INTERSECTING NOLLYWOOD, CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT IN UGEZU J. UGEZU'S FILM; *KING ABOVE GODS*

Iloma Nyenwemaduka Richard, Ph.D
Department of Theatre and Film Studies, Faculty of Humanities,
Rivers State University, Portt Harcourt
Richard.iloma@ust.edu.ng
+2348138183277
ORCID. 0009-0006-0486-4182

Abstract.
The role of Nollywood in transmitting cultural values and portraying ideological postures within the African environment cannot be overemphasized. Since 1992 when its first film, apparently Kenneth Nnebue's Living *in Bondage*, was released, the industry has been preoccupied with the reflection of various aspects of Nigerian socio-cultural life, including values, economic engagements, language, food, clothing, arts, and belief systems. The industry has also played a significant role in reflecting the Nigerian environment by showcasing numerous settings across geographical locations, such as vegetation, aquatic bodies, habitations, and aerospace. Notwithstanding the avalanche of films delving into cultural and environmental subjects, scholarship has not been done to highlight the connection between Nollywood, culture, and environment. This study therefore evaluated the correlation between Nollywood, culture, and environment, revealing how societal values, identities, and environmental consciousness are reflected and shaped by the Nigerian film industry. The study was anchored on the dual theoretical frameworks of structuralism and the African Eco-Media theory to qualitatively analyze Ugezu J. Ugezu's film titled *King Above Gods* (2018). Among its findings were the fact that Nollywood serves as a lens through which culture and environment interrelate. The study also discovered that, through streaming algorithms, Nollywood amplifies cultural and environmental impacts. It is therefore recommended that relevant stakeholders in cultural and environmental discourse should integrate film as a critical resource instrument

Keywords: Intersect, Nollywood, culture, environment, film

Introduction

Since 1992 when the Nigerian film industry, otherwise known as Nollywood, came to the mainstream film cultures in the world, its production output has become a major point of scholarly conversation. Iloma and Shaka (2018) and the 2009 report of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics designate Nollywood as the second largest film industry by output in the world after India's Bollywood, and to the lead of American's Hollywood, and the largest in Africa. This astronomical growth of the industry has had a multiplier effect, impacting the country's Gross Domestic Product GDP, employment generation, and skill acquisition, among others. .

Beyond the limits of entertainment, economic development, skill acquisition, and employment generation, among others, scholars such as Iloma (2022),(2023), Iloma and

Okwuowulu (2018), Okwuowulu & Iloma (, 2018) Ohia and Iloma (,2023), (2023), and Iloma, Shaka & Uwah (2018) have affirmed that the film medium and, by extension, Nollywood do not tell stories from the vacuum; instead, they mirror realities in society. This has enabled her interrogate various spheres of human engagement, including culture, religion, economy, clothing, food, nature, and the environment, to mention but a few. This study focuses on the intersection of Nollywood, culture, and environment using Ugezu J. Ugezu as a paradigm.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the dual theoretical frameworks of structuralism and African Eco-Media theory. Structuralism, primarily associated with scholars such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Vladimir Propp beliefs that meaning can be found beyond the surface outlook of the story presented, but in the hidden structures, codes, myths, and deep patterns underneath the story. On the other hand, the African eco-media theory, which is primarily associated with Cajetan Iheka, provides an outline for investigating how environmental stories are rooted in African cosmology and for appraising the ecological implications of media production itself. These theories are considered appropriate to this study due to their relevance to the subject of the paper.

Review of related literatures

Much has been documented to emphasize film as a powerful tool for social reflection. Shaka (2011) asserts that in Nigeria, the film medium, like other art forms, has remained sensitive to the recounting of the social anxieties of the people. He compares the Nigerian filmmaker to the literary writer whose work does not exist in nothingness but is drawn from social realities to the extent that they provide indicators for understanding how the society is organized and led. This study narrates how social happenings surrounding the Nigerian environment around the 1990s translated to some emergent genres in the Nigerian film industry. Shaka maintains that the era of 1990s in Nigeria was "a period in which the ship of state was set adrift by political experimentations that was intended to sail to a dead end," noting that the political experimentations started with the military president, Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida, who annulled the presidential election that was to bring his friend, M.K.O Abiola to power. The refusal of I.B.B to hand over power to the democratically elected M.K.O Abiola resulted in a mass revolt that forced him to step aside for an interim government that brought in Ernest Shonekan to power. Shonekan's government was soon toppled by General Sani Abacha. Abacha's government instituted a reign of terror in which many lives were taken with impunity, especially the lives of journalists and any other person who was conceived to be opposed to his government.

The pro-democratic coalition, National Democratic Coalition NADECO which was headed by Anthony Enahoro was formed, and many vocal social critics went on self-exile. The highest treasury looting in the history of Nigeria is said to have been experienced during Abacha's government, such that, up till now, successive governments in Nigeria have yet to recover Abacha's loot. Resultantly, the entire Nigerian populace floundered in abject penury. The survival quest of the masses subsequently led to the ill-famed surfacing of stories of cannibalism, as exemplified by the *Otokoto* saga in Owerri, Imo State, and other forms of ritual killings, such that various parts of the human body were harvested for monetary charms. Shaka therefore maintains that the prevailing social circumstances in Nigeria gave rise to the

ritual murder genre, which kick-started the video phase of the video film industry with Kenneth Nnebue's blockbuster, Living *in Bondage* (1992).

In his analysis of the ritual films, Yeseibo (2005) affirms the genre as reflecting stories of once poor people who suddenly become well-to-do by means of ritualistic or cultic practices. Bringing Kenneth Nnebue's *Living in Bondage (*1992) to context with the disillusioning social realities of the 1990s, Yesiebo narrates how the poor, unsuccessful job seeker, Andy, becomes desperate in his quest for wealth. He is led to a group of Ibo businessmen who gradually let him into the secret world of success. The price of killing his wife, Merit, is demanded as a mandatory requirement for membership. Having gone so far in society, he cannot opt out. He tries to substitute Merit for a prostitute, but when this plan fails, he is compelled to kill Merit in a terrible ritual scene. Consequently, Andy begins to prosper beyond measure. Again, Yeseibo provides further examples of Nollywood films that fall within the ambits of this genre, to include: Chico Ejiro's Blood *Money* 1 & 2 (1993), Sunny Collins' *Ijele* (2002) and *Aguba* (2003), and Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen's *Igede* (2002) amongst others. Yeseibo notes that the dominance of cultic and ritual elements in this genre generated public outcry both locally and internationally, as they tend to label Nigerian culture and image with the utmost negativity.

Suffice it to state that stories that crave quick cash, Yahoo plus scams, and organ harvesting, which dominate social happenings in present-day Nigeria, are continuously represented in Nollywood, thereby justifying the link between Nollywood and society.

Furthermore, Okome (2007) posits that Nollywood films serve as an anchor for discussing the subject of identity, especially the contrast between traditional and modern societies. The use of historical themes, virginal settings, traditional costumes, make-up, music, and local language in historical epic genres such as *The Battle of Musanga* (1996), *Igodo* (1999) and *Sango* (1997) re-enacts Nigerian society during the pre-colonial period, while Iloma and Nwafor's(2014) discourse in which organized crime leading to the brutal murder of one of Nigeria's most reputable judges, Justice Hinga, as a reprisal attack by an armed terrorist organization for sentencing their leader to death by hanging was enacted. The representation of this criminal incident in Teco Benson's *War Front* (2010), *Mission to Nowhere* in Iloma (2018) and Iloma (2025) mirrors burning issues around crime in contemporary Nigeria.

Drawing from the above, Okwuowolu and Iloma (2018) and Iloma (2022) narrate Nollywood's depiction of the traditional Benin environment and communal values in colonial Nigeria. They explain how the rich vegetation, palm and rubber plantations, together with the aesthetic artifacts, carvings, paintings, and sculptural designs that surround the Benin environment prompted British interest to colonize the Benin Empire. The British had considered the enormous economic prospects of these economic trees and artifacts when exported to Britain. Suffice it to say that these were the remote motivations of the British invasion and conquest of Benin in 1897, leading to the deposition of her revered King, *Ovoramwen Nogbaisi*, carting away of her rich artefacts; and the forceful taking control of the entire political and economic structures of the empire. In Iloma (2023), it is revealed how the issues of environmental pollution, degradation, neglect, and poverty in the Niger Delta Region constitute the thematic thrust of conversation in Ossy Okeke's film titled: *Liquid Black Gold* (2009).In this film, Iloma explains how some aggrieved youths of Zeide community feel cheated and neglected over pains inflicted on them by the presence and activities of oil companies within their environment. In spite of the depletion of their ecosystem by the

activities of the oil company, no convincing effort was made toward providing them with portable drinking water, primary health care facilities, a good road network, and general alternative means of livelihood. The theorization of the militancy subgenre of the action film genre in Iloma (2023) was predicated upon this background. In a study titled: Crude Oil Crisis in the Niger Delta: Prospecting a Theorization of Militancy Sub-genre of Action Film in a Selected Nollywood Narrative, Iloma (2024) argues that militancy in the Niger Delta Region was birthed as an aggressive response to the frustrating circumstances experienced by the people over the deplorable state of their environment and the general exploitations encountered. He explained how disillusioned members of host communities within the Niger Delta geographical locale realize how exploited, neglected, underdeveloped, and grossly shortchanged they are at the hands of the Federal Government of Nigeria and other key stakeholders in the oil and gas business within their land. Resulting from this circumstance, Iloma observes that since the early 2000s, there has been a rise of a new dimension of insecurity that surged around the Niger Delta Region, causing great tension and severe unrest in the land. He explains how a group of disgruntled youths in the Region form themselves into militia groups, wrecking great havocs and carries out wanton coordinated attacks on crude oil facilities, takes hostages of foreign experts, and causes civil unrest. Iloma further maintains that the Nigerian filmmaker's response to this social trend resulted in the circulation of a category of films that dwell on the subject of militancy. The point of note here is how film intersects society and its environment. Studies on film genres in Nollywood have further highlighted this nexus.

According to Nwafor and Edum (2013), ''Generic classifications in Nigerian film is a product of the people's social, political, and cultural experiences," substantiating this, Ayakoroma (2006) highlights that whenever major events that shake the nation's foundations break, filmmakers quickly churn out films based on that subject. He argues that the release of such films as *Sturbborn Grasshopper* was representative of General Sani Abacha's dictatorship, *Orija Shrine* drawn from the Okija shrine saga, *The* Tchidi Tchikere's *Incumbent* based on the political scenario in Anambra State, caricaturing the travails of Chris Ngige and Lancelot Imasuen Oduwa's *Issakaba*, drawn from the activities of Bakassi Boys, a vigilante group in Aba, South East Nigeria, which engaged in fighting crime. Iloma (2018), Iloma and Ibe (2024) and Iloma, Shaka, and Uwah (2018) explain that vigilantism represents powerful voluntary organizations aimed at combating crime and restoring sanity in crime-dominated societies. They advance that vigilantism in Nigeria is compelled by the failure of state actors like the police and soldiers to effectively contain spates of insecurity in the land, thereby leaving men and women with no other option than surrendering to fate through self-help and putting their lives in the line.

Supportively, Shaka (2017, p.2) maintains that genre is the driving force to film production in Nigeria. He identifies some of the popular genres to include ritual, Christian evangelical films, epic, comedy, campus stories, and Niger Delta genres, among others. Discussing the workings of genre in Nigeria, Shaka further notes that genre seasons are launched by the agenda setting of popular stories in the tabloids. This fact is exemplified by the popular Okija saga, which erupted into the national consciousness following the crisis between the erstwhile governor of Anambra State, Chris Ngige, and his political sponsors, and other insinuations that the Okija Shrine was used by politicians as a hub of oath-taking between them and their sponsors. Shaka notes that this saga, which led to the raiding of the

shrine by the Inspector-General of Police, triggered off a genre of films on the influence of the shrine on social life in Anambra State.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design and content analysis to examine the nexus between Nollywood, culture, and the environment. Ugezu J. Ugezu's film titled *King Above Gods* was purposively sampled as the model for the discourse. The film was intentionally considered due to the relevance of its content to the subject of discourse. Both primary and secondary sources of data collection were applied to gather relevant research materials. The method utilized for analyzing the research's data was textual analysis.

Discussion: Intersecting Nollywood, Culture and Environment in Ugezu J. Ugezu's *King Above Gods*

Ugezu J. Ugezu's *King Above Gods* is a story about King Agabidu, a feared monarch believed to have won several wars. Overwhelmed by his successful war escapades, King Agadibu becomes very arrogant to the extent of considering himself mightier and superior to both human and divine forces. Trouble ensues when the King begins to defy sacred taboos, shed innocent blood, and desecrate sacred shrines. A swift response from the earth goddess *Ala however,* strikes the community, and everything falls apart. There is drought in the land, with a devastating impact on crop production. The shrine and forest bodies that once sheltered the people turn hostile and horrible King Agabidu is isolated as his Queen, son, and chiefs abandon him. In spite of these troubles, rather than being repentant and submissive to the land, in Igbo cosmology, which is the mother and judge of human actions, King Agabidu attempts to destroy more sacred shrines to assert the superiority of his powers over the gods. In the final analysis, the King is struck with madness, leading to the collapse of his throne and the subsequent enthronement of another king who now restores calm.

This film interlinks culture and environment by reaffirming the Igbo belief in the metaphysical order of the universe, where the gods, *Chi, Ala/Ani* regulate human actions and enforce justice and moral values within the environment. King Agabidu had turned his community into an anomic one, where traditional norms are totally broken and gross disregard for the gods and elders reigns. This situation is worsened by his frequent displays of extreme pride and arrogance, where he considers himself above the gods. As the film opens, he boasts to the gathering of his entire community, "I have transformed from a mortal to a god". In a binary reaction that affirms the people's belief of the people, King Agabidu is reminded by an elder who speaks in a proverb reflecting deep meaning: "the insect can never be bigger than its mother, no matter what it eats". This aligns with the Igbo worldview that, no matter how powerful a man is, he should not challenge his personal god *chi.* Rather than heeding the Elders' caution, King Agabiidu considers it, an affront on his personality and authority. In an unprovoked reaction and mystical display of powers, he takes away the elders' life. Plates 1,2 and 3 below are pictorial explanations of the incident. In plate 1, a respected elder of the land, prompted by the anomaly in the King's ranting and boasting of the King which he declares himself above the gods, warns against such behavior. In plate 2, King Agabidu, considering the elder's warning, an affront, uses mystical powers to strike the elder. Plate 3 shows the elder lying lifeless on the ground

Plate 1 reveals an elder warning King Agabidu to refrain from assuming the place of the gods

Plate 2. Agabidu considers the elder's warning an affront to his authority and uses mystical powers to strike him.

Plate 3. The elder falls flat on the grand, dead

Furthermore, Ugezu's *King Above gods* reaffirms the nexus between Nollywood, culture, and environment by reflecting how cultural values in Igbo land shape the environment. King Agabedu's display of hubris which resulted in extreme pride and arrogance, excessive abuse of power, flagrant shedding of innocent blood, and consequently, death re-echoes the point that, in Igbo cosmology, culture is entrenched in the environment, where the land plays an active role in judging human affairs and punishing offenders. Ogungbemi (1997) suggests that a community involves the combination of its humans, ancestors, land, and the gods. The eventual fall of Agabidu and his consequent death are the results of natural justice emanating from the combined intervention of environmental forces in the community. Ugezu's film reflects the cosmology of the Igbo which sees land *Ala* as an instrument of moral enforcement, possessing the power to reward good and also punish evil. The main conflict of the film, which plays out between King Agabidu and divine laws, is purely environmental. His frequent re-echoing of the phrase" I am above all gods" shows him as assuming powers that override environmental order. His defilement of communal shrines and the shedding of innocent blood,which was sacred, cannot be merely seen as a religious taboo but as violence against environmental order,

The film utilizes natural settings depictive of Southern Nigeria. Real forest shrines and diegetic sounds of birds and crickets to register the involvement of the environmental forces. As can be seen from the film, justice was not served through soldiers or judicial proceedings in the court of law but through the reinforcement of the earth goddess which struck the ecosystem, resulting in bareness of crops, storms and madness engulfing the palace and ultimate death of King Agabidu, thereby pointing to the nexus between the film, culture and environment. Inarguably, the film proves that in Igbo society and indeed Africa, culture and environment are inseparable. The environmental challenges encountered were not accidental but direct effect of broken covenant with the earth goddess. In this circumstance, the land performs the role of a judge in a non-state environmental court. The connection between Agabidu's burning of sacred shrines and the immediate consequences resulting in dreadful thunder strikes, madness, and his eventual collapse reiterates the film's ecocentric stance that the land will always defend itself against its aggressors. This is further endorsed in the final

scene when after Agabidu's tragic exit, the new king and elders jubilantly maintain that "the land is our mother and our judge". The important lesson of note in this film is that, Power is only legitimate when it acknowledges that no matter how mighty a king, he is not above the land upon which he stands.

Conclusion,

This study showed how the selected Nollywood film revealed the Igbo worldview, which discloses how culture and environment are intertwined. The study also revealed that film's primary focus is to reflect social realities around it. Drawing from the above, it is safe to conclude that the film is the lens through which cultural and environmental issues are transmitted and brought to public glare.

Recommendations

Given the significant involvement of Nollywood films in excavating and bringing core issues of culture and environment to public glare, this study recommends that the film medium in Nigeria should be given more calculated attention and support from relevant stakeholders to thrive.

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