

CULTURAL FLUX IN SELECTED NOLLYWOOD FILMS

Somtoo Obiefuna Arinze-Umobi

*Department of Theatre and Film Studies,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria.*

Email: umobisomtoo@yahoo.com

Phone Number: 07033569974

Abstract

The culture of a people communicates who they are. Unfortunately, cultural erosion occasioned by cultural flux threaten traditional identity of many cultural enclaves; especially, the Igbo of eastern Nigeria. The study therefore aims at evaluating impact of constant cultural flux due to interaction with other cultures, and also due to the influences of modernity and globalization. Objective includes, using film as the most expressive medium of cultural exchange to checkmate impact of cultural flux and to ascertain how the changing nature of culture affects the history and memory of a people as a result of the loss of salient aspects of the people's cultures. Furthermore, objectives examine the affective dynamics of culture in films set in the Eastern part of Nigeria using the case study approach of the qualitative method. Simple random sampling approach is used in the selection of the films; while, the content analyses approach is used for interpreting the content of the films. Findings from the study reveal that cultural flux interplays with the presentation of indigenous cultures of the Igbo people. Therefore, the study suggests that film productions should be tailored towards effective projection of the peoples' indigenous culture than focusing on the external cultural influences on the society.

Introduction

The position of culture in the lives of a people since the evolution of man cannot be overstated. The quest for man to be identified within a group informs his culture. Hence, culture has been generally accepted to be the way of a people in totality. However, it transcends this ordinary conception because it is a phenomenon that constructs and deconstructs a people. Therefore, culture is identity, history, agency and practice that cannot be taken as fixed entities but part of a system of representation which is permanently in a process (Oluyemi 35). Culture is never a static phenomenon; it is a process that is in constant transformation over time

and in space. Its amorphous nature is attributed to the people's attitude towards it. According to Mohammad Zaman:

Culture, like matter also tends to creep towards uniformity although not quite to the degree of homogeneity as in the case of inert matter. To be precise, culture is more like a flowing amoeba with sprouting arms and legs and mouths as dictated by its immediate environs, evolving constantly in an amorous flux of "scapes" (1).

The changes in culture could also be attributed to the intercultural mix or interaction among different ethnic, racial and national divide. Hence, the commingling of different cultures produces new hybrids that either is in line with the contemporary changes and realities of the people.

Therefore, the evolving nature of culture accounts for its mutability and transmutation within a geographical enclave. More often than not, the idea may be to expunge negative cultures and replace it with positive ones. For example; the abolishment of Osu caste system in most communities in the South East Nigeria, female circumcision, widowhood practices, just to mention a few. Other reason for cultural mutability could be directly or indirectly as a result of globalization, modernization and the fact that humans are by nature in flux. Therefore, people have the power to accept or reject certain norms and values which threatens their existence.

Unfortunately, the changes in culture most times adversely affect the history and memory of the people because some of these cultures are lost to western and globalization tendencies. The implication is that salient ways of the people are consciously or unconsciously jettisoned. Tracie Utoh-Ezeajugh et al observe that, "as the world moves closer together through increased globalization, migration and technological advancement, the possibility of transformation, transmutation or even total extinction of indigenous cultures and cultural values becomes imminent" (228). Hence, Danbello Ahmadu affirms that "...culture has suffered untold damage over the past years due to cultural imperialism which has crept into the society via communication facilities like radio, films etc" (532). His position raises pointer to the danger state of people's culture by the propellants of globalization which is media technology.

Film is one of the essential media for projecting people's culture and arguably the most powerful because of its audio-visual aesthetics, and the reliance by most developed nations like America, Britain, China, etc in projecting their culture and inadvertently acculturate smaller and

developing nations. Ahmadu supports this idea by stating that "film is a documentary of the consciousness of culture, galvanizing or fusing all forces into a concrete charger that reconstruct the mind of the people" (537). Hence, film as a medium has gained much ascendancy globally and appeals to all ages and races (Nwaozuzu 1), through the reflection of human society that encompasses the language, ritual and beliefs of a given society (Amaefula 147). Therefore, film is a cultural product and thus the business of marketing people's culture for audience appreciation.

Nigerian film industry popularly referred to as Nollywood is at the center of transmitting the culture of Nigerian to the globe. From its evolution till date, it has saddled the responsibility of reflecting the cultures and the changes in culture over time within the diverse cultures in Nigeria. A cursory assessment of Nollywood films will reveal either through thematic preoccupation or the aesthetic elements (costume, language, makeup, setting) among other things, the infiltration of cultures within a narrative, and thus highlighting the dynamic nature of culture and the its irresistibility to change over a given time, and the ability of film to capture such changes. The complexity of Nollywood Industry is anchored on the diverse cultural background of Nigeria. The richness of Nigerian culture which is evident in the ethnic diversity accounts for the success and appeal Nollywood films have on the global audience. Within the complexity of Nollywood, the major ethnic groups-Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa strive to ensure that their peculiar cultures are projected. Furthermore, through the appreciation of films, some of the negative aspects of the people's culture are exposed and condemned while the positive ones advocated for. Therefore, this study examines some cultural flux in two movies set in South Eastern Nigeria in order to examine cultural interactions and their affective impact in the interpretation and understanding the films. The select films are Ilochi Olisaemeka's *King Uremma* and Okonkwo Chikelue's *Evil Culture*.

Conceptual Clarification

Cultural flux refers to an ongoing process of change in the way of life of a given people. Culture is reasoned to be the creation of human interaction. Hence, Fayomi Oluyemi observes that, "the changes in human society reflect the dynamism of culture. This dynamism is responsible for constant change in patterns associated with given culture... (40). It is imperative to note that cultural flux cannot only be reasoned from the point of western imperialism or influence. Rather, it connotes also the changes that have

occurred due to ethnic or tribal interactions within a given territory like Nigeria. The reason is because "greater part of what makes culture is acquired or learned, and not inborn or innate". Hence, "the implication is that culture could be learned, acquired, experienced or transferred from one place to another through various ways" (Ahmadu 532). However, one of the fundamental reasons for using the film medium to project cultural changes is remotely for commercial interest. According to Olav Velthuis, "as in other markets for cultural goods, commercialization is the dominant force driving change in the contemporary art market." (1). Consequently, most of the changes exhibited in films may not be a true reflection of the society which may be as a result of filmmakers quest for quick profit.

One importance of cultural flux is its ambivalence in allowing cultural interactions that may benefit or mar a people's identity. These interactions according to Shambat Ilya in *Cultural Flux and Dynamic Integrity* "creates all kinds of creation, some that embody the best of the component cultures; some that embody the worst of component cultures, and some that contain both benign and malignant features of all the above". Hence Kayode Animasaun as quoted in Uwaoma Nwazue, avers that:

The problem of cultural mis-presentation and confusion is either the juxtaposition or sudden transition from one culture to the other or interweaving of traditional and western cultures as done in most Nigerian movies. The result is that the Nigerian cultures is often time downplayed which often leave the viewers to inquire about what good the traditional cultures can offer. (141)

Though this position presents the negative aspect of cultural flux, it does not preclude the inherent positive changes because it gives people a better chance at much better integrity which comes as a result of "integrating multiple influences and coming up with higher synthesis that enriches every culture that comes into the picture, as well as increasing the wisdom and knowledge of individuals involved in the flux" (Ilya).

Synopsis of the selected films

King Uremma

The film explores the theme of tyranny and its consequences on the lives and culture of Umungwu community. Uremma (Chioma Chukwuka Akpota) returns from her exile fortified with charms. She challenges Ajilija the king of Umungwu for his tyranny and oppression against women and children, and subsequently defeats Ajilija and his chiefs

(Onowu) with her superior charms. Consequently, Uremma ascends the throne as the king of Umungwu and promulgates a decree that all men in the village should assume the duties of women in their respective homes; in other words, men thus wear clothes traditional meant for women, cook, and do other domestic chores. However, Uremma's authority is threatened by Ezenagu who returns to the village from the city after staying away for some years. Ezenagu defies Uremma's decree by refusing to adorn on female dresses and also rains abuses on his fellow men especially the elders for allowing such sacrilege. Ezenagu's deviance denies him audience with Odibeze, one of the female chiefs, over his claim for a piece of land that was bequeathed to him by his mother before her demise, which Odibeze had taken. Odibeze boos him out of her house on the ground that he must wear women's cloths, buy kola nut and hot drink, before they can discuss about the land. Ezenagu's continuous and willful disobedience to the rule of Uremma consequently lands him in prison. However, Uremma's daughter falls in love with Ezenagu and releases him from prison on the condition that he becomes her bride. Ezenagu rejects the offer but prefers to stay in the prison, but for the mercy of Uremma, he is released from prison on the ground that he will be loyal to her rules. Infuriated by the turn of events in his village, Ezenagu becomes violent and kills one of the allies of King Uremma and consequently flees for fear of what Uremma will do to him. Uremma's malicious rules continuous until Ezenagu returns home again, this time fortified with charms and consequently dethrones Uremma and her chiefs, and restores normalcy to the land.

Evil Culture

This film underlines the clash between western and traditional religion. Ejiofor (MacSmith Ochendu) neglects his obligation to Igolo the community deity due to his debauchery. For this reason, Igolo revenges by preventing every suitor who comes to marry Ejiofor's sister Ihuoma (Chioma Chukwuka Akpota) by appearing to them (suitors) in their dreams warning them never to marry Ihuoma or they die. Ihuoma's failure to get married prompts her to seek the face of God. The Parish Priest informs her that the reason behind her predicament is Igolo. Hence, He advices Ihuoma to invite Ejiofor to church who consequently gives his life to Christ. Meanwhile, as the Igolo festival approaches, the community is in apprehension over the incessant deaths caused by Igolo because of Ejiofor's failure to make the yearly sacrifices. Hence the elders hire the services of another chief priest to perform the ritual, but Igolo refuses to

be appeased. Undeterred, the community goes on with the festival and becomes thrilled when Ejiofor finally appears with the Igolo mask at the village arena.

Appraising Cultural Flux in the Selected Films

The plot of *King Uremma* presents a culture that is alien to the traditional and contemporary Igbo society. The Igbos of the eastern part of Nigeria is predominantly a patriarchal society where kingship and cabinet membership is designated to men. However, in Umungwu community the case is reversed after the dethronement of King Ajilija by Uremma on the account of gross maltreatment of women and children. The expectation by this dethronement is that she uses her position to correct the negative aspects of patriarchy, but she presents even the worst scenario, a phenomenon that is symptomatic to the politics in Nigeria. She changes the cultural norms and values, and forcefully condemns the men folks to the traditional status of women, women now wear clothes meant for men, sexually abuse and marry as many men as possible and even dictate what happens in the governance of the community.

However, the film presents the issue of polyandry- a custom that allows women to marry more than one man. This marital situation is not uncommon in Africa and indeed Nigeria as research shows that the Irigwe people of Jos, Northern Nigeria are known for such culture. Nevertheless, this cultural practice is not the norm among the Igbos. In *King Uremma*, one of the cabinet members Onowu is praised by her fellow women for marrying a third husband. This action is a deliberate attempt by the director to lampoon the polygamy which was practiced by traditional men in Igbo society before the advent of Christianity and modernization. Onowu's marriage to Obiadi goes through the traditional process of wine carrying and payment of dowry.



Plate 1: Obiadi receiving wine from his mother to search for his groom



Plate 2: Onowu (groom) drinks the wine presented to her by Obiadi (bride).

Payment of dowry in African society is the prerogative of the groom's family. However, the presentation of the opposite in the film is a creation that relates to the marriage culture in India, Sir Lanka, Naples, Pakistan

and Bangladesh, where marriage rites is fulfilled by the bride's family unit. Ezenagu sees these events as a smack on masculinity and his cultural background. Hence, he laments, "how did things turn upside down within a twinkle of an eye. Women now wear men's clothes, own lands and dictate what happens. Now this is an abomination and I will not be a part of it". This presentation highlights the importance of film in experimenting and fusing cultures which may or may not fit into the cultural sensibility of the people it narrates its story.

Similarly, king Uremma's daughter who arrogates herself the role of a prince in Umungwu exhibits the same tyranny her mother wields in the community. Her refusal to see herself as a bride that should be married, but the groom that ought to marry any man of her choice relates to the Ogwashi-uku Idegbe cultural belief that bestows women a masculine gender role of a son in the absence of a male child in her family (Nwosu 62), for the continuation of her father's lineage. Ezenagu's refusal to accept this offer and preference to stay in prison exposes him to the wrath of Uremma's daughter. Ezenagu's rejection underscores the utter rejection of such culture among the Igbos where women are married outside their families.

Furthermore, the culture of transvertism or cross dressing is well projected in the film. One of the core decrees of king Uremma is that men put on women's clothes vice versa. The culture of transvertism is rampant in contemporary society and is a product of transgender which has more prominence in the western world. Though transvertism is not new to the world today, it is culture that is frowned at in traditional Igbo society and its explication in King Uremma underpins its infiltration to the Igbo dress culture. Ezenagu ridicules this situation by greeting the male elders who had been condemned by Uremma's terror, "**ndi nne mama**"; a popular greeting in celebration of motherhood in Igbo land). His sarcastic greeting criticizes the turn of events in the present society where men are gradually turning sissies.

In *Evil Culture*, the issue of religion is central to the understanding of the plot. The film discusses the clash between the traditional religion and Christianity which was forced down on Africans during the colonial era. Though the western religion has been embraced in the eastern part of Nigeria, however, traditional religion is felt more during annual festivals in most communities in the region. As presented in the film, Ejiofor' inability to fulfill his role which his Father left as the priest of Igolo

arouses the wrath of the deity against his family. The deity inhibits Ejiofor's sister from getting married, and also turns Ejiofor into an unprosperous man among his peers. However, Ihuoma's decision to embrace Christ and thus represent western religion creates the divide and establishes the flux between these cultures. This is further highlighted in Ejiofor who boasts before the community elders that **"I Ejiofor of the universe.... I am a new creation. Old things have passed away"**. His public statement points out the influence of the Christian faith over the traditional worship. Nonetheless, his faith does not stop him from finally assuming his communal responsibility of ensuring that Igolo is appeased and also makes an appearance during the festival.

The film projected also the decline in cultural attire during festivals in Igbo communities. Festivals in the contemporary time unlike in the traditional era have undergone several changes that even in costumes, western attires tend to dominate. This is unconnected to the impact of globalization and modernity that have rapidly engulfed the Igbos that the purity of culture is hardly ever noticed.



Plate 3: Ejiofors costume is a mixture of traditional Nwaguru cap with polo shirt.



Plate 4: Western costumes during Igolo traditional festival

Therefore, in the film we see characters wearing jeans trousers and T-shirts during the festival. Even, Ejiogu who ought to be a representative of tradition and culture of the people is costumed in a medley of western and traditional attire and thus, highlights the trend of flux that has permeated the culture of the Igbos in ramification.

Conclusion

Cultures interact to create new concepts, ideas, norms and beliefs, and film as a medium of expression is mostly used to convey these concepts for critical evaluation and assimilation. However, from the assessment of the case studies, it is evident that the culture of the Igbos' who are situated in the Eastern part of Nigeria has greatly been affected by contemporary forces of modernity and globalization and also the consciousness of the people to adapt to changing trends in the world. Further findings from the films reveal a recurrent utilization of code-switching- interchanging from Igbo to English language, vice versa. The essence is to project the on-going flux in language use which affects human communication pattern. Therefore, the films to an extent reveal the contemporary socio-cultural realities in the Eastern part of Nigeria and the processes of change affecting their cultural practices. This study concludes that the filmic presentation of a particular people should be tailored toward projecting the

indigenous cultural practices of the people than centering on in-cooperating influences from other culture.

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