

Nollywood at the Borders of History: Yoruba Travelling Theatre and Video Film Development in Nigeria

by

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Abstract

The origin of video film genre in Nigeria is shrouded in conflicting views and contentions. Indigenous film historians and critics are yet to agree on who could be credited as the initiator of the video revolution in Nigeria. While some available documents trace this genre to Kenneth Nnebue's *Living in Bondage* produced in 1992, arguments at other quarters present the Yoruba filmmakers as the pioneers of the burgeoning video film industry in Nigeria, and thus accuse others of subverting history in favor of their region. This paper, therefore, investigates the contributions of the Yoruba travelling theatre practitioners to the emergence of what is now known as the Nigerian video film industry, and concludes that while *Living in Bondage* may have popularized the genre, the Yoruba popular theatre practitioners initiated video film production in Nigeria.

Introduction

Film had its first stroll into Nigeria in August 1903 via the instrumentality of the Indian-Lebanese merchants (Omatsola, 1999) whose sole motivation was economic rather than cultural (Okome, 1991). Opubor, Nwuneli and Oreh (1979) note that “the medium of film was itself still new in those days, and still technically in its infancy; content was largely documentary”. But in spite of this, Okome (1991) reports that it was the magic of the moment for people to see moving pictures, and for many years “films continued to be shown to full houses in Lagos, and...was commended for relieving the monotony of Lagos life through interesting and innocent entertainment” (Opubor and Nwuneli, 1979).

The first moving flick in Nigeria came through the Balboa and Company, a Spanish firm, in 1903 and toured West African countries. It was a silent film that predated *The Jazz Singers*, the first of the talking pictures. The success of this exhibition encouraged other merchants, notably Stanley D. Jones and Albuerio based in Lagos. At this period, cinema activities were limited to Lagos before it spread to other parts of the then Western Nigeria; Ibadan in 1921 and Ijebu ode in 1929 (Okome, 1991). Ekwuazi (1991) observes that film has evolved from three crucial socio-economic stages in Nigeria: the colonial/independence period; the post independence period; and the post Indigenization Decree period.

The colonial period enjoyed the combined efforts of the colonial government and the church. The colonial government established the colonial film unit (CFU) during World War II with the sole responsibility of producing films for the colonies with the objectives of: showing/convincing the colonies that they and the English had a common enemy in the Germans; to this end, about one quarter of all the films made by the CFU were war-related to encourage communal development in the colonies (*Village Development* is representative of this group); and to show the outside world the excellent work being done in hearten parts under the aegis of the Union Jack (*Daybreak in Udi*) (Ekwuazi 1991). And the missionaries, on their own, were motivated by the passion for evangelical/religious films with the aim of integrating or acculturating their converts into the Christian fold.

Hence, film exhibition in Nigeria took two forms. First the government and the church operated through the mobile film units (a van), a 16mm projector, a reel of 16mm film, and a motion-picture screen. And second, commercial distributors operated through showings in the big halls and film theatres with films brought in through the British Council in London and the Crown Film Unit. These films were meant to condition the audience to “civilization” (Obioha, 2001). Thus, films during the colonial era were used to entrench the influence of the colonialists in the name of “civilization” to the detriment of indigenous cultural development. And the church missionaries used film as a religion enforcer to push Christianity down the throats of the people, creating a chaotic situation in which the new religion attempted to swallow up the indigenous religions (Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* intelligently reports on this devastating effect of Christianity on African religions and culture).

Correspondingly, the 1960 independence ushered in a new phase in film development. With the indigenous government still in place, there was an increasing need to re-define the geographical entity called Nigeria and build a new national consciousness, detached from the colonial framework on which the nation had previously been pivoted. Conversely, a film division was established under the Federal Ministry of Information and funded to produce documentary films about post-independent Nigeria for distribution within and outside the country. And as a result, regional and state governments joined the crusade, which gave birth to a host of “home-grown “ documentaries in contrast to the pre-colonial, mainly imported films.

As a consequence, feature film production did not surface until two years after independence when the federal government gave the lead with *Bound for Lagos* in 1962 which opened the floodgates to a myriad of other features produced/sponsored by the government or independent film-makers (Ekwuazi, 1991). Thus, the beginning of what could be regarded as professional filmmaking in Nigeria came in 1963 with *Culture in Transition* which some critics have branded as a mish-mash of varying genres, thereby rejecting the film as a true feature film. Nevertheless, *Culture in Transition* presents itself more as a docu-drama than as a feature film, because it was an assemblage of disparate aspects of traditional and modern cultural forms of the Nigerian society coupled with adapted sequences from Soyinka’s *The Strong Breed* and Duro Ladipo’s “Oba Moro” (Obioha, 2001). Also, the cinematic adaptation of Wole Soyinka’s *Kongi’s Harvest* of the same title produced in 1970 eventually became the reference point, to some critics, of the take-off of independent film production in Nigeria, although it was not without its frailties, especially when we consider that Wole Soyinka dissociated himself from the production because “what is in the film is not eventually the script” he wrote (Soyinka, 1979). However, the film was significant in marking the beginning of private film production in Nigeria.

And juxtaposed, indigenous language films, did not come until April 1975 when *Amadi* produced by Afrocult Foundation Limited was released with impressive success. Though “the acting may have been sloppy... the film may lack cinematic aesthetic finish and though for sophisticated audiences it shows poor techniques” as Opubor, Nwuneli and Oreh (1979) observed, “for the local audiences, it had a dynamic attraction – the local appeal of a spectator’s mother tongue...” However, the success soon heralded two other films in indigenous languages: *Ajani Ogun* (1976) in Yoruba language and *Sheu Umar* (1977) in Hausa.

The Yoruba Traveling Theatre

The Yoruba traveling theatre practitioners in motion picture production according to Adesanya (1997) “was perhaps the most auspicious single factor in the evolution of an indigenous cinema in Nigeria.” Hence, having established a rich tradition of touring plays, the traveling theater made a debut with Ogunde’s *Aiye* in 1979 and *Jaiyesinmi* in 1980 and introduced a regional dimension to the Nigerian film. Also Adedeji and Ekwuazi (1998) note that:

... whether in optical or reversal format the bulk of the films are from Yoruba traveling theatre companies turned film production companies. In fact, these companies, together, accounted for over 60 percent of the films that featured at the 1st National film festival (1992). Among such films were box office hits like *Mosebolatan*, *Taxi Driver* etc but, ironically, not one of these films rated even an honourable mention.

Also critical, Adesanya (1997) records with disgust that: "From the folkloric *Ajani Ogun*, the Yoruba film genre metamorphosed into the witchcraft-horror thriller introduced by Ogunde's *Aiye*," leading to a spate of witchcraft flicks that gave the Yoruba film genre a bad name.

In spite of the above comments against the films produced by the Yoruba traveling troupes, their efforts completely dominated the industry to the extent that it (i.e. film industry) almost turned out to be a regional or ethnic industry with just few privately-sponsored films from other regions. A myriad of reasons can be adduced for this trend. First, before the production of the first indigenous film in Nigeria, the Yoruba traveling theatre had established a rich, flourishing tradition of touring plays across the nation and beyond. Adedeji and Ekwuazi (1998) comments that:

The Yoruba theater has made an indelible impression on the whole country. As a traveling theater, it has taken the theater to the people and entertained vast and diverse audiences throughout the country. Not earning any subsidies from the government or financial support from any foundations, the artists have progressively managed to survive in a very big way. They draw their income not only from their stage shows but also from television shows, from waxing their music and plays on discs, by printing their plays as photoplays and as literature.

Ogundele (1997) adds that "at its height of productivity and popularity in the 1970s and early 80s, there were at least 100 troupes of the traveling theatre in Yoruba society." From a vast and robust popular theatre base, it becomes quite easy for the Yoruba traveling theatre to hijack the industry for the furtherance of their artistic career in another medium. Secondly, the Yoruba have a long theatrical history which dates back to the Alarinjo (or Eegun Apidan) masquerade performance of the old Oyo Empire, and many live in big cities and towns which allows for the formation of a vast audience pull each time the traveling theatres visited the communities with a new play which also spread to non-Yoruba speaking areas of West African coast (Ogundele, 1999:47). Thus, it was easy to transfer the audience of the already expansive touring theatre to a newly evolving film industry. And moreover, with the box-office success of Ogunde's *Aiye* and *Jaiyesinmi*, a host of other Yoruba traveling theatre actor-managers joined the race, with Ade Afolayan's *Kadara* (1981) and *Taxi Driver* (1983), Isola Ogunsola's *Efunsetan Aniwura* (1982), Moses Olaiya's *Orun Mooru* and *Are Agbaye* (1984) as part of the leading films of the era.

Traversing the Genres

The Yoruba traveling theatre troupes were also quick to grab all available popular performance media of their time. Having established a buoyant tradition through stage performances, the Ogunde-led theatre tradition in their quest for popularity and audience acceptability explored other media “from waxing their music and plays in discs, by printing their plays as photo-plays and literature” (Adedeji and Ekwuazi, 1998). Thus, they employed a multi-media approach to play production, adapting a successful play in one genre/medium to several other genres.

One of the newer genres that enjoyed gross patronage of the traveling troupes was the television. With its debut in 1959 when WNTV was established as the first African television station, there was a dire need for local content in television programming. Thus, the Yoruba traveling theatre filled the vacuum by creating local material by adapting most of their successful plays on stage to the new medium. In fact, Adedeji and Ekwuazi’s account presupposes that the traveling theatres had been performing those functions which, in more urbanized and industrialized societies, are performed by television (163). Citing Fiske and Hartley (1984:88), they list the following functions:

1. To articulate the main lines of the established cultural consensus about the nature of reality.
2. To implicate the individual members of the culture into its dominant value systems.
3. To celebrate, explain, interpret and justify the doings of the culture’s individual representatives in the world out-there...
4. To assure the culture at large of its practical adequacy in the world by affirming and confirming its ideologies / mythologies in active engagement with the practical and potentially unpredictable world.
5. To explore, conversely, any practical inadequacies in the culture’s sense of itself which might result from changed condition in the world out-there, or from pressure within the culture for a reorientation in favour of a new ideological stance.
6. To convince the audience that their status and identity as individuals is guaranteed by the culture as a whole; and
7. To transmit, by these means a sense of cultural membership.

Soon, the attention and prestige often associated with the new medium began to deprive the stage of its best practitioners: Moses Olaiya, Kola Ogunmola, Duro Ladiipo, Oyin Adejobi, Isola Ogunsola etc – who sought solace in the more glamorous audio – visual medium. Having a better alternative, the theatre artists then decried the difficulties, traveling risks and economic uncertainties surrounding movement of a large group of cast/crew from one community to another.

Sadly still, the birth of television coincided with the beginning of indigenous feature film production and distribution in Nigeria. Some of the theatre producer-managers started relocating to the new film genre by inserting film scenes into their stage plays. Ogundele (1997) recalls that in the late 1970s, Hubert Ogunde had:

... started producing plays with brief film insertions in them, usually at the climactic end. Such insertions usually involved fantasy actions or elements (transformation of human beings to animals, for instance) which were meant to convey the supernatural dimension of Yoruba cosmology, but which could not be convincingly done on stage.

Lakoju (1988:59) also narrates a similar experience with Moses Olaiya, popularly known as Baba Sala, who used film insertion to express a sequence in a play where he was expected to plunge into a river in an attempt to commit suicide.

Fascinated by the effects of film insertion on their audience, these theatre practitioners later abandoned the stage for television and film. The influence of these two audio-visual genres became so enthralling and exasperating for the continued existence of live theatre that Bamidele (1992:262) had to lament that with the sporadic development of the film industry, “we are approaching the end of the traveling theatre era. We no longer see these actors we were used to on the stage. Their faces are now a constant feature on the large screen”. So, the combined force of television and film brought traveling theatre on its knee begging for survival and relevance within the new technology-driven world economy.

The Video Explosion

After twenty–seven years of hard pioneering labour, filmmakers brought a combined harvest of less than two hundred titles to the altar, while videographers, for a sweet-song labour of about three years, garnered a harvest of 454 titles (Adesanya, 1997:16)

The above account alludes to the expansive nature of the Nigerian video genre in an incomprehensibly massive dimension. This revolution is a reality thanks to “the ‘hare-brained boys’ and their fast hanky-panky ways, which have virtually beaten the genuine filmmakers to the game” (Ogunsuyi, 1999:69; Olayiwola, 2007:58). In contrast, while the filmmakers were contemplating on how to raise sumptuous funds to salvage the film industry from imminent extinction, the videographers brought the video format and thereby sustain the film audience.

And whether or not motion-picture film will stage a come-back remains an ongoing debate, but with the shades of events, the video-films have definitely come to stay with us. Omatsola (1999) had predicted that ‘...all the filmmakers who think that they can revive motion-picture films and sustain it in Nigeria will be frustrated by not only the Nigerian economy but by the villagization of the world by satellite communication’.

The short existence of the medium of motion-picture films was due to the structural adjustment policy occasioned by the oil doom that encapsulated the entire nation in the 1980’s. This made the filmmakers resort to reversals. “And when they emptied Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) of its reversal film stock and chemicals”, hinted Adesanya (1997), “they settled for video tapes” (P.15). The video-film has since then become a household companion in Nigeria. From Ogundele (1997)’s report that “there are now at least two new video film a week” the figure has grown geometrically to between thirty to fifty video – films per week. The market is now saturated that even the gross sale of video dramas has declined tremendously.

Undoubtedly, the Yoruba traveling theatre troupes were the originators of the video-film tradition in Nigeria, however, most available historical records on the history of Nollywood identify *Living in Bondage* as the premier video film. Thus, in their characteristic manner of retailing theatre (Bamidele, 1992), the Yoruba itinerant troupes found an opportunity to replace the evading motion-picture tradition with video format that was ridiculously cheaper to produce. Consequently, they started with video cameras originally meant to record social functions such as wedding, funeral and naming ceremonies. And although, the resultant productions were disgusting, they were simultaneously ensuring a cultural continuity.

With the video genre, the Yoruba traveling theatre directly imported the ‘antics’ of the itinerant genre. First, the same cast/crew of the traveling theatre was transferred to the video genre without first understanding the requirements of the new form. More so, improvisation which was the hallmark of the traveling theatre became the performance style of Yoruba video-films. And most importantly, the folkloric style, and the witchcraft stories of the former genre became the dominant tradition. Hence, the resultant form was more of a transposed traveling theatre, deficiently recorded on video.

In contrast, Igbo ethnicity and language brought a ray of hope into the industry. With the box office success of *Living in Bondage*, Igbo centered video-makers bombarded the industry, and within a short while, bestrode the home video market. And having established a vast marketing network in audio-cassette distribution in Onitsha, Aba and Lagos, it became relatively easy to convert a network for video marketing. In the same vein, unlike the Yoruba genre that has its antecedent in traveling theatre, the actors, directors, script writers etc of the Igbo/English language films are from a television background. Hence, Adesanya (1997) argues that the problem “that rocked the television sector over sponsorship and professional fees in the early ‘90s was to lead to the exodus of independent producers of the so-called soap operas and the resurgence of the “never say die” English language video-films”.

Accordingly, coming from the background of television drama, their productions were “a rehash of television programmes packed as movies” submits Adesanya (1997), although he had earlier contended that Igbo video-films “are better produced and advertised than the Yoruba movies” (p.18). This is probably because, apart from having romanticized with the television, a couple of the Igbo/English Language video practitioners have their origin in the university based theatre, and therefore conversant with the use of script, an important element lacking among the Yoruba practitioners. Nonetheless, in both cases, we are confronted with two leprous legs, one simply more rotten than the other. While the Igbo/English language films lean towards the television and Western stage, the Yoruba movies are deeply rooted in the traveling theatre modes; both resulting in a mish-mash phenomena.

Also significant, using Haynes’ (1994) words “traffic does move”, but for us in what direction it moves is important. Conversely, it may be certain that the English language ‘videographers’, after groping for a while, may have eventually found a way to link existing television and film techniques. Here, the Yoruba genre in their acting is predominantly stagey (except for few ones), and their technical staff (at least in the majority) are still adjusting to the dynamics of the screen.

The Living in Bondage Contention

The honour of having pioneered video film revolution in Nigeria by producing the first indigenous feature film on video is still a subject of contention and scholarly inquiry. While Kenneth Nnebue’s *Living in Bondage* is believed by some scholars (especially foreign observers of the fledgling industry), as the first known Nigerian video film, it has also been creditably argued that the video revolution cannot be divorced from the enterprising gesture of artists of the Yoruba popular theatre who employed all the media of production to popularize their ‘folkloric’ drama. For instance, Onuzulike (2007:25) unequivocally avers that “An Igbo-language production, *Living in Bondage* produced by Kenneth Nnebue in 1992, ushered in the birth of Nollywood”. Ebewo (2007) also shares this view, positing that *Living in Bondage* is credited with “jump-starting” the video film in Nigeria. However, various confrontations have reached the pages of the newspapers and soft-sell magazines among the Igbo and Yoruba filmmakers regarding the true origin of video film in Nigeria with the latter accusing the former of subverting the truth surrounding the authentic origin of video revolution by advancing *Living in Bondage* as the maiden Nigerian video film. Thus, a special film festival/workshop was advertised in the national dailies in 2010 by the leadership of Association of Nigerian Theatre Arts Practitioners (ANTP), a Yoruba regional association headed then by Jide Kosoko with the prime intent of keeping the public and academic community abreast of the authentic origin of video film in Nigeria.

Arguing within the same thought frame, Adejunmobi (2002:77) contends that video film origin in Nigeria is unarguably traceable to the Yoruba language traveling theatre tradition, frequently described as “popular theatre” by reason of its audience and producers, who after much popularity in the Yoruba speaking communities in southwest Nigeria, exploited the media of television on a regular basis by the late 1960s and motion-picture film production in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Consequently, the economic downturn experienced by the nation coincided with the era of indigenous film development which prevented a continued production in celluloid format, therefore forcing a move “to video technology. Hence, by the late 1980s, Yoruba video films had come into existence” (ibid). And as a result, Adejunmobi (2002) contends that the producers of the first Igbo-language video films did not appear until the early 1990s, after discovering the potential of films in other languages, wherein Igbo filmmakers later pioneered the English language video films, shortly thereafter.

In the same manner, Adesanya (1997:16) observes that video production in Nigeria started in the late 1980s, not the early 1990s as previously thought, based on desperation by producers to remain in the motion picture business, on a very low budget. Here Adesanya’s view on the historical development of the video form in Nigeria may suggest that other titles must have predated *Living in Bondage*, especially when other filmmakers were absent at this period. Second, Okome (1997) and Ogundele (1997) argue that although *Living in Bondage* exposed the economic viability of the evolving video genre, artists of the Yoruba popular theatre started video filmmaking process in Nigeria. Hence Ogundele states that:

By the end of the 1980s, video plays had become the dominant technological medium of popular culture and entertainment in Yoruba urban centres. The popular musicians were the first to realize its immense and social economic potentials. This was followed by one or two television stations which, realizing how popular the drama series they sponsored had become, transferred them onto video sales. Then more and more homes began to acquire video machines...a few enterprising video producers in Lagos and Ibadan soon realized that, with a camcorder on your padded shoulder, you could call some former stage actors together, get them to act out a story in imitation of the vanishing travelling theatre tradition, and everybody was back in business.

Accordingly, video production evolved through the creative ingenuity of popular culture and entertainment in the urban Yoruba environment in response to the wholesome gap created by a crippling economic condition that engulfed Nigeria, and eventually the entire arts community, making motion-picture film production a tall dream. Nevertheless, to re-invent the nostalgic popular theatre era, they took advantage of the newly evolving video format, and brought themselves back in business.

Furthermore, the person to be credited as the midwife of the transition from celluloid to video among Yoruba filmmakers is still largely contentious and therefore it remains an issue of much debate. Although Haynes and Okome (1997:23) suggest that the Yoruba travelling theatre began theatrical video in 1988, they are silent about the first producer and the first film produced in Nigeria. Likewise, Ademola James, the pioneer director-general of the National Film and Video Censors Board is also evasive about the first video drama production, yet set the video revolution at 1982, though displaying the picture of Muideen Aromire (popularly known as Alade), as one of the earliest producers of full-length feature movies in the video formats from the 1980s. He is, however, quick to note that the overlapping sequence of developments that led to the transformation from motion-picture to video did not permit a neat, water-tight definitive date (James 2007:160). And last, Alamu (2010:28-29) complimentarily contends that the first Yoruba video was *Igi Da* produced by Kola Olatunde in 1990, positing that Muideen Aromire, though popularized as the originator of Yoruba video film, could not have been the first video producer since his debut was released in 1992. Yet, contrary to Alamu's view, Alade Aromire (as fondly called by his admirers) argued that his first film, *Ekun*, was produced in 1986. Thus he explains:

Let me tell you what you don't know. "Living in Bondage" was not the first home video as claimed by some people. Go and ask the producer of the film, Kenneth Nnebue and the director, Ahmed Oguntade who have done over 40 Yoruba video films before coming out with "Living in Bondage". Kenneth Nnebue was a producer in Yoruba...but for me, my first film was "Ekun" which I produced in 1986...both "Ekun", "Omije" and "Asiko" were all produced before 1990.

Moreover, to fully understand the motivation for popularizing *Living in Bondage* as the first Nigerian video film, it is perhaps expedient at this juncture to briefly interrogate the scope of "Nollywood" as it is known today. Admittedly, the name has been another subject of contention, especially by those who see its coinage, which is likely to be a blend of Nigeria and Hollywood as a new form of neo-colonialism. This is further heightened by the fact that "Nollywood" is a Eurocentric coinage; a word "invented by a foreigner construct which first appeared in a 2002 article by Matt Steinglass in the *New York Times*" (Onuzulike 2007:25), linking the industry to Hollywood in the United States in the same manner that the Indian film industry has been named "Bollywood". One wonders if the British would have christened their own industry "Britiwood", if it does exist? There is obviously no socio-cultural connection between the name and the home-grown, indigenous film tradition in Nigeria. For instance, why must all evolving film industries be linked with Hollywood as though they are its appendages or derivatives? As argued by Haynes (1995:98), popular film in Nigeria developed without external influence in terms of finance and distribution. It should therefore not be tethered to the apron string of Hollywood.

Those who connect *Living in Bondage* with the birth of Nollywood must have subscribed to the narrow conception of the word, employing it to probably describe the Igbo/English language Nigerian film industry whose popularity remarkably extends beyond African shores as a result of the expansive leisure provided by the international status of the English language. Hence, on the international scene, *Living in Bondage* is construed as pioneering video production in Nigeria. And sad to note, even in Nigeria, this parochialism is sustained by some public office holders. For example, in a special interaction organized by the delegation of the Federal Government of Nigeria and Nollywood stakeholders in March 2011 to deliberate on the state of affairs in the industry and the need for government intervention, Hausa and Yoruba language filmmakers were not represented. In the future, all linguistic groups should be invited as full and equal participants.

The fact subsists that Nollywood, if the term actually designates the Nigerian film industry in its entirety, can be understood within three planes. First, we have the English/Igbo language filmmakers whose major operators are from the Eastern part of Nigeria; then the Yoruba filmmakers who invariably have their antecedents in the Yoruba popular theatrical tradition and; finally, the Hausa filmmakers who have entered the enterprise after the before mentioned with an additional cultural and linguistic spice to video production.

Conclusion

Practitioners of the popular Yoruba travelling theatre were, undeniably, at the nerve-center of video production in Nigeria. Having successfully toured their plays in the western part of Nigeria and other Yoruba speaking communities in West Africa, they extended their production repertoire to motion-picture film, and when the economy of the nation became less buoyant, and making motion-picture film became an economic risk, they looked for an alternative medium in video which was then an evolving medium in Africa. Hence, the first Igbo/English language film came after Yoruba filmmakers had established video as a medium of production, and throughout this rather instinctive and spontaneous genre, it is still difficult to identify a particular artist or movie as the pioneering work in this unique African revolution that is taking the world by surprise. Nonetheless, perhaps we can tentatively describe the late actor and movie producer, Muideen Aromire as the progenitor of the video film revolution in Nigeria, since his film, *Ekun*, is the earliest documented Nigerian video film.

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