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## A Paradigm Shift from Tradition to Modernity in Nollywood's Projection of African Narratives

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*Abstract* - The Nollywood movie industry, since its inception in the early nineties, has progressively projected the African cultural heritage to other parts of the world. This encompasses both good and bad aspects of the culture. Today, many Africans in Diaspora tend to feel at home whenever they watch any of the Nollywood movies just like the Hollywood and Bollywood project, the American and Indian weltanschauung respectively. Interestingly, there has been a consistent transformation of the Hollywood and Bollywood from the traditional to the postmodern stages. This is not applicable to the Nollywood Industry. The paper, therefore argues that there should be a paradigmatic shift of Nollywood movies from tradition to modernity since virtually all the African Narratives being projected by the industry hitherto are not only pristine and anachronistic but also fall short of the existing realities of the African way of life. This has impacted negatively on the socio-cultural development of Africa, and in particular portray some Nigerian ethnic groups as uncivilized and backward.

*Keywords* : Nollywood, Tradition, Modernity, Development

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# A Paradigm Shift from Tradition to Modernity in Nollywood's Projection of African Narratives

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**Abstract** - The Nollywood movie industry, since its inception in the early nineties, has progressively projected the African cultural heritage to other parts of the world. This encompasses both good and bad aspects of the culture. Today, many Africans in Diaspora tend to feel at home whenever they watch any of the Nollywood movies just like the Hollywood and Bollywood project, the American and Indian weltanschauung respectively. Interestingly, there has been a consistent transformation of the Hollywood and Bollywood from the traditional to the postmodern stages. This is not applicable to the Nollywood Industry. The paper, therefore argues that there should be a paradigmatic shift of Nollywood movies from tradition to modernity since virtually all the African Narratives being projected by the industry hitherto are not only pristine and anachronistic but also fall short of the existing realities of the African way of life. This has impacted negatively on the socio-cultural development of Africa, and in particular portray some Nigerian ethnic groups as uncivilized and backward.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Successful models today are those built on the indigenous. There is no great modern state in our time that does not draw from its ancient values and institutions. Every great Jewish project is enriched by the idea of the classical culture of the Torah, including the modern state of Israel. Every great European institution, including the United State of America, is molded in part in the image of the ancient, Greco-Roman civilization. Countries in the Moslem world, such as Iran, draw from the classical Islamic civilization of the Middle Ages. Asian countries like Japan and South Korea base their political systems on their rich tradition and cultural heritage (<http://magazine.biafrannigeriaworld.com/ekwenche/ekwenche/leadershipservice/monograph.html>).

Don't try to change the image. Change the reality; the image will follow. There is nothing worse than PR that goes wrong. You end up with the stereotype even more entrenched. So, the word is reputation - your record based on experience. Change the reality and the reputation will change itself. The brand will follow. (Dowden 2011)

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No society can survive for long if it solely depends on unevaluated and Though some societies today presume that the traditions handed down to them by a generation should be upheld tenaciously, respected and guided jealously, such traditions may have outlived their usefulness in the present milieu: the 21st century. This suggests that all human systems are subject to decay. As the scriptures put it, "behold the old has passed away and the new has come". The transformation comes from the action of internal forces or through the contact with other systems of values and cultures. Thus, some traditions can evolve and at some point be re-valued, rejected and abandoned or integrated with elements of an alien system.

Given that we live in a period of major structural changes and that all societies pass through developmental stages, beginning with savagery, progressing to barbarism and culminating in Western Civilization or modernity, every society ipso facto strives to meet up with the existing social structures. Ajakaiye and Akinbinu (2000) pointed out that, globalization is introducing new challenges to which societies must respond. This is taking place in an environment in which traditional development and growth paradigms no longer provide adequate guidance for the satisfaction of changing population needs and demands. The concept is viewed as a positive force that unifies widely different societies, integrating them into a global village and enriching all in the process.

Thus, this paper is subdivided into five sections. The first section is the introduction, the second explores the origin and evolution of the Nollywood movie industry in Nigeria, the third section delves into conceptual analysis of History, culture and tradition, modernity and development. The fourth section discusses salient aspects of the Nollywood movie industry that need to be re-examined for the purposes of knowledge production and wealth creation; while the fifth and final section is the conclusion and recommendation.

## II. THE ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF NOLLYWOOD MOVIE INDUSTRY IN NIGERIA

The word nollywood coined following the style of Hollywood (referring to the American film industry) and Bollywood (referring to the Indian film Industry) is

the generic name for the Nigerian film industry. It grew from the rich traditional culture of Nigeria into a supposedly modern internationally recognized industry. Prior to the emergence of Nollywood in the early nineties, theatre and television stations were primarily the medium used by a lot of theatre artists. The popular view is that the Nigerian movie industry actually started with the production of 'Living in bondage' by Ken Nebue. The movie features characters such as Kenneth Okonkwo, Kanayo O. Kanayo, Bob Manuel Udokwu, Francis Agu, Ngozi Nwosu and Nnena Nwabueze. It also marked a turning point in the Nigerian movie industry and heralded the trend in modern-day movie making in Nigeria.

Nollywood and indeed, other movies were made for the viewing pleasure of Nigerians initially, with messages to inspire, motivate, reprove and correct some anomalies particularly in the political, social and cultural sphere. The use of the English Language as the main communication tool and the marketing employed strategies facilitated its expansion beyond the shores of the African continent. Today, Nigeria's Nollywood is counted among the major business centres of film making in the world. For instance, the United States has the oldest film industry (and largest in terms of revenue) situated in Los Angeles (California).

India (Bollywood) is the largest producer of films in the world. It is multi-lingual in its use of language and the largest in the world in terms of ticket sales and number of films produced annually. Hong Kong is another film making centre for the Chinese speaking world (including the worldwide Diaspora) and East Asia in general. Hong Kong therefore, has been the third largest motion picture industry in the world (after America and India) and the Second largest exporter of films in the world. Alamu (2010) remarks that Nigeria's Nollywood has been viewed as cultural products of the Nation, and the global attention currently enjoyed by it is due to efforts by producers to create a distinct film tradition. The industry has advanced by virtue of the individual efforts of dominant producers and marketers in spite of its burgeoning challenges such as the problems of unabated piracy and the indifference of the government which has denied it the status of a foreign exchange.

It suffices to say that since the early 1990s, the Nollywood movie industry has churned out thousands of titles and has successfully brought to limelight many talented Nigerian actors and actresses. Through an amalgam of Nigerian narrative techniques (African storylines) and Western technology, the industry documents and re-creates sociopolitical and cultural events that occurred within and beyond the country borders. The industry has also provided employment for the teeming Nigerian population especially the youth. Ogunleye opines that with the global world united under the sway of visual culture, the emergence of the film

industry in Nigeria is timely and crucial as it serves as the voice of its people and responds to the drudgery of a socioeconomic existence characterized by high unemployment and dwindling opportunities. It has also taken all on board, including religious-minded people who are enthralled by 'Halleluia video films, religious films created or sponsored by evangelical groups for the propagation of their faith'.

Obviously, Nollywood is very popular in Africa because it excites individuals especially those living in the city and those who know little or nothing about their tradition and culture. But outside Africa, a lot of people who are curious about Nollywood do so because it appeals to the sense of the noble savage-that picture of the African running around in circles in the jungle or beside the river waving frantically at Europe's steamer on the river banks. This finds expression in the emphasis on the juju, magic and witchcraft which most Nollywood movies portray outside the African continent.

### III. CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE

Central to this paper are five concepts: History, culture, tradition, modernity and development. History, culture and tradition are interwoven, one snowballs or dovetails into the other. The same applies to modernity and development. History, meaning inquiry, knowledge acquired by investigation is the discovery, collection, organization and presentation of information about past events. It is a field of research which uses a narrative to explore, examine and analyse the sequence of events, to express the memory of the past experience. Thus it is said that, he who controls the past controls the future. Our view of history shapes the way we view the present and also dictates what answers we offer for existing problems. Feyisetan (2011) poetically describes history thus.

History is occurred events and things don't just happen, they are caused and if they are caused, they are not random events and if they are purposeful events, therefore, it is meant to teach generations who want to learn from the past. We only need to learn from those events and take precaution in solving our present problems despite the fact that situation may not be the same even though human nature is universal.

In history, the preservation of any peoples' culture has always been central to their very existence and survival and whenever or wherever this cultures is threatened, people have always risen up to defend all that they cherish. Thus, culture deals with the issues surrounding the identity of the daily lives of individuals or communities. It is a tool kit of identities for a group's survival and it is characterized by a common worldview, a myth of common ancestry and identify, ethos and a set of rituals which give rhythm to life (Kukah 2007, Nanda and Warm 2004).

Traditionalist school of thought hold that the African cultural values and the traditional African

perception of reality are crucial and must never be ignored in the cultivation of African intellectualism. Thus, the African past should not be perceived as arid and wasted, instead, as fruitful and productive (Nwaorgu, 2010). Sogolo (1993) argues that the way a people sees life is synonymous with the way they explain the phenomenon of their experience. Such experience, however, is coloured by variable tempo-spatial factors, almost to the point at which comparison becomes meaningless. It follows therefore, that though there may be a thousand belief systems there are not a thousand theories about the world, society and man, as every society lives in a world of its own and with its set of belief about the world which mesh together to form a coherent thought system (Otubanjo 1989).

Some scholars have argued in various fora that the key to effectively addressed contemporary problems lies in reclaiming and revitalizing indigenous traditions that have been degraded and suppressed in the wake of colonialism. They hold that colonialism violently disrupted African cultural traditions and imposed with varying degrees of success, European forms of thought and social organization upon colonized Africans. Thus, it is germane to begin the process of reclaiming the core shared African traditions and pursue a more decisive liberation, by a decolonization of African minds and psyche. In contrast, some critics hold that the revivalist project is ill-suited to the challenges of contemporary Africa. To them, the call for a nostalgic return to the past is not only naïve and romantic, but positively dangerous and retrogressive (Ciaffa 2008). Buttressing this, Hountondji (1996) submits that Africans must make a 'clean break' with the pre-modern past in order to address the most urgent demand of the present. Modernization requires a mental orientation commensurate with the problems of the present, not an attempts to resurrect and re animate ideas from societies of the distant past.

This brings us to the concept of modernity and development. The relationship between tradition and modernity has been a topical and central theme of post-colonial African philosophy. The question is, what is the relevance of indigenous African traditions to the challenges of contemporary life? Do traditional modes of thought and behaviour constitute resources or impediments to the projects of development and modernization in Africa? Does modernity suggest that peoples' core values be jettisoned and discountenanced? Modernity or modernization expresses that tradition is outdated and antiquated and so should be wiped out by the process of development. It denotes the transformation of the disparate groups into an integrated and consolidated polity by eliminating the residual set of values, norms and structures of the

'tribal man', and institutionalizing a new set of modern and progressive values (Hameso 1997)

The approach suggests that individuals and groups are expected to develop new identities such as modern behaviour and refined attitudes to issues thereby shedding off ethnic identities and relationships that are perceived to be pristine (Hameso 1997). To Anber (1967), modernization necessarily leads to the reinforcement of ethnic identity rather than to its deterioration by reviving or recreating particularistic cultural attachments to the ethnic group that is in the process of achieving universal (modern) goals. In other words, tribal loyalties may develop not only along with, or in spite of modern advancements, but may in fact, develop because of the nature and context of modernization itself. Most often, this kind of transformation is elicited by increases in urbanization, education and communication which in effect bring about integration and development.

Modernity and development are complementary terms as the former begets the latter and where there is development, modernity definitely sets in. Development has been conceived as multi-dimensional, referring to positive changes which lie in the social, economic, political and cultural spheres of societal life. The phenomenon stimulates employments, guarantees sustainable livelihoods that expand people's capacities to generate and enhance their wellbeing and that of future generation. Development may also be identified as a process in which a system or institution is transformed into a stronger, more organized, more efficient and effective form which proves to be more satisfying in terms of human wants and aspirations. It is a conscious effort for the attainment of a specific goal, the increasing capacity to make national use of natural and human resources for social ends (Andrain and Apter 1995; Hettne 1990; Ikpi and Olayemi 1997).

Nwaorgu (2010) notes that although civilization, learning and scholarship began in African, the European over looked Africans because they were willing to expand resources to encourage the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. He believes Africa can still meet up with the west since her backwardness is not a derivative of genetic inferiority. Hence, what is required is to develop the habit of devoting sufficient resources for academic activities, and to engage in a consistent, systematic, theoretical search and analysis. This makes it possible for human beings to gain insight into their surroundings which will enable them to have a better view and understanding of things and people. The setting will also stimulate and catalyse critical investigation and evaluation of any accepted or conventional concepts since beliefs and actions are founded on sound and convincing theoretical scheme (Nwaorgu, 2010:14-15).

#### IV. IMPROVING ON NOLLYWOOD'S NARRATIVES

There is no doubt that Nollywood movie industry since its inception in 1992 has made giant strides in projecting and propagating Africa's cultural heritage within and outside its continent. There is also no gain-saying the fact that the industry has contributed enormously to knowledge production and wealth creation. However, in order to continue to enhance productivity and at the same time project the image of the continent and Nigeria in particular in a more positive light, there is need to address and correct certain impressions which the industry deliberately or unknowingly portray in an attempt to attract the recognition and wide attention of the international community.

Studies show that most of the movies produced by the Nollywood industry emphasise negative worldviews inherent in Nigerian culture. These include: occultism, cultism, fetishism, witch-craft, devilish spiritualism, uncontrollable tendency for sexual display, incest, violence and poisoning. Indulgence in the production of such movies with negatively based themes perhaps, is hinged on excessive desire to make quick profits to the detriment of a sense of social responsibility and relevance and the true African value system (Haynes 2006). Though virtually all nations have attributes of negative traditions which probably were handed down by generations before them. Some nations (including Nigeria) are working extremely hard to write off such traditions by evolving and injecting modern ideas into their systems.

Unfortunately, Nollywood rather than engaging seriously in the image laundry of some negative Nigerian traditions, prefer to blow them out of proportion. As a result, the industry has in several occasions been subjected to criticisms. Some of the critics have questioned among other things, the content of Nollywood films which is often predictable and always revolves around topics such as, conflict between mother-in-law and their son's wives, scenes dealing with police battling criminals, burial and consultations with native doctors (Alamus 2010, Akande 2009). The expectation is that Nollywood by now should gear towards scientific and technological development, that is, generating films that have the capacity to transform the Nigerian society in all its ramifications. The industry ought to engage more in the modernity liberation which refers to development of political institutions that move away from authoritarian rule, neo-patrimonialism, and consolidate on forms of government or political system that enhance and encourage the liberty and welfare of all citizens (Wallestein 1995; Gyekye 1997a; Wiredu 1995).

Documenting and celebrating traditional beliefs without any critical analysis seems at best unhelpful and

at worst, an impediment to the challenges of the present. Progress in any society requires adapting, changing and in some cases abandoning traditional ideas and behaviours. By extension, it involves borrowing and adopting new ideas from other cultural contexts (Gyekey 1999a; Okigbo 1987). As Anthony Giddens pointed out, in traditional societies, individual actions need not to be extensively thought about because available choices are already predetermined (by the customs, traditions). In post traditional society, people are much less concerned with the precedents set by earlier generations, and they have more choices due to flexibility of law and public opinion. This, however suggests that in the modern age individual actions require more analysis and thought before they are taken (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthony-Giddens-Beron-Giddens>)

Typically, modernity characterizes a whole range of human activities that have underpinned Western life and thought, new values and identities and less tolerance for traditional cultures. But it does not mean as stated elsewhere that some core shared African value systems should be thrown overboard. According to Ndukwu, the problem is that the emerging global culture is primarily the culture of the white Europeans and their descendants. This dominance or hegemony has been referred to as cultural imperialism (Ndukwu 2010).

Ndukwu further argues that one of the ways to counter cultural imperialism is through effective, strategic and dedicated cultural diplomacy. Cultural diplomacy emphasizes the exchange of ideas, information, art, lifestyles, value systems, traditions, beliefs and other aspects of culture. To achieve this, agencies like the Nigerian film cooperation (Nollywood Industry) should be empowered financially by Nigerian government to research and design robust and implementable programmes that will ensure successful synergy of Nigerian cultures and 'others'.

Drawing on Igbo society, Nollywood often portrays the Igbo as a people that are diabolical, uncivilized, irrational, brutish, stupendously greedy for wealth with a worldview that is totally amarchronistic. To be precised, most of the films set within the cultural environment such as Okpechi's (2001) 'More Money'; Nwabueze's (2006) 'Illegal Brother' and Nnaji-Ude's (2000) 'Blood for Blood' portray attributes of poverty, negative means of creating wealth (such as fraud and occultic means), attitudes of the people to the widow, unadulterated village setting (such as mud houses) and dressing code.

Though some of these elements are still operational in some Igbo communities perhaps, as result of poor or lack of political education, cultural orientation, many communities in Igbo land have been transformed to mega-cities spiced with modern structures. Again, in many Igbo communities, widows

are no longer subjected to severe hardship probably as a result of the present emphases on women empowerment and emancipation and a growing awareness of the right of women in the Nigerian Society through improved education of girl-child than was the practice in the past. It is also unfortunate to note that Nollywood hardly explores nor unveils the uniqueness of Igbo society in terms of hard work, business enterprise, adventurism, dynamism, resilience and adaptability in economic pursuits.

Apart from energy, hard work, adroitness and dogged determination to weather through tribulations and survive in all circumstances, another distinct features of Igbo man and woman is their high level of visibility. They are every where, both within the country and beyond. With their drive and astuteness, they bulldoze their way through tick and thin. The modern Igbo man and woman are noted for their independent mindedness, accommodation of the views of others, hard work, achievements and acquisitions of wealth. Sadly, these unique characteristics have over the years elicited some derogatory and denigrating comments from the Nollywood producers and some other Nigerians who conceive the Igbo man or woman as notoriously aggressive, assertive, headstrong, abrasive, competitive, over-ambitious, greed, arrogant and clannish. The Igbo people have been described as having a high tendency to embrace cultures of other lands, very industrious (Nwabueze's *Illegal Brother*, 2006) and probably the more willing to accept western ways than other ethnic groups in Nigeria. They are appreciated for their initiative, creativity and the dexterity to turn seemingly hopeless situations around and chart a new course when every known alternative has failed (Nwankwo 2004; Ojukwu 2009).

However, Nollywood has failed to capture these unique traits in their portrayal of the Igbo race in most of the Nollywood movies. Thus, Nollywood cannot afford to continue to claim and portray Igbo society as a 'disconnect from modernization'. In fact, it is deceptive, fallacious, destructive, dehumanizing and defamatory to present the Igbo society in such negative light. The Nigerian literary artists are not also helping matters. As Achebe noted, the role of the writer in society such as Nigeria, besieged with many pathologies-ethnic-bigotry and chauvinism, political ineptitude, corruption, and the cult of mediocrity, is not an easy one. He argued that if the society is healthy, the writer's job is limited, which is not the situation in Nigeria. On the other hand, if the society is ill, the writer has a responsibility to point it out. In this case, Nigerian writers can choose to turn away from the reality of Nigeria's intimidating complexity or conquer its misery by battling with it (Ukhaheme 2011). Interestingly, Achebe's novels have been widely acclaimed to representing a panoramic exploration of Africa's history from pre-colonial times to the emergence of postcolonial nation state. But today, many script and

story writers are sentimental, emotional, biased and bereft of objectivity, strong minds, work ethics, character and rationality. Thus, many African narratives are mere fictions and illusions that cannot stand the test of time. This is so because most of the script writers are not well grounded in the Nigerian culture and tradition. If not, why have they not taken cognizance of and promote Igbo culture of individualism and republicanism where government is based on the people and policy making emphasise public participation. This structure understands the popularized western democracy each many nations are hitherto adopting as institutional framework of development.

## V. CONCLUSION

The paper attempted to explore the origin and evolution of Nollywood movie industry from its inception in 1992 to the present time, drawing from its projection of African narratives. It examined the synergistic interplay of tradition and modernity in propagating African cultural traditions beyond the African continent. The paper also criticizes the industry's poor manner of exposing some African negative traditions and its inability to use some core shared values and norms to enhance, transform and consolidate the emerging African democracy.

From the foregoing, we recommend that conscious efforts should be made by all stakeholders in the industry to think of Nigeria first in all their movies by portraying the good images of Africa and Nigeria in particular. As Ndukwu (2010) submitted: Nigerian film industry can be used as a tool for shaping the messages that Nigeria wish to project the west. It should also be a key goal of modern public diplomacy strategy. In support of Nwaorgu's (2010:24) view, every human society requires system builders and cooperate planners to make progress. Good thinking and sound morals must be coupled for any society to thrive. Thus, institutions like the Nollywood movie industry should aim at evolving systematic thoroughgoing reasoners, critical, constructive, creative, thinkers, who will be able harness, criticize, evaluate, and synthesize the strengths and weakness of a people.

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