

# Moral Dilemma in Nollywood: Virtue Celebration or Vice Glorification?

by

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## Abstract

The cinema of Nigeria, often referred to as Nollywood, now the second largest film industry in the world has engendered much discourse (most of it negative) in the few decades of its existence. Hence, it has come a long way from 1995 when Nigerian filmmakers were mortified in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso during the Federation Pan Africaine Des Cineastes/Pan African Federation of Cineastes (FEPACI) because they did not have a registered umbrella body (Brendan Shehu, 1995) when celluloid filmmaking was in vogue. Today, video film in spite of the many battles ranging from poor storyline, plot, acting, directing, technical finish, etc. has managed to rise above its detractors. Employing historical-analytic methodology, this paper looks at the issue of moral compensation to ask how has Nollywood fared, does it exist, and if so, has a historical-analytic methodology been applied and what are the effects or lack of its application?

**Keywords:** Nigeria, Nollywood, moral compensation, censor, filmmakers

## Introduction

The history of video film in Nigeria portrays a story of what could best be summed up as a celebration of the biblical “he that is down needs fear no fall” because no one believed in it much less expected it to grow, and the video format was considered to be inferior and at the bottom of quality rating. Thus, the celluloid era having endured for close to a century (1903-1992) in Nigeria and yielding a harvest of less than five hundred (500) titles (Adesanya, 1997) did not hold much hope, however, filmmakers in their bid to survive have done what they have always had to do in such situations, and unlike Warner Brothers Production Company in America, whose survival bid to escape bankruptcy pushed them to experiment with a little dialogue in their film *The Jazz Singer* (1927), and subsequently ushered sound into filmmaking, Nigerian filmmakers in their desperate desire to stay afloat turned to video, a format others had rejected.

Hence, the outcome of that adventure has not only created the world’s largest video industry, but it has also increased the lexicon of the English language with the invention of the word ‘Nollywood’ (a cinema via Nigeria). And as such, the fate of Nigerian video film industry, perhaps because of its peculiar circumstance of birth via Nollywood has admittedly become prone to all the errors of commission and omission in its early under exposure and an undue haste to attain maturity.

Now, having fought and overcame most of the vagaries of an upstart, as it were, one would have expected that filmmakers or videographers would have risen beyond a certain level of viewer/audience discomfort by doing movies that would be considered averagely above board. But sadly, the bulk of the pantheon of Nollywood remains at the level Osha (1998 p.48) refers to as “once you have seen one, you have seen them all”, suggesting that the industry is stuck with predictability in its storyline, action, and photography. But more importantly, the issue of morality in the movies needs to be examined in a historical-analytic way, as in the following introductory discourse we provide herein.

Thus, we will provide a theoretical clarification of this topic and engage discussion on moral compensation in film, moral compensation specifically in Nigerian video films, and explore the question of censorship in movies.

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## Theoretical Clarification

Morality in general usage applies to the rules of correct behavior, and therefore revolves on the issue of good and bad as it relates to human attitude and conduct. And in juxtaposition, compensation reflects the idea of rewarding someone or something for something in that someone or something has suffered a loss, physical or psychological, and in a compound context in relationship to film, moral compensation is a feeling of satisfaction the viewer or the audience gets when vice is punished and virtue rewarded wherein the punishment or reward is commensurate or proportionate to the crime engendered.

Historically, the first mention of moral compensation in drama can be traced to Aristotle in his *Poetics* while discussing *peripeteia* (also known as sudden reversal of fortune) as he noted the type of character and circumstance that can necessitate fear and pity to suggest that not all actions or characters can qualify for tragedy since tragedy is an imitation of action not a character, and further clarifying that:

*It should, moreover, imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic imitation. It follows plainly in the first place that the change of fortune presented must not be a spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear, it merely shocks us. Nor again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity. For nothing can be more alien to the spirit of tragedy. It possesses no single tragic quality, it neither satisfies the moral sense, nor calls forth pity or fear. (Dukore, 1974 p.42).*

Aristotle further contends that the downfall should not be that of a complete/total villain. And though this satisfies the moral sense, it does not inspire pity or fear. In other words, there is nothing pitiable in a person who gets deserved punishment. There must be some element of miscalculation (e.g., hubristic tendency) in the entire tragic sense for it to generate moral compensation. Also, the central concern in moral compensation is not the character; notwithstanding that it engenders the moral sense, but rather for the viewer, the audience to consider how does he/she feel after experiencing either or all the action(s) mentioned above and would he/she feel the punishment was too severe for the crime or the reward unmerited? Thus, the crux of moral compensation in the arts, be it literary, visual, or in movies, the answer inevitably affects a person's overall attitude to moral issues in arts and in the human/community sciences.

It is pertinent to posit here that the issue of morality does not hang out on a limb, but instead, it is embedded in the social-cultural milieu of a given community or people, embracing their norms, values, taboos and general law(s) of what constitutes right or wrong. In simple terms, one can say that moral compensation in movies or elsewhere is culture based that also recognizes universal norms of correct behavior or ethics. However, it is anchored more pertinently in a given culture since one does not use Roman laws for instance to judge the Greek, except when the Greek shares common grounds with the Roman. Thus, it is in this context that moral compensation in Nigerian video films is contemplated in this study.

## **Moral Compensation in Movies**

The general principle guiding the theme of moral compensation as a theory in film revolves round the concept of decency and good taste. It seeks to uphold what is morally acceptable as good as opposed to what is disgusting, indecent and contradicts or truncates the moral concerns of what is good and acceptable. It also begins with the individual filmmaker engaging in self censorship. A sort of desire to do the right thing without pandering to the base or in lowering the taste of the films, but to instead to use the film medium to elevate society, and thus it becomes necessary to regulate the moral sense as human beings unconsciously gravitate towards base instincts and if left unchecked, this could reduce the social framework to the animal level of wild, aggressive and unpleasantness, leading to a morally lax society.

The theory of moral compensation in film is traceable to Hollywood in the days of Will H. Hays, as the president of the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America, who appointed Joseph, T. Breen to head the Production Code Administration (PCA) in 1934 to enforce the Motion Picture Production Code (a set of industry moral censorship guidelines that governed the production of most U.S. motion pictures released by major studios from 1930 to 1968), which required all filmmakers to submit their films for approval before release. Hence, to earn Breen's imprimatur, the moral meaning of the picture needed to be clear, edifying and preferably Catholic wherein Hollywood might show the evil that men do, but only if it were vanquished by the last reel, with the guilty punished, and the sinner redeemed (Doherty, 1999 p.8). And thus, the focus was to ensure that there was no glorification of evil on whatever grounds and that what society upholds should be upheld by the universe of the film or if contradicted, provided with commensurate atonement for it. Hence, "compensating moral value" as Breen called it, the dictum that "any theme must contain at least sufficient good in the story to compensate for and counteract any evil which it relates", suggesting that moral compensation was the only justification for a glimpse of a snake in paradise (Doherty, 1999 p.12).

From this code, filmmakers and producers know their limit. As noted above, stealing a glimpse of the snake in paradise is not as criminal as what happens to the viewer after such view, provided there is justifiable reason for doing so. It is as simple as that. But is it really that simple? The fact is that, a greater percentage of movie fare consists of societal 'don'ts' and to avoid them when so much financial burden is at stake, takes special commitment. It is even more so for the Nigerian filmmaker/videographer, who has to grapple with not just the rush hour to produce, but also the quick reaper impulse.

## **Moral Compensation in Nigerian Video Films**

The video film in Nigeria has been accused of several offences right from its inception. Most of the accusations are equally true especially in the early beginnings. There have been improvements no doubt, but, every once in a while, you see a producer or director who releases a movie that gives the impression that whoever releases it is allergic to both historical accuracy and research. Such movies come with all the guilt of the past. The movie industry in Nigeria has also been accused of being of "poor production quality especially in the late 1990s" (Shaka 2003 p.46); that it "lacks the necessary infrastructure and credible framework" (Dozie 2008 p.13); it has "practitioners who have low level of skills" (James 1997 p.12); and that "some of the movie scripts are terrible" (Afolabi, 2003) with and images of Africa as negative as the industry suffers from technical and managerial inadequacies" (Adeoti, 2003); "poor scripts – plots, character development, lines, sequels – unending storylines (To God be the Glory), (Illah, 2013 p.9), and that thematically, the industry has broken all the regulations in the regulations in the Code of Production Ethics for filmmakers in Nigeria.

This has provided a sort of justification for all the accusations leveled against the industry. Hence, the tone and shape of the concept of moral compensation was probably set by the first successful video film, *Living in Bondage* (dir Kenneth Nnebue, 1992) which was produced by NEK Video Links with Kenneth Okonkwo in the lead role as Andy Okeke. The movie traced the struggle of Andy to get a job and be a useful member of society. Failing to get the job, he was introduced to a cult which specialized in making members wealthy once they were able to do the prescribed ritual. Andy joined this cult and the journey to wealth begins for him. Thus, by the time the story was told of his journey to riches, it appeared there was no time to effect the punishment for the crime which he committed to become rich. He used his loving and caring wife, Merit, for money ritual. Thus, it was not until well into part two of the film that he began to face the consequences of his action after an unprecedented exhibition of wealth.

The delay in effecting justice, therefore, became akin to justice denied. It is not that in actuality moral compensation does not exist in Nigerian video film, it is rather that by the time this justice is executed, its meaning and weight are lost by the viewer. The viewer, having been exposed to such glorification of wealth is bound to get the impression that it is better to be a king in hell than a servant in heaven. In other words, he begins to feel like the man who saw a widow whose husband was said to have died of HIV/AIDS and told his friend, "If it is indeed true that her husband died of HIV/AIDS, I wouldn't mind to die of the same if only I can have a tumble with her." Indeed, Omoera (2011p.1) has linked violence (in its varied forms) in the larger Nigerian society to Nollywood films (Omoera, 2011p.1). He vehemently argues that a lot of moral questions hang round many of the scenes in Nollywood films, drawing specific references from *Issakaba* (dir Lancelot Imasuen, 2001) and *Most Wanted* (dir Dozie Eriobu, 2000) which are likely to leave one to wonder if entertainment is now at the expense of morality and cultural education in the Nigerian film ecology.

Movies have power to influence and this influence comes from both the actions seen within the frame and those implied, which occur outside the frame or the shot. In achieving a good story, therefore, elements of moral compensation must be put into consideration. Now, since the movie maker is a business man first, and a story-teller/ entertainer, second, (in our situation, at least, though the reverse should be the case), one would not expect him to adhere to correct rules of entertainment. His/her business is first to recoup his/her capital and make a profit, he/she therefore, cares little for aesthetics and norms, and even less for functionality, and this best explains why many Nigerian filmmakers/videographers sacrifice the moral compass at the altar of crass mercantilism in most of their films. And additionally, some of these films have the tendency of over-maturing and overgrowing children into adulthood which they are ill prepared for. For example, we see a set of impish children with slim moral texture in the Nollywood movie, *Aki and Popo* (2000). Osita IHEME and Chinedu Ikedieze (who in actual fact are full grown adults) respectively play the role of Aki and Popo, with questionable/conflicting image representations of Nigerian children, all in the name of providing entertainment as they engage in mischievous pranks of stealing, insulting their elders, beating up other children, attempting to rape girls, etc, and the image/gaze that is ostensibly represented is that kids can be involve in such unwholesome activities and walk away scot free. It is this kind of moral issues in Nollywood films that impelled Omoera (in press) to ask the billion naira question: What kind of gaze is being set for the growing child who is likely to copy some of the pranks/misbehaviours exhibited in Nigerian films such as *Mr Ibu*, *Akin na Ukwu*, *Aki and Popo*, *Ike and Chima*, etc?

Hence, to protect the filmmaker from himself/herself, the censor should not be far from him/her, although the actual censorship should begin with self, but the self has the tendency to overlook things, and thus, there is a need for a third party, the censor.

## **Censorship in Movies**

Having explained that “diegesis” is the world of the film, the universe inhabited by the characters in the landscape of cinema, Doherty (1999), goes further to say that, “the job of the motion picture censor is to patrol the diegesis, keeping an eye and ear out for images, language, and meanings that should be banished from the world of the film.” Doherty makes film censorship seem like a preoccupation with fault-finding. Yet, film censorship goes beyond looking for what is right or wrong, to embrace proffering guidelines for movie makers to abide by.

Essentially, movie censorship begins consciously or unconsciously with the individual filmmaker. From the first shot, even the first dialogue, a director/producer should have an idea of where he/she is heading. This job is made easier if he/she knows the production code guiding the profession, knowledge that would assist in avoiding what needed to be avoided and in finding ways to work around such areas that would pose censorship problems.

The nature of the film makes a clash between production codes and audience/societal mores inevitable. In an article aptly entitled, “Production Values versus Audience/Societal Mores,” James (2001), critically discusses the nature of the relationship between the variables in the discourse of civilities and incivilities in Nollywood films. Thus, he posit that: In other words, for instance, despite the peculiarity of the elements of production values that guide its producers, a meaningful or worthwhile film must have social relevance and its content/resolution must be imbued a sense of social responsibility (James, 2001p.247).

The point here is that the filmmaker owes the audience/society a level of responsibility in that the filmmaker is a representative of the viewer/society and as such, he/she should endeavor to put himself/herself occasionally in the place of the viewers in order to represent them well. Notwithstanding, the fact that the producer/director and viewers have the same terms of reference which are drawn from the environment, they operate from different economic interests or spectrums. And it is this differing economic concerns that lead to a misunderstanding since the viewer wants to be entertained, informed and if possible, be educated while the producer wants to entertain, but in a manner that will appeal to base instincts which enables him/her to enjoy a better patronage.

However, society or at least a part of it wants an elevated kind of entertainment which appeals to the higher taste, the more decent and ennobling part of humankind. It is in the bid to achieve a kind of middle ground between the two conflicting interests that No. 1.9 of the *Code of Ethics and Production for Filmmakers in Nigeria* states that:

On their part, film and video producers while demanding from the public and from public leaders a sympathetic understanding of their purposes and problems and a spirit of co-operation that will allow them the freedom and opportunity necessary to bring the motion picture to a still higher level of wholesome entertainment for all the people, are obliged to be conscious always of the necessity to be committed to the principle of social responsibility and the need to preserve common national ethos (cited in Ekwuazi, Sokomba and Mgbejume, 2001 p.298).

The preservation of cultural heritage and the need to uphold common national ethos is of particular concern to the Censors Board. Also, the *Film Policy for Nigeria*, in article 10.14(b) of its provisions saddled the Censors Board with the responsibility to: ensure that films imported into Nigeria do not conflict with our national interest and cultural ethos. The job of the Censors Board in every society is first the recognition and acceptance of individual differences especially in the creative realm. This recognition enables it to provide the needed guidelines that filmmakers are expected to follow. If this was not done, the tendency is that some artists are likely to mislead society into adopting values which are not good, and it is in that line with the above statement that Part VII. 37(2) of *The National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) Enabling Law*, states: that: the Film Censors Committee shall not approve a film which in its opinion depicts any matter which is: (a) indecent, obscene or likely to be injurious to morality; or (b) likely to incite or encourage public disorder, or crime; or (c) undesirable in the public interest (1993, p.20). Thus, ironically, the censor is protecting the society from itself since the filmmaker is also a product of society, but as already stated, his/her interest is at variance with that of society. And for society, Mazisi Kunene, cited in Orié (2008 p.112), captures its own concern that “Each society is concerned with its destiny within the cosmic arena. Without this perspective, the society can only be stampeded into directions it does not fully comprehend or does not feel ready to follow”.

No artist likes to be told what to do or be dictated to, hence there appears to be a kind of resistance against the production codes which should not be misunderstood by the censor, because the artist by his/her calling is not comfortable with issues of control, and besides, people would rather be in a position of control rather than be controlled. Thus, the censor has to do a good job for the film maker to appreciate his/her job.



Incidentally, the censor's job helps the filmmaker to package his/her story in a more acceptable way. Issues such as moral compensation, decency, violence, for its own sake, nudity, poor knowledge of traditional and cultural norms and belief systems and respect for conventional symbols are better appreciated from a neutral viewpoint which the censor provides, and indeed, a situation where violence is unleashed with, neither provocation nor commensurate punishment exerted cannot be in the interest of the society. And ultimately, both parties are working in the interest of the society; however, the filmmaker engages the society in the aesthetic and pleasurable experience of itself while the censor provides the functional relevance from the filmmaker's work so that both the filmmaker and censor leave the society better than they found it. Hence, the objective of both censor and filmmaker is to reach the audience, perhaps, with different personal gains, yet, the censor is more communal oriented in his/her goals than the filmmaker who has personal gains and his/her capital to consider.

## **Conclusion**

The artist in every society enjoys a special privilege, a privilege that comes in the form of poetic license; however, it requires the artist a measure of responsibility or corresponding obligation which the society exerts on him/her. To rebel or to be creatively peculiar is innate to virtually every artist, while the censor on his/her part is employed to save the society, to protect it from the artist and to also protect the artist from himself/herself, a thankless job which must be done, notwithstanding who feels cheated or otherwise.

This article has attempted to discuss the issue of moral compensation in Nigerian movies. It reveals that moral compensation does indeed exist in Nollywood, but that by the time it will occur, its impact would have been grossly weakened. On the issue of censorship, it is shown that both the artist and the society need one another, and that both are concerned with the well-being of the society though with different objectives. The function of art in society is to leave it better than it was, and artists have the moral obligation to make a positive statement about society, not to rehash the wrongs as they are. And as Achebe (2012 p.56), says: "In Africa, the tendency is to keep art involved with the people, it is clearly emphasized among my own Igbo people that art must never be allowed to escape into the rarefied atmosphere but must remain active in the lives of the members of society. The point I'm trying to make is that there is a need to bring life back into art by bringing art to life, so that the two can hold a conversation".

The conversation between art and life should not be discordant. This can only happen when the artist fails to be concerned with issues which are of concern to life. In this case, the society reacts because evil and negative tendency are preferred to good morals and acceptable ways of living. Hence, in summation, we suggest that in order to have a rich harvest of stories that provide aesthetic pleasure and moral satisfaction: (1) each film should function as a complete event and that crimes committed in a film should be paid for before the end of the film and if it fails to do so, let the gains from the crime be seen as problematic from the outset, (2) crime/vice should not be glamorized, (3) African ways of life must not be subjected to ridicule, (4) symbols should not be misused, and (5) censors should know the techniques of cinematography and be grounded in ethnical issues.

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