

Nigerian Film and Mirroring the Politico-Historical Perspective of the African Culture in King of Justice and Suicide King

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Abstract

Politico-historical culture of a traditional setting of African people can be seen as the collective endeavour in living, learning, developing and coming to terms with the traditional environment of people in a particular place, season and time. In any traditional African community, the aspect of governance is dependent on the enshrined customs of choosing leaders that has become part of the culture in the traditional political process. In a typical African (Nigerian) society, tradition in the realm of politics has experienced a range of disorder, tussle, sycophancy, chaos, betrayal, oppression, murder, deception, corruption, intrigues and other attendant vices. The Nigerian films have reflected much on traditional political culture in Nigeria as a way of life, which is the focus that this seminar sought to examine through the analysis of these relevant and selected Nigerian films: King of Justice and Suicide King. The objective of this paper is to assess the political culture in the African traditional setting in terms of practices and contents as being mirrored in Nigerian films. The paper proves that Nigerian films are not figments of fantasy but are possible avenues through which the political culture and traditional practices of a particular people can be mirrored for communication of positive change.

Keywords: *Mirroring, Nigerian Film, Politico-historical culture*

Introduction

The Nigerian film industry, also known as Nollywood, has undergone a major transformation since the colonial era. Scholars have explored how the colonial legacy has affected the development of the film industry in Nigeria. The history of the Nigerian film industry can be traced back to the pre-colonial era. While the development of cinema in Nigeria was influenced by colonialism and the emergence of postcolonial nationalism, local filmmakers and performance artists played a key role in shaping the early years of the industry. As Okoye notes, "the Nigerian film industry has come a long way since its early days, and has established itself as a key player in the global film industry" (45).

Culture entails shared beliefs and values of a group, the custom, practices and behavioural pattern of a particular nation or people. This paper attempts to examine the context of the afore-mentioned in selected Nigerian films in the light of political process and developments in the Nigerian traditional setting. The paper therefore, embraces an examination of the art Nigerian films in trying to mirror political developments in the Nigerian traditional society. To this end, it showcases the intrigues, deceit, violence, killings, abuse, mud-slinging, evil machinations and other intricacies that have long become a trend and way of life identified in the Nigerian political tradition.

According to Keazor and Husaini, the colonial government used cinema to promote British culture and values. They write that "the colonial government used cinema to promote British culture, values, and ideas, and to showcase their technological progress as part of their civilizational mission" (28). However, local audiences also appropriated cinema for their own purposes, using it as a means of entertainment and education.

Furthermore, writer and critic Jonathan Haynes argues that the colonial legacy has had a lasting effect on the Nigerian film industry. He notes that "the development of Nigerian cinema has been greatly influenced by colonialism, which left its mark on the organisational structures and aesthetics of the industry" (35). The colonial government's emphasis on assimilation and westernization influenced the early development of the film industry in Nigeria, with filmmakers often emulating western film styles and themes. The history of the Nigerian film industry in the colonial era was marked by the introduction of cinema by the colonial government as a tool for political and social control. However, local audiences appropriated cinema for their own purposes, using it as a means of entertainment and education.

Although films entertain, the medium is a serious vocation and an avenue of showcasing the traditional political culture of a particular culture. The prevalence of films in Nigeria and indeed all over the world has made it easily accessible to many people thus making them to know about major developments in their identified way of life and how politics is played. For the purpose of this paper, Nigerian films shall be examined in the realm of traditional political culture in Africa, like Nigeria, where traditional political activities are mirrored to keep the people updated on their political culture from their traditional perspective. Films as an aspect of performing arts, is a versatile and powerful art form. It is a medium of pleasure and relaxation as well as a tool for education, information, communication and also in this context, a mirror reflecting traditional-political activities. All the functions of films mentioned above help to explore the realities of the culture: what is going on, what ought to be and what might be.

In films, mirroring of traditional cultural practices is not regarded as "Art for Art's Sake", but rather aimed to expose traditional political culture and should be judged by cultural, political and traditional standards. Bassey Ekpe confirms the efficacy of films for demonstrating, "...their utility as tools for engaging with and analysing human concerns" (126). From the confirmation of Bassey Ekpe therefore, this paper seeks to concern on human situation in terms of local politics as observed in many African communities and centres on traditional political culture of the African people with analysis in the selected Nigerian films under study (*King of Justice* and *Suicide King*).

Political Culture - Towards a Contextual Clarification

In the perception of traditional political culture of most African communities, ascending a leadership throne is fast becoming a phenomenon that is adversely affecting the people because of greed and attendant evil machinations resulted in the process of scheming and undermining the traditional laid-down customs. With this development, humanity mostly the Africans seem to be thriving at the brinks of cultural disaster that is caused by these selfish over-ambitious individuals longing for power by all means and at all costs. The rural places have been needlessly

inflicted by all forms of negative consequences resulting from the activities of these traditional and powerful political gladiators who claim to be the ones to oversee the custody of lives and development, while the customs and traditional principles for leadership are seen trampled upon. Meanwhile the rightful people for throne succession are helpless to tradition when been confronted by powerful individuals in the community who -- need power, just for the sake of power, and are ready to do everything possible under the sun to acquire it. The communities in Africa, belong to Africans, but the innocent people have been held to political ransom by self-imposed leaders who have employed their resources and connections to subvert the traditional political culture of African communities and thus attracted many untold and many forms of hardship from both physical and spiritual dimensions to the people.

How is politics in Nigerian traditional society? Fundamentally politics relates to leadership and the manner in which leadership positions can be attained. However, much as political development in Nigeria has been highlighted above, the concern here, of course, is with the contextual clarification of traditional politics replicate in Nigerian films. Unarguably, Nigerian films have always served as the bastion for the propagation of traditional culture of the people, despite the differences in cultural norms and values as practiced in different tribes and languages. Film has specific advantage over other art forms and expressions due to its direct appeal on the watchers or audience. Revolutionary consciousness could easily be raised to great height in dramatic performances, especially with the utilization of elements like indigenous characters and names; political developments and societal reflections; as well as audience participation and involvement. Film, then more than novel and poetry, is a form of cultural ideology that has the capabilities of generating positive social action.

The utilization of the dramatic medium as a means of propagating, contrasting irreconcilable ideologies and the struggles for the control of the conscience of men has been noted by various commentators. Ngugi wa Thiong'o sees drama especially in his theatrical orientation as the crucial and most decisive stage in the struggle against cultural neo-colonialism in Africa, and Kenya in particular, and as a weapon of galvanizing the broad masses towards radical socio-economic changes. According to Udentia (25), this attests to the predominant position occupied by drama and drama related issues in his collection of critical essays - *Writers in Politics* and *Barrel of Pen*.

However, it has been generally agreed that drama (theatre) is a mirror of society and is being adjudged watchdog of the society due to its roles in the society. These roles have the potentialities of reflecting traditional political practices as a culture in the consciousness of citizens and individuals about their traditional environments. It follows; therefore, these selected Nigerian films are to show how things and matters related to politics stand in the Nigerian traditional and cultural society. Borrowing from the submission on Nnanake Ekeke in his article: *A Critical Overview and Evaluation of Theatre for Development Praxis in SBCC Approach*, Nigerian films can serve as "a reflection of the communal situation in the aspect of social reality. It is a veritable tool for achieving social change in various ways" (91). The various ways for achieving social change includes the traditional culture of politics as practiced in many African communities that are not people-oriented considering the momentum of the global democratic wave in governance presently encouraged for the interest of the people.

In the context of traditional political culture in Nigeria, there are certain activities indulged by these political position seekers that are unique. There are laid-down political rules and processes in occupying positions of authority traditionally. The Nigerian society has metamorphosed through various political stages - from the colonial, through early independence era, disrupted by many military interventions to this seeming-civilian dispensations, confused with political manoeuvres and remotely controlled by selfish cabals under the neo-imperialistic influences but there are traditionally enshrine process in the culture of a particular group of people. The Nigerian film is a potent tool for holistically reflecting what is happening in the traditional society. With regard to this view, Mao Tse Tung in Akinwale, argues that, "in the world today, all culture, all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. There is, in fact, no such thing as arts for art's sake, art that stands above class or that is detached from or independent of politics" (127).

The type of social relationship that exists in a particular society at a particular time determines the political, economic and even religious tunes that prevail in that society. The films in Nigeria are part and parcel of the society, and naturally and logically, it partakes of the society's worldview. Suffice to say that home cannot escape feeling and depicting the political heartbeat of the environment. It becomes obvious why many Nigerian films and the industry have resolved to become committed to reflecting on political traditional culture in their productions.

Given this understanding therefore, it is obvious that what is being demanded of Nigerian films, in political culture in the Nigerian setting is to reflect and showcase the texture of traditional practices in politics. This however can be done through a systematic ideology in the plot, creating remorse and a thought-provoking end in political dramas. This is expedient because all human experiences are politics. All human relationships are governed by it, including even the most innate. Film in the context of theatre according to Nnanake Ekeke can be “used to research, analyse and solve critical issues in the community, empowering indigenous people to enhance or make change towards positive behaviours, knowledge and attitudes regarding vital social issues challenging their lives” (146). Thus, the mirroring approach in traditional political films has the efficacy of sustaining the Nigerian traditional political system. Looking at films in Nigeria, it can be observed that they are capable of shaping and molding individual or group behaviours and attitudes toward a particular traditional cultural ideal.

Art can also be seen as a weapon with propaganda. (Bamidele 15). Such a statement is an indication that film has some axe to grind in the society mostly on issues of political culture of a people. In dramatising this aspect prevalent in Nigerian political culture, it must be offensive rather than defensive. Traditional political films might help to inculcate cultural patriotism through change of attitude in individuals in understanding the peculiar uniqueness of their political culture

In reflecting political culture, the political interest is very significant: is it for selfish reason? Is it for the interest of the people? Chieftaincy (political) struggles, however, are not always made of clearly perceptible moments of direct and dramatic confrontation. Class struggles vary greatly in character and form and occur in various spheres of traditional social and political life. It is unfortunate that most analyses of the political process in Africa have not woken up to this very basic fact of reflecting on the African political culture. Film is created from and exists within the society, and its statements are invariably interpreted by the audience as being about society. It does not operate in a vacuum but mirrors and reflects the needs of the society. The post-colonial Nigerian movie industry occupies a unique position, which stems from years of pioneering quest for social change by using plays that depict the society.

To corroborate this fact, Horace in *The Art of Poetry*, says that: “Fiction made to please should keep close to the truth of things; your play should not demand an unlimited credence; ...” (Dukore 74). Therefore, culture of traditional politics in Nigerian film is a potent social and moral force in the society. This is guided by the precepts of the interrelatedness of art and society on one hand and of art and politics on the other hand. Film is a product of the society and there is no way it can escape the sociological engagement. This is mainly because the plays and actors in the films have a particular message to pass across to the society via the audience. It is an art form which is situated within the ideological and political worldview of the artists that create it. Thus, Aristophanes says that “the dramatist (actor or actress) should not only offer pleasure but should beside that be a teacher and a political adviser.” (Akinwale 12). It is imperative for the Nigerian films and producers to adopt positive models of traditional political culture in their productions.

To effectively sensitise the people in the Nigerian society in the quest for understanding politics in their traditional way of life, these films under study: *King Justice* and *Suicide King* are making political statements meant for mirroring the traditional Nigerian political culture.

King of Justice and Suicide King

King of Justice and *Suicide King* are political movies written by Chuku Okpara, directed by Andy Amenechi and produced by Chinbueze Ucheama.

The selected films are from a traditional perspective, the urge to override the traditional customs and values by a certain individual in abandoning the traditional laws in order to hijack the traditional throne, leads to murder, death, banishment and other calamities. Political power-play in these selected Nigerian movies, covers both contemporary, gender and traditional quest for political power in the Nigerian society. These movies reflect the machinations that characterize political power-play under a traditional setting. The locale is Ezibodo Kingdom. The major characters in the videos are:

- | | | |
|----------|---|-------------------------|
| Ezenaya | - | King of Ezibodo Kingdom |
| Lolo | - | Ezenaya's Wife |
| Chibuzor | - | Ezenaya's only Son |

Adugo	-	Chibuzor's Daughter
Oranusi	-	Member of Cabinet turned King
Oranusi's wife	-	
Lawrence	-	Oranusi's Son
Nzekwe	-	Member of Cabinet
Tessy	-	Nzekwe's Daughter
Uwakwe	-	Tessy's Suitor
Zimuzor	-	Member of Cabinet
Ojukwu	-	Palace Guard
Okudili	-	Villager
Chibuzor's guardian from Ofuna village		
Chief Priest		

Synopsis

These films are about a story in Eziobodo kingdom, in which one of the members of the cabinet, Onowu Oranusi develops greed, betrays and dethrones the reigning king, Ezenaya, by assassinating him and the entire family. Oranusi betrays the trust on him by King Ezenaya to hold the throne on trust, pending when his little son, Chibuzor, will be matured enough to take over as the king.

However, during the assassination attempt, little Chibuzor (unknown to Oranusi) is rescued and nursed to maturity in the neighbouring village by a certain woman, although he suffers blindness which he sustains during the assassination attempt. King Oranusi engages in all forms of atrocities that attract calamities to the kingdom. The choice of Oranusi's son, Lawrence, in marrying Adugo (Chibuzor's daughters) brings back Chibuzor to Eziobodo on invitation of King Oranusi. The Chilling revelation from the guardian shows that blind Chibuzor is the right heir apparent to the throne of Eziobodo kingdom. King Oranusi commits suicide after being disgraced and dethrone on confirmation by the chief-priest, while Chibuzor is confirmed the new king amidst jubilation

Notable actors and actresses feature in these movies: Olu Jacobs acts the part of King Oranusi, with Ngozi Ezeonu as wife; Kenneth Okonkwo acts the part of late King Ezenaya's son (Chibuzor), with Tonto Dike (Adugo) as his daughter. Chinwetalu Agu acts the part of the loyal cabinet member (Mazi Nzekwe).

Contextual Analysis

The Nigerian movies are not just a medium for entertainment as earlier said, but a vital instrument for educative, reformative and informative employments. These home videos recreate the concept of power from the traditional perspective prevalent in our modern society.

The setting of these selected films reflect the goings-on in many African traditional societies especially in Nigeria where some customs and traditional laws are still maintained and sacrosanctly adhered to, in monarchical politics of ascendancy. Here, there are vivid and glaring portrayals of traditional political power-play, where the problems of evil plots and scheming for position of power have become common features. In these films, we can locate the essential core of political concept which includes killing, greed, sycophancy, betrayal, violence, sex, superstition, injustice and suicide.



Long Shot (LS) of King Ezenaya, addressing his cabinet members in “King of Justice”

The concept of politics in these selected films connects the ideology of politics in a cultural context compared to the currency of democratic context of politics. The desperation for power gives birth to betrayal, greed and death in Eziobodo kingdom. In these selected films we see a situation that the reigning king, Igwe Ezenaya, in good faith, entrusted his position to his trusted lieutenant, Onowu Oranusi, in event of his death. The king tasks Oranusi to make sure that he takes over from him when he dies, and to hand over to his little son, Chibuzor, when he is mature enough to be the king, as the customs demand.

However, the good intention turns otherwise. A *paranomic shot* of the room and *extreme close-up shot* on King Oranusi reveals his mischievous countenance as he quickly hatches a plot, kills Igwe Ezenaya and plans to eliminate the whole family of Ezenaya in order to be exalted as the king. Of course, he succeeds, but without following the tradition of consulting the Chief Priest of the kingdom.



King Oranusi in the *Suicide King*

In his reign, he becomes absolute, plundering the kingdom economically, morally, and desecrating it with all forms of immorality that attract calamities to the kingdom. Despite corrective measures from some of his cabinet members, he relies so much on one of them, Ichie Nzekwe, whom he uses. Nzekwe becomes a sycophantic tool for Oranusi, who rewards him by proposing to marry his daughter for his son, Prince Lawrence, in diaspora. Nzekwe connives with the king to loot the kingdom's treasury as well as engages in other forms of corruption. King Oranusi uses his royal influence to lure Nzekwe's daughter, Tessy, into having sex with him that results in pregnancy.

King Oranusi, after killing the late king, organises his guards to also kill the wife and son, so as to become the substantive king. Fate turns out that the late king's son, Chibuzor, is fortunate to be alive, although blind. After killing the king and family, Oranusi is the first to accuse one of the guards of being responsible and quickly passes judgment on him to be stoned to death. As the scene *fades out*, there is a *cut away* to the succeeding scene.

In the subsequent scene, there is an *extreme long shot* (ELS) of the the palace as the camera *fades* out to reveal another scene inside the palace. The camera *pans* around to reveal the interior decoration of the palace as it *establishes* the presence of King Oranusi sitting all alone. There is a *close-up shot* (CS) with the *point of view* (POV) on the king's face and is followed by *medium shot* (MS), as he moves about boasting: "I have finally become the royal majesty, with the highest title in Eziobodo Kingdom." The concept of power wrongly gotten cannot be right. Oranusi becomes a despotic ruler, displaying injustice and abuse of power. Examples are when he expels Ichie Zimuzor from the cabinet for opposing him and ordering a boy accused of raping to be flogged, while he is sleeping with his son's fiancée in the palace.

It becomes obvious that King Oranusi has made himself, the King of Eziobodo kingdom, subverting all extant customs and procedures to the throne. The questions remain: Will it last?

Are the gods dead? What will be the end? Unknown to Oranusi, that in Ofuna village, late King Ezenaya's son, Prince Chibuzor, is still alive, after being rescued in a fatal mission that killed the mother. Chibuzor has a daughter and are both moving about performing to survive, although he is blind. In Eziobodo kingdom the chief priest is busy proclaiming everywhere: "Our king is blind." Oranusi's son, Lawrence, finally does not want to marry Nzekwe's daughter, Tessy. He proposes to marry Adugo (Chibuzor's daughter) from Ofuna village.

Acting on request by Chibuzor's saviour-guardian from Ofuna village, King Oranusi gathered all the villagers at the village square for the great ceremony. There is *long shot* of the final scene as villagers gathered. The camera *narrows down* to *medium shot* and *switch-panning* to show Chibuzor, his daughter, King Oranusi, Chibuzor's guardian, as well as others on the high table. Camera *spans* on villagers, with intermittent *close-up shots* on their faces to show their astonishment, even as the woman (saviour-guardian) from Ofuna begins to narrate how she rescued Chibuzor from the hands of the killers sent by King Oranusi. She attributes Chibuzor's blindness to the poisonous substance rubbed on the blindfold tied on Chibuzor.

On observing the reaction from the crowd, Oranusi orders Chibuzor, his daughter, Adugo and their guardian to be blind-folded. At this point the chief priest suddenly appears to put a stop to Oranusi's order and compels him to speak out and prove his innocence.

At the final scene, Tessy is pregnant for Oranusi. Chibuzor is crowned the king of Eziobodo kingdom by the chief priest and his blindness is gone. Adugo is given to Lawrence in marriage as people celebrate the coronation of King Chibuzor. The dethroned Oranusi at the end commits suicide.

In real terms, what we are experiencing in our society today is a wrong direction chosen by power seekers, who have decided to follow wrong concept in an effort to actualize their quest for political power and position. These selected films depict the Nigeria's case in traditional political perspective as they dramatize the wrong political power concept that employs murder, deceit, exploitation, sycophancy, greed, immorality, corruption, injustice, wickedness, intrigues and other vices in quest for power, which are contrary to the acceptable norms and values of the society.

Overview of Culture in the Selected Nigerian Films

The culture of traditional politics in the these selected Nigerian films buttresses the cultural belief in the African society that good must always triumph over evil not minding the duration of time – hence advocating things to be done honestly and in an acceptable way. These films draw the consciousness of the people towards political matters that affect them traditionally, while portraying options that guarantee traditional politics in a decent society under traditional rule.

From the analyses of these selected films, it has become obvious that both traditional and contemporary Nigerian settings are plagued by socio-political problems of power-play. The videos unveil the context of political power-play at the expense of morality and decorum. In a creative response to the problem of traditional political culture of the African society and without playing to the gallery, the selected films in this paper underscores the importance of achieving the desired change in the socio-cultural and attitudinal political mindsets of the people. However, these films show the different strategies of political culture in our traditional society and do not in any way advocate for a crude and barbaric way of attaining political power. In the words of O. U. Jacob, film can help, "propagate our traditional cultural identity and memories for posterity across generations" (142). They are depicting what are perceived to be going on in the Nigerian traditional political and cultural system, in order to evoke the consciousness of the people toward a positive change.

In *King of Justice* there is refraction or reflection of traditional political power-play that communicates a clear message to the people that political culture of a people is necessary. It presents hope for the future; that when the time comes, all the ills and evil manipulations of political power shall be exposed and punished if not culturally followed. In the context of political culture of the African people in *King of Justice*, we see poetic justice very clearly when King Oranusi is disgraced out of the throne and finally commits suicide. This is seen as a punishment for crime committed against late King Ezenaya and family.

Ichie Nzekwe is also disgraced with his daughter pursued out of the palace, without marrying King Oranusi's son, Lawrence, as earlier planned and despite all his sycophantic deeds. Even the Chief Priest was finally recognized and honoured in Eziobodo Kingdom for standing on the ground of truth. Late King Ezenaya's son,

Chibuzor, whom Oranusi thought he had killed but mysteriously survived, later became the substantive king of Eziobodo Kingdom while his daughter, Adugo, finally married Lawrence. However, Chibuzor, who was blind, got his sight restored after being enthroned as the new king.

King of Justice and Suicide King prove further that film is a consummate medium that has the potential of transforming the society through creative mirroring of what are going on, in its quota to affect the desired socio-political change. The exposition of the trado-political situation as prevalent in the African society through these selected films has a transforming message to awaken the consciousness of the people to stand for what is traditionally right by resisting all pressures and allurements by the purveyors of power to avoid possible traditional consequences which are most times believed to be deadly with long-lasting consequences. Besides the political theme of the selected films, they are many lessons to learn in order to boost moral values and to reposition thoughts and decisions in life. The virtue of patience and endurance, the virtue of contentment, the virtue of honesty, the virtue of keeping promises, etc., are all found in these selected films under study.

Conclusion

This paper assessed the political content in Nigerian films and to determine the level of traditional power-play in the selected films. It further proves Nigerian films as powerful instruments for mirroring traditional political culture. This paper also qualifies Nigerian films as vital tools for exposing societal ills. The ample exposition of treachery, violence, betrayal, thuggery, corruption, sycophancy, murder, immorality and other acts of lawlessness which characterize Nigerian traditional politics, evokes the consciousness of the people and urges them to re-order and re-assert their cultural values in the realm of politics. In this paper, it is quite obvious that Nigerian films can also be used as a tool for community mobilization, education, awareness creation, sensitization and conscientization of the people with the purpose of effecting change in the rural communities that are under powerful political influence of the privileged few who are bent to twist every tradition and custom to favour their insatiable desire for political supremacy.

These selected films therefore, seek to use the thematic focus to mirror the goings-on in African communities, in terms of leadership and succession and by implication communicate the needed change in the African traditional. These selected films, although being creative works, have the capacity to help in repositioning the traditional African society in terms of political and cultural orientation, and by extension assist in advocating for social and attitudinal change. The selected films, under analysis, also symbolize a clarion call to film producers and directors to look within the traditional African society to expose ingrained cultural and traditional practices that are not in tandem with the dynamic contemporary society in order to also engage in what will help transform the African society in the realm of traditional politics. It is pertinent to recommend the utilization of other creative avenues (like stage production and radio drama) to reflect on the traditional African culture with emphasis on the desired political attitudinal change for a better society

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