

**E-Culture and African Video Films in a Globalized World:
Amayo Uzo Philip's *Akwaeke Na Odum* and *Sacred
Tradition* as Paradigms**

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Abstract

*Many artistes and scholars are learning to use the ICT to disseminate information to the global society. Today, as video films become one of the most popular arts in Africa, movie makers are increasingly making the medium one of the most prominent windows into Africa. It is increasingly providing Africans opportunity for profitable business, and also windows to global audience. Ironically, instead of promoting national images and culture, some film makers prefer to promote what could better be described as electronic culture. E-culture is actually not a real culture; therefore, it is not advisable in a global multi-cultural environment like ours, where there is information overload. This paper therefore traces the history and premises of e-culture; and so provides a virgin definition of the concept of e-culture as applied in the videos selected for study. It examines two Nigerian cultural or epic video films, namely: *Akwaeke na Odum* and *Sacred Tradition*, to show and discuss elements of e-culture in both films; and highlights the implications of promoting e-culture, instead of the true culture, to the future of the nation in a globalized society like ours. Finally, it makes recommendations on the need to curb the growth of e-culture in video contents in the booming film industry like ours.*

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Introduction

Most popular arts in Africa began to gain recognition when people began to see them, not just as forms of entertainment, but as viable means of preservation, presentation, and promotion of indigenous arts and culture of the people. This perhaps, is very true of the video film, which is now believed to be the most popular of all arts in Africa. Until the development of the Nigerian video film industry, the more popular films from nations like America, India and China enjoyed great patronage in Nigeria. This explained why Hollywood and Bollywood actors and actresses were greatly loved and admired by Nigerians. However, the patronage of these films ceased dramatically as the then new and burgeoning Nigerian video film industry began to comment on and showcase images of lives and cultures of Nigerians, through the vehicle of hitherto unknown Nigerian actors and actresses. That development made the Nigerian audience aware of the potentials of not just the industry but the teeming Nigerian artistes.

The initial interest of most early producers were to tell familiar stories that the people could identify with; show familiar environments that project the contemporary Nigeria; and to project new upcoming talents in the video films. The video film became popular as the audience became more and more curious of seeing a possible face of the girl or boy next door. It made many realize that stardom was not restricted to Hollywood actors alone. Given the significant percentage of people interested in the films, it becomes difficult for media critics, scholars and stakeholders in the industry to ignore their impacts on video audience. While those in the academia were busy with their criticisms of some of the films based on their content, context, intellectual and technical quality etceteras, reviewers with dailies, magazines, and even media stations, use their various media to promote and project the films. These

further popularized the new art and forced producers to each design a new way of making himself stand out in the crowd. Policy makers began to philosophize on the need to use the medium to not just project individual interests, but also, our national image through promoting our positive norms and values.

Individual producers began to use the medium to project individual culture of their people, hence by the time people knew what was happening, the negative global impression that African nationals live in bushes and forests and feed on human beings, which early films like *King Solomon's Mines*, *The Gods must be Crazy* etc. projected, began to fease out. In the video films, nations like Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya were shown to possess states in Europe and America. The medium was therefore seen as a welcome development. Hence, more and more film makers were encouraged to use the medium to project their various cultures, norms and values.

In Nigeria, although film production has remained a private sector initiative for a long time, the government still recognized the great potentials of the industry, particularly in image laundering. The industry commands a huge audience within the nation and in the diaspora. Sequel to this, the government is partnering with the key participants in the industry to see how they may utilize the industry to promote and market the nation to other global audiences.

Nigeria is a multi-cultural society with many ethnic groups, although officially there are three recognized tribes and cultures, namely, Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo. Given this background, popular Nigerian films must as a matter of fact, portray one or two of these cultures, or a combination of these in the narratives. In so doing, the video film in Nigeria become medium for cultural propaganda and promotion amongst the key players in the industry. Ironically, instead of projecting the true culture of Nigerians in some Nollywood (Nigerian)

films, some film makers project what this writer believe is e-culture, and which has a couple of disadvantages for the nation before the global audience.

E-Culture

Each time the word ‘culture’ is mentioned, the first thing that comes to mind is a people’s way of life. Many sociologists and historians define culture as the complex whole of man’s acquisitions of knowledge, morals, beliefs, arts, customs, technology, values which are transmitted from generation to generation (Njoku, 1998:8). As a concept, when viewed from a broad perspective, culture could be “perceived as a way of life, it encompasses all human efforts, achievements, and attitudes. It manifests in religion, language, philosophy, music, dance, drama, architecture, political organization, technology, education, values, knowledge system, social system, judicial or legal organization, and morality (Anyanwu, 2011:9). Culture therefore constitutes what Nwala (1985:58) observes as “what is natural” in the understanding of the traditional of a people. Hence, among the Igbos, it represents ‘*omenala*’ meaning that which obtains in the land or community, according to the custom and social tradition of the community (Odibo, 2004:26).

The term “e-culture” was first adopted in the Netherlands in April, 2002 in a policy paper by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. According to the internet website, in 2003, the Council for the Arts published a report to the Dutch government entitled “From ICT to E-culture.” E-culture was taken to mean all processes of “expression, reflection and sharing in the digital domain.” The perspective on e-culture was based on three premises, namely:

- Communication and information defined by digital media technologies

- New arena concerning arts, libraries, cultural heritage institutions; and
- Involves instrumental application, cultural innovations, changes and developments in the institutions within the digitalization society.

Some people define e-culture as on-line culture. However, from the perspective of the research paper, E-culture is that configured culture or image presented, and used in place of the actual culture of a people, which is projected for the viewing audience through any of the electronic or technological media like the radio, television, film or even through the computer or other related technologies. E-culture may be an adaptation of a real culture, or an imaginative invention, recreation, representation, or coinage of the producer. It is not real, because it is false and so, does not reflect the people's way of life. Hence, its preservation defies what it aims to achieve, which is recording and protection of past events for posterity.

Film makers and dramatic artistes are encouraged to be creative so as to think out creative ways of telling stories that are geared towards development; positively educating and informing the human mind, as well as contributing to the development of the society. However, they are expected to be true in their narratives in representing their society because as a mirror or the reflection of the society, there is need for films to show our society the way it is, and proffer solutions on how to achieve a better society. Projection of e-culture is therefore not positive because it is false; and does not exist within the cultural framework it projects. It does not therefore represent the people's life or history, because it remains what it is: an imitation of imitation.

Also, it aids the development of native and alien cultures which may be strange, negative, and thus could adversely influence the perception and understanding of the audience who access them, be them young people, indigenes

living in Diaspora or interested outsiders. It is therefore capable of sending out false information concerning a people to historians, anthropologists, researchers or scholars interested in the culture or the people.

Synopsis of the Study Film: *Odum Na Akwaeke*

Directed by AmayoUzo Philips, *Odum na Akwaeke* is an Igbo film set in an 18th century Igbo society, with the attendant features of huts with thatch roofs, densely bushy environment and rendered in Igbo language. It started as a folk tale during the moonlight games. In the film, Akwaeke, a young beautiful princess in Amanator Okporo turned down all the suitors who came to seek her hand in marriage, including the neighbouring prince, the best hunter, the best farmer etc. all because she did not find them worthy to be her husband. All advice from her parents and friends, that there is no perfect husband, except one learns to appreciate someone, fell on deaf ears. She wants a perfect husband with wealth, great looks, etc. such was the only man she was willing to love and live with; although the great village hunter Ogbuagu was in love with her and was ready to do anything to win her to himself. As fate will have it, Akwaeke meets and falls in love with Odum, a spirit personified as a handsome and wealthy man. After their cultural marriage, Akwaeke discovers this too late, as her spirit-husband gives back parts of his loaned body to the original owners, when Akwaeke and her maids were already stuck in the land of the dead. Their death became imminent. However, the great hunter Ogbuagu, helped by the protections of the village seer and the power of love comes to rescue her from the claws of a vindictive spirit bent on teaching her a lesson of her life. Almost already half dead, Akwaeke apologizes to Ogbuagu and promises with songs to marry him if she succeeds in getting home alive. The hero Ogbuagu

succeeds in his feat and collapses into Akwæke's embrace when he brought her home to her already mourning household.

Synopsis of *Sacred Tradition*

Also directed by AmayoUzo Philips, *Sacred Tradition* is set around the 19th century, in Ubahadurueze community. As part of the tradition of the community, a second daughter cannot get married before her elder sister, except as a second wife to a man. The heroine of the narrative Ugomma is opposed to all forms of traditions because she sees them as unfair treatment. So, she becomes a lone voice in the war against tradition. Incidentally, she meets and falls in love with Dinta, a huge and very handsome hunter. The couple's attempt to get legally married, according to the dictates of their culture was forestalled by Ubahadurueze men, as Olamma, the elder sister of Ugomma is given away in marriage to Dinta, with her face covered in a veil.

Back in his village, Dinta discovers the deceit and resorts to maltreating Olamma in order to drive her away from his home. He deprives her of conjugal rights, does not eat her food nor talk to her. Olamma confides in Ulele, a widow, who advises her to get herself a lover. Olamma succumbs to this advice. In one of the escapades, she is caught and reported by Ikoh–Dinta's friend. That is a taboo in the community. Sequel to that, Olamma is surrendered to the gods for punishment, and she is driven home with madness.

Dinta goes back to Ugomma but she refuses to have anything to do with him except he finds an antidote to Olamma's madness. Dinta seeks for Olamma's partner because it is his sacrifice that can free Olamma from the curse. Finally, the man Ikedi appeases the land and Olamma regains her senses. Ugomma's parents discover that she is pregnant for Dinta, and the father goes to confront Dinta. Dinta is delighted by the news, to the chagrin of his father- in- law. Dinta informs

him that they are coming to marry Ugomma before her pregnancy becomes obvious. The father Mazi Dike refuses the proposal because Dinta is still married to Olamma. Dinta informs him that Olamma's partner is coming to formally ask for her hands in marriage. Finally, the two sisters are married to their lovers on the same day.

E-Culture Projection in *Odum na Akwaeke* and *Sacred Tradition*

The two video films were chosen because both may be classified as epic movies, coined from the epic poetry. Encarta Premium 2009 notes that epics are long narratives which deal with legendary or historical events, as well as with the exploits of a single individual. Some of the features in epics include, sometimes the introduction of supernatural forces that shape the action, conflicts in terms of physical or super natural battle, or invocation to the muse. The characteristics quality of the epic hero is communal instead of individualistic, hence his heroic deed serves as gratification for communal pride and interest. The video film *Odum na Akwaeke* possess these features in abundance more than *Sacred Tradition*. The traditional backgrounds of the films made it possible for viewers to appreciate the cultural setting of the films. Although *Odum na Akwaeke* is rendered in Igbo language, *Sacred Tradition* is rendered mainly in English. Though at some point, most of the characters mix English with Igbo language, making the film bilingual.

Odum na Akwaeke is a folk epic which is developed from oral tradition, whereas *Sacred Tradition* can pass as a literary epic. Encarta Premium 2009 highlights that the story in folk epics is usually based on legends or events that occurred a long time before the epic itself. Literary epics are creations of known authors that deal on the traditions, mythical or historical experiences of a people. As if to distinguish these

facts, the director of *Odum na Akwaeke* started the film as a folk tale during the late night moonlighting which is common among the Igbos. One therefore does not need to verify the cultural background or setting of the film, as the language depicts this. As an offshoot of an oral tradition, one expects that the culture portrayed in the film just like in *sacred tradition*, should be the core and prominent Igbo cultures of old, not corrupted by modernity. Unfortunately, it is not the situation as E-culture was projected in several scenes of the two films set many centuries ago. This is most apparent in the following areas:

Language Use

Although the *Odum na Akwaeke* was produced in Igbo language, the key actors in the film who belonged to one nuclear family spoke different dialects of Igbo language. Akwaeke, the heroine of the narrative speaks what is accepted as central Igbo, understandable to all Igbos regardless of their dialects but spoken mainly by the Igbos around Imo and Anambra. Her father speaks Niger Delta Igbo which is common among people living in some parts of Asaba, OnitshaUgbo and Agbor, while her mother Odibeze speaks the Waawa-Igbo common among Enugu and Nsukka people. This is a language ascription blunder committed in the video film, especially, given that there was no established exhibition of a different or matrilineal language background, outside the film environment. It is therefore unreal, impracticable and equally unnatural for members of a family living together, in the 18th century, to speak different dialects. This is thus, an unforgiveable and inexcusable oversight on the part of the film maker. Ironically, this shortcoming is not very obvious in *Sacred Tradition* although the key roles are played by the same people. This is due largely to the fact that later is produced in English. For instance, the actress who acted

Akwaeke in *Odum na Akwaeke* , acted Ugomma in *Sacred tradition*, the actress who acted her mother in the film, played the role of her mother in *Sacred Tradition*, just as the actor who played the role of her father, acted the same role in *Sacred Tradition*. The projection is therefore an electronic culture that has no root in Igbo culture.

In a similar development, the language used by most of the characters is inappropriate. The flaws thus make one to question the origin of the film maker or his knowledge of Igbo culture. Is he truly a bona fide son of Igboland or whether he did conduct a research on early Igbo culture. For instance, in *Odum na Akwaeke*, the scene at the palace, shortly before Akwaeke's marriage, one of the village chiefs says: *l laruo be gi, mee ka ndi obodo gi mara...* meaning, if you get to your house, make your towns men aware, instead of "*mee ka ezinulo gi mara,*" that is...let your household be aware. This gives the impression that the man is addressing people outside the community, whereas, they are from within a village or clan with one traditional ruler. Also, when Ochikaeze is consoling his worried wife over the daughter they married away to a complete stranger, he tells her: *ebezila akwa ka ndi n'enweghi olile anya...* meaning, stop crying like those who have no hope, instead of , *ebezila akwa ka onye n'enweghi olile anya...* that is, stop crying like someone who has no hope.

Also, while agreeing to appeal to Akwaeke to consider some of the ready suitors seeking her hand in marriage, her friend tells her mother Odibeze not to worry... "*I nu?Mummy.*" The use of *Mummy* to address someone other than one's mother in an Igbo language film is quite alien and uncalled for, particularly, in an epic story. The use of mummy to address another woman other than one's mother is a 21st century development that is used among young students in high schools or institutions. One wonders what the director hoped to achieve with such an anomaly.

Setting

Regardless of the age-long tradition of monarchy in Igbo society, in both films, the palaces of the traditional rulers or monarchs are designed as makeshift batchers erected with palm fronds and raffia materials and local mats. These give the impression that traditional rulers in Igbo culture do not have or live in palaces, but batchers instead. This a faulty portrayal of Igbo culture that is also electronic, because although the cemented palaces{in use today} were not in existence in the 18th and 19th century, Igbo kings have *obis* made of dwarf mud walls that may be roofed with raffia or thatches. These represent the palaces of the kings. Its absence in the films says a lot, given the over-publicized “Igbo enwe-eze” belief, which many Igbo anthropologists argue is propaganda by the colonial masters (Odibo, 2008:43).

Although the films were set some centuries ago, so to say, when people still live inside thick bushes and forests, the setting of the films in isolated bushes, without any aiota of unity and interaction among members of the community is inappropriate. Odibo (2004:80) observes that the Igbos are known much for extended family and kinship system. Therefore, they live in groups according to their families and so are their brothers’ keepers. The two films reflect very solitary families that face their problems alone except when there is need for the community like during marriage ceremonies, or group negotiations etc.

Costumes and Make-Up

The costuming of *Sacred Tradition* has few faults except perhaps, the persistent appearance of Ugomma and Olamma with a particular hair design from the beginning till the end of the film, which is also an electronic projection, since in core Igbo culture, brides are wont to re-tie their hair prior to their marriage ceremony. In *Odum na Akwaeke*, the costumes and

make up were quite alien to Igbo culture. In a bid to showcase colourful costumes, the costumier created costumes made out of rich modern georges without consideration of the era of the film. Again, in order not to waste the fabrics, Ochikeze's costumes were temporarily pinned on the shoulders to produce drape-like costumes for the traditional ruler, instead of making a real royal regalia for the king. On Akwaeke's traditional marriage ceremony, she was made to wear fur slippers, instead of her being bare footed considering the time the film was set.

Among the Igbos, the most common make-up applied by women are camwoods which were used for body adornment and not as lip gloss. Lips make-up was not common to women in Igbo culture until recently. However, there was a disturbing use of black lip gloss on all the female characters in the film. This is equally uncultural and can only be identified in video films.

Portrayal of Igbo Culture

Ekwuru (1999:126) observes that the phrase 'Igbo culture' seems to give a false sense of universality that bears no exact congruency of the content, and implies the existence of a unique mass of cultural forms and modes that are universal to every Igbo village and town, but which in reality does not exist as Igbo culture is used to delineate a "universe of subcultures" within the Igbo geographical area. Although this assertion may be correct in some context and in certain cultural frame work, there are some cultures and traditions that are basically universal among the Igbo, which have generally accepted rules and regulations. Such cultures are what we shall examine in the sub-heading.

The study films by omission or commission failed to portray the true marriage culture of Igbo people. In *Odum na Akwaeke*, the ancient Igbo culture concerning marriage demands that the father of the bride sends emissary to conduct

an investigation on the background of the suitor to ascertain his status, before he will get the permission to come for the marriage rites. This is important among the Igbos, because they believe in finding the status of every person in order to ensure that an osu (outcast) – a social pariah system among the Igbos, does not marry a freeborn. Conformity with that custom would have saved the people of Amanator the misfortune that happened to Akwaeke and all her maids.

Also, the Igbo have a tradition of *Ije di abali ano*- a cultural rite that permits the bride to visit her suitor for just four days prior to the proper marriage. These key issues were omitted in the two films thus, the director created the impression of absence of a culture, as well as make it seem that two strangers could meet and marry without knowing each other's people or background. In Sacred Tradition, the idea of a groom being handed over a hooded bride is akin to that. One defends the lady's plight of not taking part in the decision concerning her marriage because the Igbo of old run a patriarchal system.

Furthermore, early marriages in uncivilized Igbo society are based on strict agreement of the men, involving on one hand, the man whose daughter is to be married and his kinsmen, and the interested party on the other hand. The issue of love as bases of marriage in Igbo culture is absent. Ironically, in both films, the director created love as the key reason why the principal actors in the narratives decided on their choice of partners. This is not a fair cultural representation of ancient Igbo world view.

In Igbo culture, although the men collect the dowry paid on a woman's head, marriage is strictly female affair as other requirements are spearheaded by women, including the celebration, handover etc. it is in the office of the village women to entertain people and take care of what the in-laws

brought. Unfortunately, these were missing in both films. The village women were tactically removed from the narratives.

The social organization of the Igbo society is headed by a traditional ruler, who stands as the Eze of the community. However, the Igbo have no office for the any offspring of the king, particularly when she is a female. Incidentally, Akwaeke was assigned a princess role that entitles her to as many as five maid servants. This constant representation in most Nigerian films is a copied ideology from other western films outside the Igbo locality.

Religious Life

The Igbos are deeply religious people. Amadi (1987:42) observes that among the Igbos, religion is integrated within the political, social, and economic lives of the people so that religious beliefs have control over many aspects of the people's lives. Owing to this, every Igbo family head must have a special place of worship for his gods, deities or ancestors, which may be in form of shrines, or totems of worship, like trees, reserved spots, deities etceteras. This informs why Igbo men pour libations, throw away pieces of food or cola nuts to imaginary beings, or go for divination. Serious decisions were not taken by such family heads without consultation with the superior beings. In times of trouble, they seek these beings for guidance. Ironically, in both films *Sacred Tradition* and *Odum na Akwaeke*, which were set in the ancient time, when these ancestors are treated as awesome beings, this important life of the Igbo were tactically omitted. In *Odum na Akwaeke*, the diviner was made to come seeking for the king Ochikeze, who lost his daughter to a spirit, not the other way round. This is a projection of electronic culture that did not reflect the ancient Igbo man and his way of living. When the seer was brought into the picture eventually, excessive magic,

rituals, and incantations were employed in his attempt to exercise power before the young men on a rescue mission.

Implications of Projecting E-Cultures in Video Films

The film maker makes film from his/her experience from the society. Anyanwu (2000) observes that a film maker is a little more than a historian and certainly not a journalist as she/he has the power to go beyond mere documenting of reporting of events. As he argues, the film maker can interpret just as Plato did, the kind of society she/he envisages for viewers to live in. This is in line with Bamidele's (2000:29) observation

Modern writers who are touched by the stigmata of modern consciousness in terms of social integration, in terms of cultural decadence, and in terms of widening chasm between the individual and his moral and material environment see their roles as that of redeemers and their art as a redeeming agent. They make statements that are very succinct, or implicit, about their desire to reach towards a metaphor of desirable wholeness through their art.

The desire to create a new world should not make film makers to recreate falsehood about our history or where we are coming from. Issues concerning thematic thrust or discourse in video films should be treated having at the back of the film makers' mind, the need to expose our past so that the viewers will appreciate the need for change. Hence, projection of electronic cultures on video films instead of the true culture of the people has a lot of disadvantages as already highlighted. It has several suggestions or implicit understanding, as well as involvements such as the following:

It aids the development of cultures that may lead people to abandon their native culture, since most times electronic cultures tend to look more easy and classy because they are basically designed to lure, entertain or interest the viewer, instead of teaching them the true life and reality of the people.

It suggests that the film maker is deploying deception in the projection of history, because there is conflict of interest, based on the film maker's interest to impress and capture viewership, instead of an altruistic statement on a video film.

It is an inadvertent admission on the part of the film maker that he/she is an unpatriotic patriot who gives the impression of projecting his/her national image, yet contributing to destroying the same background, through raising a platform to erase the historical past.

Today, development has swept away the major ecological features that African communities are known for, some of which define the typical Igbo cultural environment. However, through film making, film makers manage to provide relatively closer resemblance of the Igbo sacred grooves, shrines, and the "bad and evil" bushes or forests which were once natural habitant for village and ancestral deities of Igbo people. Such images documented and preserved in films will remain icons with which African children yet unborn shall be taught with. When the generations yet unborn hears the stories of murdered twins that are deposited in evil forests, or when they read classical literature in the same category as Achebe's *Things fall Apart*, they will have good and clear images of the past. These are some of the reasons why electronic projection of fake culture as reality should be discouraged.

Conclusion

In this era of globalization when development in information technologies has made it possible for nations worlds apart to digest other people's cultures and tradition, it should become worrisome to developing nations who have lesser chances of circulating their culture to the developed nations, because the impact of that interaction will always be adverse on the less developed nations. Jeremy Thomas of the British Film Institute notes that "it is hard to mix business and culture. Business is going to win" Campbell (1998:209). Many are of the opinion that the early circulation of modern American culture partly contributed to the stifling of local cultures, which the African culture is a part of. Now that there seem to be a reawakening in the production of African films, there is every need for all African film makers to utilize the film medium to promote our culture, as well as right all the wrongs of past ignorance and late development. That is the only way to bridge the gap that was created by our deep slumber when other great nations were working for their future development.

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