
Cinema as a Tool for Rebranding Nigeria: A Study of Nollywood Filmmakers' Perceptions of their Role as Nigeria's Image Makers

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ABSTRACT

Many critics present Nollywood filmmakers exclusively as materialistic cineastes whose interest and involvement in cinema are basically geared toward achieving social and economic upward mobility. According to such critics, most Nollywood filmmakers prioritise material benefits to the detriment of other imperatives such as the (re)branding of Nigeria. Although true to a particular class of Nollywood filmmakers, the above observation seriously needs to be nuanced. This follows from the fact that many players in the Nigerian film industry are primordially driven by non-materialistic goals such as nation building and nation branding. In effect, a good number of Nollywood film directors and producers are very much conscious of the need to deploy the filmic medium to project the beautiful facets of their country. This class of filmmakers does participate in laundering the image of Nigeria. This image laundering use to happen intrinsically and extrinsically in four ways: (i) many Nollywood filmmakers have embraced the "rebranding Nigeria" paradigm; (ii) many among them shoot their movies on attractive Nigerian locations (notably highly urbanised environment and glamorous settings). This shooting of movies on attractive locations is susceptible to sell the positive aspects of life in Nigeria; (iii) the presumed negative depictions of Nigeria in Nollywood films are susceptible to serve nation building and nation branding initiatives by the Nigerian government and (iv) Nollywood actors are in themselves veritable instruments of Nigeria's soft power in foreign countries, particularly in African nations.

Keywords: *Cinema, Nation Branding, Image Maker, Nollywood Filmmakers, Nigeria's Image Problem.*

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INTRODUCTION

Like other professions, filmmaking is carried out by individuals who have their personal philosophy of life as well as their subjective perceptions of cinema and the role the medium may play in nation building. In line with this, Nollywood filmmakers have their perceptions of filmmaking as well as their opinions about the role they are supposed to play in the rebranding of Nigeria. Many critics have tended to overlook or downplay this important aspect of filmmaking in Nigeria. This is revealed in the fact that the majority of Nollywood critics [1,2,3,4] tend to principally depict the typical Nigerian filmmaker as an entity who is less interested in positively (re)branding his country, and more interested in deploying the most sensational narratives about Nigeria to make the greatest profit possible.

Coincidentally, a good number of Nollywood filmmakers have actually made pronouncements which suggest that they are less interested in projecting the good sides of life in Nigeria and more interested in satisfying Nigerian audiences' thirst for negative and sensational stories about Nigeria. A case in point is Film producer Emmanuel Ukpong. Actually, Ukpong [5] stresses the capitalistic motives that drove his engagement in filmmaking. He writes that "I already had a production company which was making profit working on TV. My company made more money working on TV. We understood the market. We started learning film, its aesthetics, its business, its technology [and] the future. We invested in training; we chased technology. We developed our business model" (p.14-15).

In the same line of thought, Akpabio [6] underlines the primacy of economic profit which is often at the root of many negative representations of Nigeria in Nollywood films. Akpabio [6] suggests that Nigerian Filmmakers' main interest is to make maximum profit. This is to the detriment of representing the Nigerian people and cultures in a fair and balanced way. Such disposition among Nigerian filmmakers is somehow proof of the fact that they are less interested in serving as Nigeria's image makers. Citing the former Chairman of Lagos State Executive Council of Nigerian Video Marketers Association (Emmanuel Isikaku), Akpabio [6] stresses the fact that most Nigerian filmmakers are bent on making profit through giving Nigerian audiences the sensational – but not necessarily distorted – stories about Nigeria. Thus, Akpabio, - like many commentators – views Nollywood filmmakers as businessmen who are more market-oriented than image making-oriented. As businessmen, they tend to care less about laundering the image of their country. To substantiate his points, Akpabio cites a film producer by name Sunday Soyinka, Akpabio. He writes that most filmmakers are interested in giving the audiences what they like watching or what they expect a Nollywood film to be. In

his words, “When audiences are for instance, frightened, while watching a film, the word quickly spreads and interest in such production builds up very fast. [Audiences] acknowledge the presence of negative themes, yet they love the flicks anyway! [...] Interests in the subject matter of love, romance and themes verging on the farcical also are becoming quite popular” (p.97).

Materialistic filmmaking undoubtedly characterises the Nollywood film industry. This does not however mean that all Nollywood filmmakers are principally driven by materialistic philosophies. It may surprise observers that a good number of players in the Nigerian film industry are very much conscious of the need to deploy the filmic medium for rebranding their country. Indeed, many Nollywood films and Nigerian filmmakers do participate in laundering the image of Nigeria. This use to happen intrinsically and extrinsically in the following situations:

- (i) many Nollywood filmmakers have expressively manifested their support for or adherence to the “rebranding Nigeria” concept,
- (ii) many of them shoot their movies in attractive Nigerian locations (notably highly urbanised environment and glamorous settings) which is susceptible to sell a positive image of Nigeria,
- (iii) presumed negative depictions of Nigeria in Nollywood films may serve nation building/branding initiatives by the Nigerian government and
- (iv) Nollywood actors are in themselves instrument of Nigeria’s soft power in foreign climes.

Using secondary sources and critical observation, this author seeks to explain these four scenarios in greater details in the subsequent paragraphs of this essay. The paper is divided in two main parts. The first part examines the role of Nollywood in the Nigerian image crisis; as well as in the different campaigns launched by the Nigerian government to rebrand Nigeria; while the second part discusses the Nollywood filmmakers’ attitudes towards the rebranding Nigeria concept.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is conceptual in nature. It is based on a critical review of secondary sources and critical observations. The secondary sources reviewed for the study include journal articles, books, online material and newspaper articles.

ANALYSIS

Nollywood and the Rebranding of Nigeria

It will be expedient to begin this section of the paper with a fair *aperçu* of the genesis, objectives, structure and mutations of the “Rebrand Nigeria” campaign. The “Rebrand Nigeria” campaign was launched on Tuesday 9 March 2009 in Abuja with the slogan “Nigeria: Good People, Great Nation”. At its inception, the project was intended to launder the image of Nigeria both in and outside the country, through a wide range of public relation and advertising strategies. The campaign was the successor of a number of international image building efforts by the Nigerian government.

It is actually on record that in 2004, the Obasandjo government launched the “Nigeria Image Project”. Not much has been said about the project apart a presentation on the theme “Image and National Economics” made by the then Minister of Information and Orientation, Chukwuemeka Chikelu. This presentation was made to the national press and public relation and advertising executive. In 2005, the Nigeria Image Project was re-christened “The heart of Africa” (HOA) by the new Minister of Information and Orientation Frank Nweke Junior. The government invested a veritable fortune for the project: 600 million was secured for the success of the exercise [7,8,9]. Despite such a huge financial scarify, the project crashed, yielding only meagre dividends. The project’s meagre yield has been attributed to a number of factors including:

- (i) There was no clear coordination of the project;
- (ii) Very low involvement of experts such as public relations, advertising and media practitioners;
- (iii) The project did not hinge on a well structured image analysis;
- (iv) Failure by the stakeholders involved in the project to develop the brand;
- (v) The international community’s lack of confidence in the political, economic and social reforms effected by Nigeria [9,8].

The failure of the HOA project combined with a number of adverse circumstances including the serious short comings of the 2007 elections – described by Egwemi [8] as one of the principal causes of Nigeria’s decline into the image abyss – to pave the way for the adoption in 2009, of the “Rebranding Nigeria” project. Supervised in all its stages by then Minister of Information and Communications, Dora Nkem Akunyili, this project has principally been anchored in attitudinal change, orientation of Nigerian cultural values and the renewing of the spirit of patriotism and hope in all Nigerians. According to Akunyili, the scheme represented “a new chapter in our attempt as a people to take conscious steps at redefining our nation, re-examining our values and character and rededicating ourselves to the ideas of our founding fathers” [8]. However, the project is believed not to have sailed and raked in the awaited dividends [9]. Like its

predecessors, the Rebranding Nigeria Campaign tragically crashed, just within few months. According to Fayemi Kayode, its crash could be attributed to the fact that though fuelled by the best of intentions, the campaign was not only “pooh-poohed” by most Nigerians but also it failed to gain serious traction. Within only few months, the campaign generated series of controversies and “much of it was about deriding the campaign, rather than enhancing the image of Nigeria” [10, p.6]. The campaign designers also seem to have sinned by not sufficiently factoring experts and brand development in the branding process.

There is no doubt that the Rebranding Nigeria Campaign is today spoken of, mostly in the past tense. Despite the presumed debacle of the rebranding campaign, its spirit continues to drive various governmental efforts aimed at nation image management/building. What is implied here is that, the Nigerian government has not totally surrendered the idea of rebranding Nigeria. Indeed, numerous governmental initiatives – for instance the “Do the Right Thing” campaign and the “Nigeria Our Heritage” scheme – could be considered as off shoots of the Rebranding Nigeria initiative or paradigm. Such subsequent country image management projects have been structured to involve the rebranding of all the major sectors of the Nigerian polity. This orientation is captured by former Inspector General of Police (IGP) Mike Okiro who concurs that “there is no way you can re-brand Nigeria effectively and successfully without re-branding sections that make up Nigeria, the various organization, unit, ministries, parastatals and the individuals beginning with the Nigeria police” [11].

Based on such a frame of thinking, the “Nigerian media in general and the Nollywood industry in particular have been included, in both the list of sectors to rebrand and the mix of tools to be deployed for the Rebranding Nigeria Project. Nollywood films have thus been considered as an integral part of the arsenal deployable in the Rebranding Nigeria project” [12]. It is therefore not uncommon to read scholars and government officials who have highlighted the potentials of Nollywood to immensely facilitate the Rebranding Nigeria campaign. Considering Nollywood as part of the machinery for Nigeria’s image management implies a number of government policies, which normally should be pursued by the Ministry of Information and Communication as well as the National Film and Video Censors Board. As early as the years 1998, these two government organs have deployed various techniques – ranging from simple sensitisation to censorship – in a bid to orient and sensitise Nollywood filmmakers as to the need to secure a positive portrayal of Nigeria and its people in films. This can be evidenced by Minister of Information, Fank Nweke Junior’s 1998 criticism against the Nollywood industry, in which he formulated a nuanced lamentation over the adverse effects Nollywood films have on the image of Nigeria abroad. He conceded that: “you can have stories that talk on things like voodoo but when it is overdone and made the centre of any offering, that is when it becomes a problem because the more people see it, the more they will think that our country [Nigeria] is all about voodoo practice” [13]. Following the footsteps of her predecessors, Dora Nkem Akunyili “wooded” stakeholders of the Nollywood industry to support the Rebranding Nigeria Campaign. In a strongly worded exhortation, she remarked that it is Nigerians’ inability to properly tell their story to the world that has earned the negative image they have globally. The negative perception of Nigeria(ns) could therefore be predicated on Nigerians, who do not believe in themselves. She however expressed optimism on condition that the Nollywood industry fully assumes the role of cultural ambassador for Nigeria. She further exhorted the Nollywood industry to enlist its support for the rebranding campaign. This made her add that:

We need Nollywood on board. You are critical to this [“Rebranding Nigeria”] campaign. Almost everybody is watching you; you can project the image of this country. You can show negative things positively, constructively. Through the content of your films and videos, you’ll project Nigeria positively to show the world that we’re ‘Good people, great nation’. To tell our great stories, we need Nollywood. You’re one of our best icons and brands; speak to our country about this campaign. If you show Nigeria as a failed state or a country of 419s, that’s how the world would see Nigeria and Nigerians. [14]

The National Film and Video Censors Board made similar efforts aimed at sanitising the Nigerian film industry and tailoring filmic production in a way that will be friendly to Nigeria’s image building efforts. These efforts mainly took the form of sensitisation through the publication of successive press releases advocating a new direction in the Nollywood industry as well as censorship, evidenced by the banning of a plethora of films whose contents were deemed aggressive to the image building efforts of Nigeria. In 2002, the Board banned films such as *I Hate my Village*, *Shattered Home*, *Outcast 1&2*, *Night Out (Girls for Sale)*, *Omo Empire*, *Issakaba 4*, *Terrorist Attack and Unseen Forces* on account that they translate their producers’ “limitless freedom and lawlessness”, a factor which “is drowning the industry with mostly repetitive or recycled films on a few themes that hinge on sex, rituals, blood and gore” [12].

Apart from the government, other voices have joined the ongoing advocacy and razzmatazz for the use of Nollywood as an instrument for rebranding Nigeria. Ndukwu opines for instance that Nollywood films can be deployed to project selective (positive) aspects of life in Nigeria, this to achieve image redemption in the global sphere. As he puts it “we [Nigerians] can use our movies to explain our big brother role in Sierra Leone, Liberia, project our tourism potentials and destinations and as well attract foreign Direct Investment” [15, p.23]. In the same line of thought, many

critics advocate that Nollywood filmmakers view themselves as Nigeria's cultural ambassadors and partners with government in the Rebranding Nigeria project. According to Ndukwu [16], Nigerian media producers including Nollywood filmmakers, should primordially think proudly Nigerian; any time they produce films, soap operas and documentaries, or any time they premiere a movie, exhibit at film festivals, screen their films in cinemas and any time they distribute video tapes, VCDs and DVDs. To Ndukwu [16], there is a pressing need to re-evaluate Nigerian movies and check the way the Nigerian value systems are showcased in them. Films should clearly specify and clarify what the Nigerian nation recognises as positive or negative. Above all, filmmakers should be made to understand that by projecting a good national image, they contribute to enhancing the country's acceptability in the international arena, fast-track the country's vision and progress as a nation. Such positive filmic images add immense value to the Nigerian society in the eyes of the outside world.

It is obvious that the (re)branding template/model being advocated by both Nollywood critics and government consists in emphasising Nigeria's strength and downplaying the country's weakness. In some sense, such a template entails projecting Nigeria in a more positive light, irrespective of the actual socio-economic situation (the political and economic reforms) in the country. This model seems to be particularly informed by – or a blind imitation of – branding techniques often used in developed countries, where in governments, to a visibly great extent, influence their national cinematic productions to ensure the selling of a competitive image of their countries abroad. A detail grossly overlooked by this model is the fact that in those western countries, there are significant socio-political and economic reforms which make these countries already competitive brands, without the help of the cinema [17]. The cinema industry is only a marginal variable in their branding process. O'Tudor underlines this fact when he reviews the case of India. He argues that before embarking in a national branding campaign, India had carried out serious internal adjustments, reforming major sectors of its economy [18].

Similarly, the USA has always been cited among the most competitive brands, not really grace to its media, but grace to the excellent products and institutions associated with it notably Microsoft, hamburger, Coca-cola, Boeing airplanes, MacDonal, NASA, FBI, CIA, among others. So too Japan is associated with such products as Toyota, Sony and Nikon. It goes without saying that the strength of these brands/institutions and the economic power they have delivered to their owners have propelled these nations to the leadership of the global economy. It is not an exaggeration to argue that, these countries are individual brands that can deliver on their promises – as Eguwemi [8] will put it. In such a context where we have countries being brands that can deliver on their promises, the media – notably cinema – simply constitute a marginal tool in nation branding initiatives. This is not to say that the media are not integral to the branding process. They complement profound and primordial efforts that have enabled these countries to have a branding DNA. The ideal situation described above is the contrary of the Nigerian experience. O'Tudor (2014) corroborates thus:

We talk about rebranding a country where corruption still holds sway in all segments of our individual and corporate lives. We talk about rebranding when the most basic amenities of life continue to elude government's delivery capabilities. Is it not funny that we want to rebrand Nigeria when citizens of our country cannot walk the streets safe and secure from hoodlums and sometimes even the law enforcement agents that ought to protect them? Before rebranding Nigeria, we ought to perfect the internal processes that constitute the brand DNA. A good product sells itself in the market place, but at the moment, Nigeria is still a hard sell, even to its own people. Let somebody tell the government that countries of the world that ever ran successful branding campaigns did not just wake from slumber to initiate a campaign of logos and slogans. (p.9)

Thus, critics have seriously criticised the nation branding template developed by the apologists of the rebranding Nigeria campaign. To these critics, the Rebranding Nigeria Campaign – the same as its predecessors and successors – has been weak and unrealistic thanks to the fact that they were not founded on planned socio-economic reforms and the meticulous construction of Nigeria's brand DNA. Similarly, many Nollywood filmmakers think a positive representation of Nigeria in culture should be the logical outcome of timely social and behavioural revolution in Nigeria. In other words, Nigeria and Nigerians must positively and dramatically change for Nollywood films to depict them in a positive light.

Besides the above, securing films that re-present Nigeria in a positive light will continue to be a huge challenge given the fact that, for economic reasons, the filmmakers are inclined towards shaping production according to audiences' taste. As earlier mentioned, instead of scaring audiences, bad news has been a suitable unique selling proposition (USP) for films. In view of this, most filmmakers are circumstantially tempted to emphasise negative themes in their filmic productions. Such negative themes are believed to unfailingly function as a good bait for audiences. They (the negative themes) thus represent a pre-requisite for "commercial success". Corroborating this view, Akpabio [6] concedes that most moviemakers are of the view that audience members love negative themes. Citing a movie producer, he buttresses his point thus: "when audiences are for instance, frightened, while watching a film, the word quickly

spreads and interest in such production builds up very fast” (p.97). This capitalist tendency represents a herculean challenge, if not an albatross for the effective rebranding of Nigeria through Nollywood.

Nollywood Filmmakers’ Perceptions of their Role as Nigeria’s Image Makers

Many Nollywood films and filmmakers do participate in laundering the image of Nigeria. This use to happen intrinsically and extrinsically in the following situations:

- i. many Nollywood filmmakers have expressively manifested their support for or adherence to the “rebranding Nigeria” concept,
- ii. many of them shoot their movies in attractive Nigerian locations (notably highly urbanised environment and glamorous settings) which is susceptible to sell a positive image of Nigeria,
- iii. presumed negative depictions of Nigeria in Nollywood films may serve nation building/branding initiatives by the Nigerian government and
- iv. Nollywood actors are in themselves instrument of Nigeria’s soft power in foreign climes.

Many Nollywood Filmmakers have embraced the Nation Branding Paradigm

A number of Nigerian filmmakers see the filmic medium as a tool that can enable them correct the negative representation of their country in the global media. Such filmmakers (film directors, producers and actors) claim their filmic productions are aimed at challenging foreign media’s representations of their country. These representations overlook the positive sides of the Nigerian socio-cultural and political experience, to exclusively depict Nigeria as a country plagued by terrorism, ethno-religious conflicts, poverty, illiteracy, armed robbery, epidemics and endemic corruption among other socio-political ills. In an interview granted the online magazine *Afrika* [19], Nollywood director Elvis N. Ololo (director of *Money Drop*) declares that his professional and business doctrines have always been to shoot films that are Africa-oriented and that can “impact positively to the preservation of African culture and heritage, telling our [African or Nigerian] stories and fight[ing] the war against stereotype images” [19, p.3]. Besides his film titled *Money Drop*, Ololo has been the brain behind numerous Television series (notably *Großstadt Jungle* – in German) which seriously challenge the negative stereotyping of Africa and Nigerian people and cultures. He notes that his TV series revolves around exploring the quotidian life of African and Nigerian identities with a migratory background in Europe. The series functions as a tool aimed at shattering or reducing the negative stereotypes of Africa and fighting racism [19, p.4-5].

Like Ololo, many other Nigerian actors, producers and film directors have sought to shatter stereotypes and myths which for years, have relegated the African continent in general and the Nigerian people in particular to inferior classes of human beings. A case in point is the Double “A” movement conceived by a group of Nigerian performing artists in Europe to deconstruct the negative stereotypes of Nigeria that are prevalent in the western media. Since its creation, the movement’s dream has been to “develop young talents and contribute its share to the growth of Nigerian entertainment, but above all to promote a positive image of Nigeria to the outside world through entertainment” [20, p.54].

A film director who is member of the Double ‘A’ movement confides that his artistic philosophy has also been to “show the good face of Nigeria”. Under the banner of the Double “A” movement, this film director brings Nollywood stars on tours in various European countries to create a greater awareness for the Nollywood industry in the continent [20, p.53]. Similar to Double “A”, the Association of Nigerian Actors and Actresses in Belgium (ANNABEL) is bent on using film to emphasize the positive aspects of Nigerian cultures and launder the image of Nigeria in Europe in particular. The group reveals its nation building orientation when it states that “ANAABEL is also trying to prove to the [Belgian] government and the world in general that there are lots of Nigerians who are gifted, and who, despite their situation, can still make use of their talent” [20, p.53]. The group also declares that “Nigerians are not [a] liability, but useful and important [entities] in any society they are. ANAABEL is working on how to project the positive part of Nigerians in this land [Belgium] and in the world in general” [20, p.53].

If a number of Nollywood filmmaker’s artistic and business philosophies align with the need to launder the image of their country, others simply limit their efforts to cultural promotion and nation building. A case in point is Frank Ufumadu (who directed *The Chronicles* [2018], *Obanje* [2019] and *Storms* [2016]). Ufumadu actually claims that his filmic productions gear principally at properly and positively representing traditional Nigeria. Another cineaste/videaste Ahmed Yerima – who is actually actor, director and playwright – opines that like any other social observer, filmmakers must be relevant to their society by being proactive, thinking for the society and at times pre-empting the society. He writes that “[As a director and actor] I must be relevant. I cannot sit down and create art for art sake. I cannot be writing about irrelevances—marital issues and such (not that they are irrelevant)—but when there are issues of life and death involved” [21, p.20]. He also says he cannot just remain passive:

When immediate issues, generational issues of the society, or when issues of the future of the existence of my country are involved, I cannot remain passive. An individual within the society but also as a playwright [director and actor], I need to

say something; I need to state how I feel. [...] When it comes to looking at issues that touch the country I will go first. [21, p.20-21]

In view of the positions expressed above by Nollywood filmmakers, it is more than clear that not the totality of Nigerian film directors or producers are just materialist and capitalist business entities solely bent on making profit with films that negatively/faultily depict Nigeria. A good number of Nollywood filmmakers have since keyed into the noble project of challenging controversial and despicable representations of their country. They produce filmic texts which do not necessarily say Nigeria is all a paradise but which attempt to balance the negative stereotypes with the good facets of Nigerian cultures.

Many Nollywood Film Directors shoot their Films on Attractive Locations

A good number of Nollywood films explore life in the grassroots and by so doing most often exhibit images of the underdevelopment and primitivism characterising part of Nigeria. Such images often include “primitive” architectures (wooden or mud huts with roofs in thatches), middle age types of dress code or fashion, abject poverty, cannibalism, black magic and enclaved villages among others. Although common, these images of underdevelopment and rurality/primitivism are not the only tools used by Nollywood film directors to depict life in rural or urban Nigeria. Indeed, many Nollywood films feature images of the urban and modern facets of Nigeria. They project images of modernism in Nigeria through visuals of metropolitan spaces and through depictions of a plurality of urban cultures. In so many Nollywood films, emphasis is clearly placed on very developed road networks, ultra modern built environment, well equipped public establishments, westernization of attitudes and improvement of lifestyle in Nigerian cities among others. In line with this, Haynes [22] recognizes that many indexes of urbanity in Nigeria are unearthed and evasively displayed in Nollywood filmic scripts even though such an evasive display is most often juxtaposed with series of serious urban problems prevailing in big Nigerian metropolises such as Lagos, Port Harcourt, Enugu and Abuja among others. Haynes [23] underlines the fact that many Nollywood film directors seek to emphasise the myths that suggest that Nigerian metropolises are in no way inferior to western ones in terms of built environment and socio-cultural anomalies. He writes that Nollywood films present for instance the city of Lagos as “a turbulent and dangerous landscape, where class divisions are extreme but permeable, and enormous wealth does not buy insulation from chaos and misery” (p.131).

In the same line of argument, Akaoso opines that Nollywood film directors’ constant tendency to emphasise Nigerian urbanism has helped challenge a good number of old age myths that associate life in Nigeria with primitivism and barbarism [24]. He claims that by representing Nigerian cities as places where people have long ago started enjoying the products of modernism such as pipe borne water, motor cars, ultra modern formal education and the Internet, Nollywood film directors have made a great work of challenging such outdated stereotypes of Africans in general and Nigerians in particular. They have challenged the western beliefs and racial stereotypes which have for years suggested that Nigerian/African people still live on the top of tall trees and move about naked. In the same line of thought, Alawode and Uduakobong [25] remark that a number of Nollywood film directors even over exaggerate their positive representation of the Nigerian urbanity. This is often done through depictions which tend to suggest that the Nigerian urban spacer is characterised by widespread mansions, economic boom and widespread affluence. The two researchers express such a position when they write for instance that the Nigerian lifestyles and attitudes portrayed in Nollywood films that focus on Nigerian urbanity are “flawed with exaggerations and flamboyance, affluence and elegance” [25, p.25].

Many Nollywood film directors or producers are even conscious of the need to shoot their films on beautiful locations that could help the Nigerian film industry nuance or totally challenge the negative representations of their country in foreign media. Okoh notes for instance that many Nollywood directors recognize that the choice of urban towns as film locations is an excellent way of producing films that positively represent Nigeria and enrich the debate about filmic depictions of Nigeria [26]. In the same line of thought, Nollywood actor and film director Richard Mofe-Damijio (cited in Aziken, [27, p.5-6]) notes that the desire to use locations that appropriately reveal or reflect the Nigerian experience has motivated many Nollywood filmmakers to make Asaba the new capital of the Nigerian film industry. He pointedly contends that “anywhere [Nollywood] movies would be shot has to be ecstatically appealing to the eyes. If there is nothing in the place to catch the eye, nobody would come here to shoot no matter who is here” [27, p.5]. In guise of explanation, the Nollywood veteran adds that:

It is not something that we deliberately planned for Nollywood to come. Nollywood wanted a place that is peaceful, conducive and of course has enough hotel beds. What we have done outside of the provision of infrastructure in the town [Asaba metropolis] is to make sure that the town is beautiful enough when it is on camera. [27, p.5-6]

Mofe-Damijio’s position clearly shows that both Nollywood filmmakers and Nigerian town planners are becoming conscious that films could be an excellent way of selling Nigeria to outside audiences. The above citation also illustrates

a movement among Nollywood filmmakers which associate their profession with nation branding. A similar or related trend among Nollywood filmmakers has been to treat images of underdeveloped zones of Nigeria in an aesthetically pleasing way so as to downplay the “ugliness” or perceived negativism of life in specific parts of Nigerian urban or rural spaces. By this doctrine, Nollywood filmmakers do not really shy away from shooting their films in shanties or extremely underdeveloped built environments but emphasise on the realism and positive humanism in those film locations. Film director Ema Odosio claims to have been guided by such a doctrine in the shooting of her award winning film titled *Kasala*. She reveals that when using Lagos as location for her films, she “ would go into the streets of Lagos to film, and [she] would see everything that made Lagos what it is: the traffic, the smell, the dirt, the vibe, the energy, the people. And [she always] want to make stories that are authentic” (cited in Kpade, [28, p.8]).

Odosio adds that it is this desire to always represent Lagos and other urban cities of Nigeria in a realistic way that has inform her directorial philosophy in *Kasala*, her award winning movie. She further explains that “I think I made *Kasala* with a vengeance. I’ve had the privilege to work with *Ebonylife TV* which was beautiful but *Kasala* kept pulling me in: the people I met in the streets, the things I’d done on the streets of Lagos, the visual aesthetic kept pulling and I decided to make that” [28, p.8]. Odosio also explains that “I wanted to see Lagos, I wanted to see barbwires. I wanted to see gutters, I wanted to see the people. I knew that the location was a character on its own. And I wanted to be able to find the right location that would be able to represent that boys and the lives they live in Lagos” [28, p.8-9].

It could therefore be surmised that it is not only by choosing the ultra modern locations that Nollywood film directors could construct and sell a positive image of Nigeria to foreign audiences. Modest locations could aesthetically and realistically be treated in film context to nuance or challenge negative stereotypes of Nigeria.

Nollywood Film’s Negative Depictions of Nigeria are not necessarily Damaging

It has become common among Nollywood film critics to problematise negative portrayals of Nigeria in Nollywood films. By this tendency, the critics associate any perceived negative depiction of Nigeria with a distortion of reality and an experience that can only be damaging to Nigeria’s image on the international scene. Authors such as Ndukwu [16], Folarin [29], Akunily [30], Adefuye [31] and Omojuwa [2] among others have endorsed such problematic views. They see any negative depiction in Nollywood films as an attempt to ridicule Nigeria and sell the wrong picture of the country to foreign audiences. As earlier said, this way of conceiving the image making power of Nollywood films is not informed by empirical studies and should therefore be problematised. Little wonder, a number of critics have sought to counter the above position, arguing that many of Nollywood film’s perceived negative depictions of Nigeria either have no iota of negativism or are in no way damaging to Nigeria’s image.

In line with the above, film critic Kwaghkondo (cited in Adagbo, [32, p.18] notes that the culture of thematically defining most Nollywood films with issues such as voodoo, black magic, ritual killings and moral decadence should not automatically be regarded as distortion of the Nigerian reality or as efforts aimed at tarnishing Nigeria’s image. Kwaghkondo is of the persuasion that voodoo in particular is Nigerian in character; in line with this, Nigerians should not absurdly be ashamed of such a culture. He adds that the so-called developed and modernised civilisations have replicas of this culture and they feel no shame about it. Also, it is just absurd that many Nigerian hastily lambast Nollywood directors for exploring voodoo as a thematic issue in their films. As he puts it:

I have no problem with the use of juju or voodoo. I always refer to the British film industry, about this boy who went to magic school, (a reference to Harry Potter). It is that tradition the British came from. I was in Leicester, Central Britain and they told us stories of these castles or buildings they call Haunted Houses. Nobody lives there. Those who dared to sleep there are said to have stories to tell. It is said that if you slept in one room, you woke up in the other. Or you wake up outside. They told us visitors to the castles testified. There is no denying this sort of things because it is like denying the existence of the devil. It is there in all parts of the world. In most villages, people consult oracles. That is not my problem. It is not something we should be ashamed of. I went to the United States and they were consulting fortune tellers. I think they call it Mediums. [32 p.11]

In the same line of argument, Endong [12] opines hat it will be faulty to consider Nollywood films’ negative depiction of Nigeria as a phenomenon which is inherently damaging to Nigeria’s image on the international scene. This is so as Hollywood film’s constant depictions of America as a land of wayward people, gun-happy people and morally decadent people seem not to have always motivated foreign audiences to regard America in a negative light. In spite of these negative depictions, many Africans in particular and third world nations in general continue to view America in a positive light.

Some of the perceived negative depictions of Nigeria even aim at sensitizing policy makers and the general Nigerian public in favour of policy change and nation building. Such an action is perfectly in line with nation branding. In effect,

good nation branding most often entails the up-front amelioration of the social, political and economic conditions of the country which is to be rebranded. Many Nollywood film producers and directors have understood that such social and political amelioration may come through sensitization done through the instrumentality of films that expose the ugly side of Nigeria in view of providing a diagnosis that may inform upcoming nation branding initiatives. In line with this, film director Nadine Ibrahim claims that her involvement in filmmaking has always been driven by the strong desire to denounce socio-political ills with the hope that such denunciation may inform better political actions and policies that will not only better the lives of Nigerians but also ameliorate the image of her country (Nigeria) on the international scene. In her language, the director of *Through her Eyes* – a film on terrorism in Nigeria – says she has always wanted to “tell peoples’ stories, to create a platform for other voices”. In addition, she claims to have realised that she “could do it in a visually captivating manner”. She has also always wanted “to tell stories that can change the world”. She adds that “I think film can be used as a powerful tool to generate awareness about what’s going on in our country [Nigeria] and the world in general” (p.17).

Nollywood Actors are Vectors of Nigeria’s Soft Power in Foreign Climes

The last but not least evidence of Nigerian filmmakers’ role as their country’s image maker is seen in the fact that popular Nollywood actors – notably Ramsey Noah, Genevieve Nnaji, John Okafor, Pete Odochie, Omotola Ojaide, Patience Ozokwor, and Jim Ike just to name a few – have in various foreign climes been vectors of Nigeria’s soft power particularly in Africa. Indeed, Nollywood actors are revered in many African countries and in African diasporas in Asia, Europe, America and in the Caribbean. As conceded by, Haynes [22] these Nollywood stars are “adored” or considered role models in many African countries. In many African and Asian communities they are viewed as symbols of hope. The youths identify with them and sometimes seek to emulate their example in terms of dress code, language and acting style. No doubt, many of such Nollywood actors have in many instances been used outside Nigeria by NGOs, and political bodies to drive specific campaigns. In 2007 for instance, Sierra Leone president used Lagosian screen goddess Genevieve Nnaji to pull records crowds at political rallies in his country [33].

In Kenya, youths and cinema goers similarly regard Nollywood actors as gods and goddesses; so much so that many Kenyan scholars have wonder why and how Nollywood actors and actresses could have such a serious edge over local entertainment divas. Such observers have found it surprising that “Kenyans know almost all Nigerian actors and their full biographies and yet they hardly know our own actors” [34, p.28]. It is also observable that activities involving Nollywood actors in foreign African countries most often pull crowds. The British Broadcasting Corporation reviewed how Nollywood stars’ participation in specific cultural events in Cameroon has always massively attracted crowds of youths [34]. All these are indicative of the fact that Nollywood stars contribute to Nigeria’s branding on the international scene.

CONCLUSION

Many critics tend to present Nollywood filmmakers exclusively as materialistic cineastes whose interest in cinema is basically to achieve economic benefits. According to such critics, Nollywood filmmakers’ prioritisation of material benefit most often pushes them to give less attention to the need to protect the image of their country Nigeria. Although true to a class of Nollywood filmmakers, this observation has been nuanced in this paper. This nuanced look at the phenomenon has followed from the fact that many players in the Nigerian film industry are primordially driven by non-materialistic goals such as nation branding motives. In effect, this paper has argued that a good number of Nollywood film directors and producers are very much conscious of the need to deploy the filmic medium for rebranding their country. This class of filmmakers does participate in laundering the image of Nigeria.

The paper has identified four ways in which Nollywood filmmakers use cinema to rebrand their country. The first way is that many Nollywood filmmakers have expressively embraced the nation-branding paradigm; while the second way is that many of them shoot their movies in attractive Nigerian locations (notably highly urbanised environment and glamorous settings). This shooting of movies on attractive locations is susceptible to sell a positive image of Nigeria. The third way is that presumed negative depictions of Nigeria in Nollywood films may serve nation building/branding initiatives by the Nigerian government and the fourth and last way is that Nollywood actors are in themselves an instrument of Nigeria’s soft power in foreign climes.

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