

# **CULTURE, ART AND FILM IN AN AFRICAN SOCIETY: AN EVALUATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this treatise, attention is drawn to the inability of the African filmmakers to adopt and deculturize the film genre – a relatively new type of literature – to suit African culture. The filmmakers in the Yorùbá community of West Africa are used as the case study.

It is observed that there is a sharp contrast between the production of the seasoned filmmakers and the new bunch of filmmakers that can be regarded as “neophytes”. While the professional film producers opt for a good production in terms of quality imagination, entertainment, and education, the pseudo-professional filmmakers prefer emotional and sensational films that lack lustre.

This study highlights different steps to be taken in production of feature films. These include acculturation of film genre in line with African culture, exploration of African cultured resources, and delineation between technology and arts.

*Keywords: art, culture, film art*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Different individuals of varied disciplines have tried to view the term ‘Culture’ in consonance with their disciplines. However, virtually all these varied definitions of ‘culture’ would seem to anchor on anthropological definition given by Edward Tylor in 1871. According to him, culture is:

that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, law, art, morals, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society (cited in Thompson et al. 1991: 19).

The foregoing shows that culture is both ‘shared’ and ‘learnt’ in a community or a given linguistic group. In essence, culture is a communal property as it reflects the being of an individual in its totality. Culture thus gives a group of people its peculiar identity. Again, culture can be broadly viewed from two aspects: tangible and intangible. The tangible culture comprises the concrete materials: tools, wood, or artefacts, while the intangible culture dwells on non-concrete values of the society, which is inherent in the being of an individual. This is what Irele (1991: 51) refers to as ‘the inner’ culture or ‘the spirit of a people’. This inner culture includes beliefs, knowledge, religion, verbal art, etc.

It is apparent from the foregoing that ‘art’ is an integral part of culture. Attention has been drawn to the fact that ‘the medium of arts’ can be used to organise and boost the culture of a society. This stems from certain inherent features peculiar to a work of art. Such a work of art should have been seen ‘as being inspired, imaginative, expressive, formally significant, creative’; though such work may be defective ‘technically, morally and socially’ (Barrett 1972: 237). In other words, a work of art thrives on the individual’s skill and ability, and patronage. However, the creative ingenuity and originality, notwithstanding, a work of art originating from and meant for a particular society would have to take into account the ‘ethos’ or ‘the social framework of the society’s culture’ (Irele 1991: 53). The artist can therefore express himself through literary arts, plastic arts, visual arts and performing arts. Theatre performing arts have featured on stage and electronic media. Performing arts have featured and still feature on radio, record disc, tape recorder, television, film – celluloid and video.

In Yorùbá community, which is an African society, the film industry came into being in 1976 with the production of *Àjàní Ògún* by Ola Balógun who had earlier produced *Amadi* in Igbo language in 1975. The two feature films were hit releases. Until then, the tradition was to watch foreign films in Nigerian Cinema halls. The appearances of Nigerians on screen then used to be mainly in documentary and educational films (Mgbejume 1989). Thus, the Nigerian audiences were enchanted and delighted to watch feature films made in their indigenous languages for the first time as such films afforded them the opportunity ‘to hear their own languages on the screen and see familiar scenes’ (Adeiza 1999: 6). It is no surprise, therefore, that between the 1970s and 1980s, there were hit releases in the Yorùbá language viz.; *Ìjà Omìnira* (Olá Balogún); *Aiye, Jaiyesinmi, Aropin N Tenia* (Hubert Ogunde); *Kádàrá, Taxi Driver I & II, Ìjà Orogún, Iya Ni Wúrà* (Adéyemí Afolayan a.k.a Ade Love); *Orun Móoru, Arẹ Agbaiye and Moşebólátán* (Moses Oláiyá Adéjùmò a.k.a Baba Sala). Besides, language is ‘a vital medium of communication and a potent vehicle of cultural expression’ (Olatunji 1993: 4). This could also have been another reason for the enthusiasm on the part of the Yorùbá audience.

There emerges a paradoxical situation in performing art in Yorùbá society. Fortunately, the emergence of *Àjàní Ògún* feature film marked the beginning of the Yorùbá film industry, and sadly enough, marked the demise of the stage play (live performance) among the Yorùbá theatre practitioners. This may not be particular to film genre alone as ‘the beginning of a new literature is purposely linked with the end of an existing culture; one makes the other possible’. (Izevbaye 1993: 20). And film is indeed a new literature (literary art).

It has its own characteristic features or artistic culture of which ‘violence’ is dominant. Other elements therein include plot, suspense, conflict, characterisation themes and language, just like any other literary genre. However, unlike other types of literary culture, film ‘presents eidetic images’, permits adequate and optimal utilisation of appropriate scenes and it ‘exhibits

the robust aspects of culture’ (Adeleke 1995: 173 – 174). It thus seems that the film art:

...sets out to give the audiences an aesthetic experience which exercises their emotion, opening up new dimensions of vision of life which they would never have discovered on their own (Nwoko 1979: 3).

The early Yorùbá film producers – Olá Balógun, Hubert Ogunde, Adéyemí Afọlayan (a.k.a Ade Love), Moses Oláiyá, Francis Oladele, Ladi Ladebo, Ola Makinwa – who produced celluloid films endeavoured to screen imaginative stories that were well structured and original. Their productions attracted the audiences because they had artistic features, viz.: colour, excitement, magic, adventure, laughter and tears (Bamidele 1993: 75). These filmmakers were able to make their literary imagination to have its bear on their productions. And as rightly observed by Izevbaye (1993: 120).

The literary imagination is... an important key to the process by which the texts about reality are created, including the retrieval of past events, since its creative play is mainly the source of our knowledge of the idols who sustain our historical and political faiths.

These early filmmakers exhibited the rich aspects of Yorùbá music, dance, festival, dress or attire, as exemplified in *Ìja Ominira*, *Aiye*, *Jaiyesinmi*, *Are Agbaiye* and *Mosebólátán*. Also, in order to give credibility to their production, they included characters speaking some notable Yorùbá dialects such as *Ègbá*, *Ìjẹ̀sà*, *Ìjẹ̀bù* and *Èkitì* to excite laughter.

Again, they bring in fools<sup>1</sup>, idiots, the likes of *Baba Sala*, *Pápì Lúwẹ*, *Baba Sùwé*, *Jèékòbù*, *Pápàlòlò Adérùpòkò* to amuse the audience. The mature and experienced film producers in Yorùbá were cautious in casting the fool, unlike the present bunch of filmmakers who indiscriminately introduce the Yorùbá fool into the scene. Unlike the Shakespearean play where the fool is the wisest, the Yorùbá fool tends to be gluttonous and is always clothed in rags and oversize attires. The appearance of the Yorùbá fool is usually offensive or distasteful, more so, when his role is insignificant to the overall development of the film plot (Adeleke 2001). This precipitates poor production in terms of film quality.

The problem of poor production is traceable to economic crunch and non-professional training. The seasoned filmmakers had to go on recess having discovered that it was expensive to produce celluloid films. More so, it takes time to recoup the financial outlay on a film because there is always paucity of audience in the cinema hall. Those who were able to get loans from banks to produce celluloid films went bankrupt<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The ‘fool’ is used loosely in this discourse to connote a clown, a jester, an idiot or a silly slave. (See Welsford 1961: XI; Adeleke 2001: 1–2).

<sup>2</sup> For instance Moses Olaiya Adejumo (a.k.a Baba Sala) went bankrupt when his film *Orun Mooru* was pirated. He had a balance of N 500,000.00 to pay his bankers when the incident happened. (see Alamu 1991: 96)

The end of celluloid culture in Nigeria ushers in the video film culture. Some television producers and cameramen who have either retired or opted out of television stations considered video film culture a fertile ground; hence they plunged into video film industry. Of late, some marketers who have no stint in the technical know-how area of the video movies have stormed the video film industry<sup>3</sup>. They now turn themselves to producers cum directors without dropping their primary assignment, which is marketing. In short, we now have amateurs, semi-professionals and professionals churning out video films to the unwary audience on a daily basis.

It is imperative to draw attention to the adverse effects which the video culture has had and is still having on cinema-going culture. It is sad to note that many cinema halls are fast becoming avenues for Christian Fellowship meetings, political meetings or reception halls. Some are mere edifices<sup>4</sup>. The existence of 'illegitimate video clubs in all nooks and crannies of the country encourages members of the public to loan any video cassette of their choice. The new phenomenon in the video industry is to show a new video film in the cities for a few weeks, possibly between six and twelve weeks, in order to recoup a large part of the financial outlay before the video is marketed to the members of the public. The reasons for the short period of exhibition to the public arise from unlimited production of different video films by different producers, and more importantly, the issue of piracy. Many video producers have incurred a huge financial loss because their productions were pirated. In order to guard against piracy, some producers speedily produce their feature films on the home video cassettes for the benefit of the general public who may be interested in their productions.

With regard to patronage, 'the mass media have brought about mass culture...' (Olusola 1979: 10). The film audience is heterogeneously drawn since it cuts across age, sex, marital status, education and socio-economic class (Adeleke 1995). Between 1970s and the late 1980s, members of the public were eager to visit film houses to see their favourite stage artists who had taken to screen, and perhaps nostalgic drive to see the old stage plays on celluloid encouraged some to patronise the exhibition halls. The cinema houses, halls and art theatres were usually busy at weekends, and more especially during the celebrations of either Christian or Muslim festivals. Then, the film-makers could afford to slate three shows for 12 o'clock, 3 o'clock in the afternoon and 6 o'clock in the evening, as the theatre hall or cinema hall was usually jam-packed.

In our findings on the numerical strength of audience in the cinema halls, we discovered film-going to be mainly male, youth and literate culture (Adeleke

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<sup>3</sup> Examples of Marketer-Producers are: Yemisi Jaiyeola (a.k.a. Adesqueen), Emmanuel Isikaku, Augustine Ovie – Whiskey, etc.

<sup>4</sup> The Odeon Cinema, at Òkè-Àdó Ìbàdàn is being occupied by the Power Cathedral Ministry, while the Rex Cinema beside the Baptist building at Òkè-Bólà, Ìbàdàn has been taken over by the Christ Life Church.

1995). The females, elderly ones and the non-literate were occasional attendees since the society would cast aspersion on female audience, while other social commitments would appear to curtail the budget of the elders. The non-literate would not value a paid-in theatre due to their limited exposure to the importance of leisure.

As of today, film-going culture is on the wane as members of the public are quite aware that no film house exhibits new celluloid except video films which will soon be produced as a home video for the consumption of the members of the public. Asides, the seemingly uncertainty which pervades socio-economic and political climate of the country does not encourage film-going. This poor patronage poses a danger to the film industry, which differs from the television that happens to be a living room entertainment. The film industry cannot exist without the people who are its (film) heartbeat and patrons. This poor patronage, as noted above, accounts for the 'illegal' occupation of the cinema halls by 'foreign' organisations viz. spiritual, social and political.

As regards the film content, the seasoned filmmakers, such as Olá Balogún, Hubert Ogunde, Adéyemí Afoláyan (Ade Love), Oláiyá Adéjùmò made effort, to make research into the culture of the Yorùbá before churning out their film productions. These experienced filmmakers were able to present authentic cultural values of the Yorùbá, unlike now that the quasi-professional film makers/video makers embarrass their viewers with debased culture. The productions by these inexperienced filmmakers lack authenticity due to poor or no research into the culture of the society, or dearth of first-hand experience of the culture of the society. The true is, aptly noted by Olúṣolá (1979: 10) thus:

Authenticity is the foundation stone for cultural development, and it is from the bedrock of a true and authentic culture that our creative contemporaries can evolve new patterns of arts and culture.

Most of the semi-professional film producers sell emotional films full of violence and bawdy-house literature to their audiences largely made up of teenagers. Many of the productions present offensive scenes such as murder, pornography, love and horror. With the bastardisation of Yorùbá culture, most of the youths who reside in the urban areas of the society would assume that Yorùbá value immorality. Furthermore, the film contents portray excessive sorcery, witchcraft and caustic expressions. Wálé Ògúnyemí (1996) has this to say on incessant use of 'juju' in film:

Our culture is not just juju or incantations. It involves our religion, belief system, dressing, greeting, demeanour, courtesies, etc. It's not just dressing shabbily and going about the bush chanting incantations etc...

The notable juju characters in Yorùbá films are Fádèyí Olóró, Abìjà, Ògúnjìnmí Ajagajìgì Oogùn, and Éwéjókòó Their appearances on the screens are more often repulsive as their actions seem to contradict reality of life. As succinctly put by Wálé Ògúnyemí (1996), "All these incantations egbé, oḩe etc. are primarily used during wars, inter-tribal conflicts of the past."

Again, some producers, especially the Christians film producers, feature little or no verbal art in their productions, as they are fully aware that, "Yorùbá and literature, ... is bound up with specific cults and institutional practices. Most of the chants and songs are connected with worship" (Olatunji 1993: 6)

In essence, the producers who are obsessed with religious bigotry steer off the traditional verbal arts. They prefer to make use of pseudo arts, as they would not want to profane their faith. We wish to make it abundantly clear that '... in the literature (film in our instance) are encapsulated the most vital elements of the people's cultural heritage' (Olatunji 1993: 6). It is no use therefore for the Christian film producers who have been caught in the web of religion and culture conflict to attempt to re-word or restructure magic formula or incantation. Some have even gone to the extreme of attempting to submerge the traditional culture, especially with regard to mode of dressing. English dress appears to be more permissible for the real Christians in film culture. This is an attempt to 'undermine the earlier heritage' (and) 'cut the new territorial configuration of the culture' (Izevbaye 1993: 123).

Some characters are created to unleash their verbal tirades on other characters. They rain abusive words or curses on whosoever comes their ways. We have in this group Baba Sùwé, Èlẹ̀ṣòó, Ijẹ̀wùrù and Káríárà. This does not augur well for the growth and development of arts and culture. Our filmmakers would seem to have forgotten that performing arts, like any other forms of art, usually reveal the identity of a given culture.

It is apparent from our discussion so far that many of the present bunch of film-makers present lustreless film contents which bother on domestic themes, marital problems, extended family intrigues, witchcraft, excessive use of magic formulas and incantations. They are not discreet in the use of violent or sexual scene, either. They have wrongly imbibed unwholesome culture from other societies — America, Japan, China, and India — without synthesising the rationale for the production of such feature films by these societies. Violence is a fact of life in Japanese culture (Dewey 1969: 43); the cowboys are gun-trotting beings in American jungle; kung fu or karate is an art of defence in China; while love motif dominates the life of Indians (Ekwuazi 1984; Àlámú 1991; Adélékè 1995). The African film-makers ought to have deculturised the film genre so as to suit the African taste. Their inability to attune film genre in line with the African culture shows the ineptitude of some of the African film producers in manipulating the film media. Hence we share Opubor's (1979) view that:

... if Black and African people are to intervene successfully in the protection of accurate images of their heritage in the media of the world, they must use the technology of the media in a way that is compatible with their ethos.

The African filmmakers should intensify efforts to explore and exploit their own cultural resources rather than importing the valueless aspects of western culture. They should not be obsessed with commercial tendency to the extent that they will be selling mere emotion or sensation. They should always bear in mind that

they have social obligations to their societies. African filmmakers should endeavour to turn out productions that would jolt the audience from their slumber so as to be sensitively appreciative of their culture and customs. They should desist from presenting deceitful scenes, which portray Africans as being either materialistic or animalistic. The film genre can be judiciously maximised to its optimal by African filmmakers – if only they endeavour to painstakingly have insightful research into the unadulterated aspects of African culture and customs, which will likely be of immense value to socio-economic and political growth, and development of African continent in this era of globalisation.

Finally, the African film producers should strive to delineate among film technology, arts and culture in order not to cause artistic fiasco for their audiences. It would be shameful if Africans cannot produce ‘films for Africans, with Africans by Africans’ (Mgbejume 1989: 41).

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