Generic Ideologies of Popular Culture in Nollywood

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Abstract
Generic conventions are traceable to the inception of arts and literature. In film discourse, genre films can be argued to play a vital role in propagating the cultural ideologies of the films. This article critically explores the various ways in which genre films express the ideologies of popular culture, and how the study of films can be approached through generic conventions. It is found that the combination of artistic peculiarities with generic conventions through stylistic and popular narrative manifestations convey dominant ideologies. As a result, this essay reviews the ideology of Nigerian popular cinema culture and the role of genre films in the growing political economy of Nollywood.

Key words: Popular culture, ideology, genre, African cinema, Nollywood.
Ideology of Popular Culture

A possible reason why there is availability of so much film analysis today, according to Guback (1978), “is the relatively easy access to film texts. In other words, scholars depend on the material that is available for study, whether it be film texts or industry-supplied information” (as cited in Wasko, 2004, p. 229). This is easily corroborated by looking at the accessibility of people to cable and online sites that deal with showing these films. These programmes mainly focus on the industry’s economics by constantly bringing to the fore, the practical processes of production, distribution and exhibition. However, even this upsurge of TV programmes is not enough to provide the needed accurate facts of the industry’s changing economics for one to draw critical analysis from. What most celebrated critical film reviews on Nigerian cinema do, are collections of few primary and secondary facts and figures that do not explore the ideologies of the popular industry.

A study of the history, social change, social totality, moral grounding and praxis of Nollywood amounts to the review of the political-economic nature of the film industry. According to Wasko (2004), “the political economy of film must understand motion pictures as commodities produced and distributed within a capitalist industrial structure” (p. 227). These commodities are the tangible products and intangible services accruable to the industry, leading to such questions as; how did the industry come to dominate as a leading source of African popular culture; what uses do they serve and for who; what ideologies sustain its continued existence; and what future assumptions are possible? These are questions open for students of Nigeria popular culture to explore in conscientious academic discoveries after this study. However, a few words on the ideological nature of the popular cinema within Nigeria down to what constitutes the generic characteristics of Nollywood film industry will suffice.

Film in Nigeria started off imbibing key elements of the indigenous cultural forms amidst being political in nature. According to Okome...
(2014), “there is the desire even need, to see the African film from this perspective – as a political tool for self-determination and self-definition.” His main point for this argument is that Nigerian cinema “grew out of the struggle of Africa’s independence and indeed coincided with the rise of nationalism in the African continent” (p. 412). In retrospect, film came to Nigeria through the then colonial lords as a tool for political administration. The Colonial Government in 1931 exhibited early silent films to the remote parts of Nigeria as a way of further colonizing the people. “Thus, the medium of film was so well utilized not only by the colonial government but also by the missionaries who found favour in using it” (Shaka, Uwah & Uchendu, 2014, p. 203). The political nature of this usage was even more heightened as the colonial administration continued to use film as a propagandist maneuver in three ways:

(i) The need to convince the colonies that Germany was the common enemy; (ii) the need to encourage the colonies to embark on communal developments; and (iii) the need to tell the world at large that the colonial administration was doing a fantastic job in the Dark Continent (Ekwuazi, as cited in Shaka, Uwah & Uchendu, 2014, p. 205).

This ideological practice of film utilization for propaganda overlapped with the eventual commercial productions which followed. The films which became commercial were later censored to suit the colonial ideologies of the Westerners, and were used to educate the masses – like in the Arnoldian perspective and Neo-Gramscian hegemony – on what depicted the ‘best’ and ‘generally’ accepted ways of behavior. Thus, the people were colonized both physically and psychologically leading to the sponsorship and empowerment of the first trained Nigerian filmmakers in 1949. Upon their return from training in modern day Ghana, the sponsored filmmakers could not make independent films for the masses as they were monitored and prohibited from producing certain
kinds of films that defied the codified standards of practice conceived by the colonizers. To regain a lost freedom of expression, after Nigeria gained independence on October 1, 1960, the post-independence filmmakers who were mainly those who crossed over from pre-independence sought to counter the erroneous stereotypical impressions of the foreign directors “as well as their misguided ideological position regarding ‘the African’ who they often considered uncivilized” (Shaka, Uwah & Uchendu, 2014, p. 206).

The critical perspective which underpins this argument is that film practice in Nigeria has always tapped its roots in the hegemonies of technological fascinations. Take for instance the first two films that were ever shown at the Captain Glover Memorial Hall in Lagos, Nigeria in August 12, 1903, and August 3, 1904 – i.e. Coronation of King Edward VII at Westminster and the newsreel with the glimpse of “the Alake of Abeokuta” respectively. These exhibitions show how Western ideologies concealed in technological fascinations continue to entice the African sense organs. The film products which were both recorded in Britain came to attract Africans to the beguiling philosophies of Western civilization. The films in their parade of both ‘white’ and ‘black’ characters in Britain were a leitmotif that the white man’s land is the preeminent habitation of ‘ideal humans’. Coupled with the conjuring powers of the then nascent cinematographic apparatuses, Africans responded with great cheer and excitement especially when the title “the Alake of Abeokuta” was projected on the screen. That was an ideal instance of hegemony concealed in popular culture. Corroborating this view especially by tracing its permanence to modernity, Shaka (2002) argues that,

The video film industry represents one of the many sites where the subjectivities and identities of modern Nigerians are constantly being creatively negotiated between the demands of traditional African institutional practices and those of modernity. This result is a hybridized subjectivity
Identity formation and social transformation are hallmarks of popular culture especially with those who agree with the tenets of the culture and civilization tradition. This approach condenses film as a part of the larger communication media and society as a whole, and as an educative agent of civilization. According to Hall and Whannel, “Popular art is mass culture that has risen above its origins. Unlike average films or pop music [which] are processed mass art, popular art is, for example, the best cinema, the most advanced jazz” (as cited in Storey, 2009, p. 54). Going by this argument, new Nollywood films can be placed under the rubric of popular arts especially in their aesthetic advancement of the traditional film form. According to Haynes and Okome (1998), “Nigerian film and now video production has been absorbed into the realm of popular culture .... Nowhere else in Africa has a domestic market been captured so successfully” (p. 106). The films’ symbolic sights and sounds continue to construct and shape the identity of viewers who identify with them, and according to Shaka (2002), “will continue to attract youths or poor urban dwellers whose source of entertainment derive from ... [them], and in this sense, popular culture will continue to remain the most vibrant culture of any society” (p. 28). Hall and Whannel are of similar view thus:

Popular art ... is essentially a conventional art which re-states, in an intense form, values and attitudes already known; which measures and reaffirms, but brings to this something of the surprise of art as well as the shock of recognition. Such art has in common with folk art the genuine contact between audience and performer: but it differs from folk art in that it is an individualised art, the art of the known performer. The audience as community has come to depend on the performer’s skills, and on the force of a personal style, to articulate its common values and
interpret its experiences (as cited in Storey, 2009, pp. 53-54).

Generic Conventions in Nollywood

An area of Nigerian cinema popular culture that needs more academic attention is the use of genre in the exploration of the ideological assertions of Nollywood industry practice. Recalling Robin Wood, “we are so used to the genres that the peculiarity of the phenomenon itself has been too little noted .... The development of the genres is rooted in ... ideological contradictions” (1992, p. 477). Genre has accompanied the long history of Nigeria cinema especially in the industrial mass production of cultural commodities. The global popularity and acceptability of Nigeria films is traceable to the evolution and development of the different film genres all through the indigenous productions of films across Nigeria and their global consumption. Indeed, that the audience easily becomes habituated to the narratives of Nollywood is largely based on the commercial success of some genres over the others. In popular culture, genres are argued to help cater for the audience’s changing expectations and tastes as well as radicalize the industrial practice of production and consumption. Genres are culturally specific items which simplify and form part of film production and reception. In his study of Hollywood genres as the coin of the culture industries, Kellner (2004) argues that as a result of “the economic imperatives of the capitalist system to produce products as quickly and cheaply as possible to maximize production and profits, the Hollywood cinema became a genre cinema” (p. 210).

Genre approach to popular culture provides a methodological frame of studying and analyzing films. According to David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson (2010), “one of the most common ways in which we approach films is by type, or genre” (p. 346; italics not in original). The study of genres is crucial to popular culture especially in the generic principles and relations of different texts. “From the French for ‘kind’ or ‘sort,’ and etymologically derived from the Latin genus, the word ‘genre’
has connotations of biological kind” (Belas, 2011, p. 625). It began to be used in relation to the arts in Aristotle’s *Poetics* where he emphasized the principle that such literary genres as tragedy, epic poetry and comedy are distinct, pure and unmixed styles of artistic expressions to be emulated and refined. Genres make it stress-free for consumers to make choice selections of artistic products. Echoing this point, Jonathan Haynes argues that “genre is the most important structure guiding a potential buyer through the stack of the week’s new releases, even more important than the faces of the actors on the film’s jacket or the names of the director and marketing company” (2011, p. 74). The way librarians have need for classification of literary materials on bookshelves according to different areas of human interests and endeavours, and the method modern markets (be it open markets or malls) adopt in segmenting various goods and services for easy access, is the same way genres exist in film practice to allow viewers easily make selections of choice films, and also indicate for what category of audience particular kinds of films are made.

Following the mass production of films mainly as a result of industrialization in the 1890s, genres became closely associated with popular culture as a system of connecting authentic artistic filmic expressions. However, it was only after World War II that film critics and industry players began to take genres seriously by meshing ideas of auteurism with genre studies. “Under the influence of the *Cahiers du cinema*, mainstream film critics began to take genre films more seriously, but their praise of individual genre films still implied that such works transcended generic mediocrity thanks to their directors’ personal vision” (Berry-Flint, 2004, p. 26). Generic conventions of film allow for the industrial circulation and accessibility of film texts across national boundaries.

“Genre films” is a phrase used to describe films that follow the same pattern and are repeated over and again with only slight modifications. Plot, character, setting, diction, music, images and conventions are practically changeable from one film to another in the
same genre. This, according to Steve Neale (2000), allows for a revaluation of genres “as ubiquitous, multifaceted phenomena rather than as one-dimensional entities to be found only within the realms of Hollywood cinema or of commercial popular culture” (p. 28). In other words, discussions of genres always raise, implicitly or explicitly questions of relations of parts and wholes or smaller groups and larger systems.

“Genres are ways of classifying films that are largely shared across society, by filmmakers, critics, and viewers” (Bordwell & Thompson, 2010, p. 346). Genres can be used to define broad, overarching forms of artistic expressions, or can be used to categorize “subdivisions within certain artistic forms or media – one speaks of ‘genre film’ or ‘genre fiction’ when speaking, for example, of film noir, westerns, science fiction, detective fiction” (Belas, 2011, p. 626). Genres emerged in popular culture as a result of their importance in the classification of films for consumption and pleasure. “Genre . . . has been used in different ways, in different fields, and . . . many of its uses have been governed by the history of the term within these fields – and by the cultural factors at play within them” (Neale, 2000, p. 28). This goes to show that genres can be classified differently by different viewers and critics. A viewer can for instance classify a film in a genre distinct from another classification by a different viewer, or a critic might even go as far as placing a film in two or more genres. This underpins the argument that “genres overlap, and there are ‘mixed genres’ [such as romantic-comedies] . . . . Particular features which are characteristic of a genre are not normally unique to it; it is their relative prominence, combination and functions which are distinctive” (Chandler, as cited in Ayakoroma, 2014, p. 82).

A Genre film is a “system of codes, conventions and visual styles which enables audiences determine rapidly and with some complexity, the kind of narrative they are viewing” (Turner, 2006, p. 119). Genre films become increasingly popular because they are not predominantly static; they are dynamic by the way they could be redefined, interchanged and modulated. According to Gill Branston and Roy Stafford, “genres are no
longer seen as sets of fixed elements, constantly repeated, but as working with repertoires of elements or fluid systems of conventions and expectations” (as cited in Uwah, 2013, p. 101). The rise of genres is traceable to the experimentation of filmmakers with the best and less expensive methods of film production. In Nollywood for instance, filmmakers started off the industry albeit saving costs and maximizing returns on investments. Kenneth Nnebue, the electronic appliances dealer shot Living in Bondage (1992) as a result of the easy process it posed in contrast to the expensive celluloid production. Thus, he tried out a narrative style that would draw a mass appeal along with substantial gains. In a short period after its release, Living in Bondage paid off more than projected, championing successful repetitions of content almost immediately across the country. Consequently, the reaction of the mass audience flocking to ritual movies, epic movies, crime and punishment movies, Christian movies, comedies, etc. let the filmmakers know what the mass audience wanted, and the filmmakers responded with monotonous cycles, remakes and sequels in a fashion that majority of the enlightened audiences soon vilified.

Once a genre film becomes overwhelmingly popular and successful in Nigeria, filmmakers cash in on it and reproduce successful repetitions with variations and refinements that do not necessarily extinguish the main essence of the genre, but keep the audience in what Adorno describes as pseudo-individualization (as earlier explained in the present study). According to Bordwell and Thompson (2010), “genres do not remain constantly successful. Rather, they rise and fall in popularity. The result is the phenomenon known as cycles. A cycle is a batch of genre films that enjoy intense popularity and influence over a distinct period” (p. 335). These cycles continue until the mass of viewers become bored and desire a change. When this happens, filmmakers then turn to experiment with new genres that embody topical issues of national discourse. Jauss shares similar views when he suggests that “successful genres gradually lose their effective power through continual
replication; they are forced to the periphery by new genres . . . . How a genre’s effective power is determined and how generic innovation is derived from reader responses remains unspecified” (as cited in Berry-Flint, 2004, p. 29).

Genres fuel the dominant ideologies of cinema through their stylistic and narrative manifestations of the popular imagination which seeks to engage the viewers in pleasurable kinds of cognitive hypotheses and variations (Berry-Flint, 2004, p. 27). Genre films gain much of their success partly as a result of their ability to reinforce basic societal beliefs, values, and myths. The Nigerian film Production Code entails that all films teach morals and religious institutions should never be denigrated. This morality approach to filmmaking is what reproduces the dominant ideologies of cinema by portraying an ideal society to the viewer, a society where the good is always rewarded and evil always punished. This is the crux of the ideology of all genre films. Noel King (1992) posits that;

To make a film is to submit oneself to the rules and meanings generated by classic . . . cinema and by the television documentary for it is these dominant cultural modes which have set standards of visual literacy and readability for us (as cited in Ayakoroma, 2014, p. 87).

Central to discussions of the significance of film genres is the tripartite circulation of interdependent relationship between the audience, industry, and text (Berry-Flint, 2004, p. 27). An audience perspective to genre studies focuses more on the decoding processes of films. It defines genre as a ‘reading practice’ which every viewer carries along to film viewing experiences. By this, the audience views the film not as textual constraints, but as social conventions which allows for easy modification of meanings rather than as generic frameworks absorbed from the screen. Similarly, an industry approach to the analysis of genre defines it from the economic perspective of marketing the film. Such strategies as star system and advertising are utilized to aid a total definition of genre. Finally, the
textual method of defining genre focuses on the narrative and stylistic as formal systems encoded with genre-specific meanings. Arguing in this line, Ekwuazi (1987) posits that “part of the total meaning of any film derives significantly from the viewing circumstance, from the communicative interaction among the audience, a triadic relationship involving each member of the audience with the others, and, of course, with the screen” (p. 21).

The strengths of genre films lie in the argument that they simplify film consumption as well as film production, and they provide an approach to film studies and analysis. Genre films do not only propel film watching as an art, but make the overall process highly pleasurable. They give the viewers what to expect in films, what to look out for, and what to adjudge as conventionally acceptable and well-made. According to Boggs and Petrie (2008), “in a western, because of the conventions of appearance, dress, manners, and typecasting, we recognize the hero, sidekick, villain, and female lead, etc., on sight and assume they will not violate our expectations of their conventional roles” (p. 473). Filmmakers who work under established genre conventions tend to be more advantaged than their contemporaries who strive to break new grounds. As a result of the conventions of plot, character, setting, costume, dialogue, soundtrack, etc. already established a priori, a filmmaker working in an epic genre for instance, has these as cinematic key-points, and a platform to start the filmmaking process.

When combined with a distinctive personal style, filmmakers can create genre films that deviate from predictable patterns. This according to Robin Wood, “can perhaps be argued that works are of especial interest when the defined peculiarities of an auteur interact with specific ideological tensions and when the film is fed from more than one generic source” (1992, p. 479). Established epic genre conventions include the use of the traditional groitor storyteller, and ‘the hero’s journey’ which according to Vogler; begins and ends in the ordinary world, involves a call to adventure, crossing of hurdles, a supreme ordeal with an eventual
reward, and a rebirth or resurrection (as cited in, Ayakoroma, 2014, pp. 120-121). In analyzing movies, film critics and scholars adopt a wide range of criteria including peculiar aesthetic styles, auteur peculiarities, race and ethnicity, apparent ideologies, film movement, etc. Notwithstanding, “one of the most enduring criteria that has determined how movies are studied and analyzed is genre” (Gocsik, Barsam & Monahan, 2013, p. 63).

There are ample evidences in Ayakoroma (2014), Haynes (2011), Shaka (2011) and Uwah (2013) to suggest the presence of genre films in Nollywood, and the role these genres play in the ideological assertions of popular culture. According to Jonathan Haynes, Nollywood films are essentially generic; they cannot afford not to be, both in the sense that a film that does not clearly signal its nature will get lost in the market and that individualizing a film takes both time and money, complicating a system that works fast because everybody already knows what to do (2011, p. 74).

Nollywood genre conventions and classifications are quite different from classical methods, however, the storylines follow the five (5) rudimentary conventions of genres which are “setting, characters, conflict, resolution, and values reaffirmed” (Boggs & Petrie, 2008, p. 473). Although each genre has its peculiar traits, these rudimentary conventions make it much easier to delineate genre films in general. As a result of changes in the social system and personal codes of filmmakers, new elements that break away from the traditional formula are constantly introduced into the industry.

Femi Shaka’s (2011) “Nollywood: Reconstructing the Historical and Socio-cultural Contexts of the Nigerian Video Film Industry” is a compendium of Nigerian video film formative exemplars. He details all aspects of Nollywood’s growth in time and space including her efforts, achievements and appraisals by audience at home and the diaspora. In
this article, he x-rays the motifs for production of video films with
different genres even when themes, moral lessons and decorum are
constantly slaughtered on the slab of profitability, thus sending a wrong
signal to the global critical audiences. These genres that have sprung out
for over two and half decades of Nollywood’s existence are ritual film
which came after political chicanery, crime and punishment, and the much
more palatable image making epic. All these as well as the Christian video,
comic film, romance film, and the new cinema culture have helped to
catapult Nollywood to international popularity. According to Kellner
(2004),

Genres become established when visual, stylistic,
and thematic concerns become formalized into an
immediately recognizable system of conventions.
Genre films were thus the appropriate form of
production for a culture industry geared toward
commercial success. For the most popular genres
become familiar artifacts that create certain
expectations which, if fulfilled, bring audiences back
again and again for their particular satisfactions.
Thus, genre films combine narrative formula,
audience expectation, and the industrial practice of a
culture industry aiming at commercial success (p.
210).

This explains why shortly after the production and distribution of
Kenneth Nnebue’s Living in Bondage (1992) and similar ritual murder films
of same season, Nollywood went commercial, both in followership and in
the political economy, and the industry without any doubt has never had
a wealthier yesterday since then.

The conventions of the ritual or occult film are so familiar that they
need little or no explication. The ritual genre contains a desire by the lead
character – male or female – to get rich quick through sharp practices that
involve an initiation into the occult, with the promise of immense wealth
in exchange for his/her soul, the life of a loved one, or both. When these stories surfaced especially within urban dwellers, the tensions became almost palpable across the country as many viewers began to relate these stories to most wealthy individuals around their hinterlands and villages. This was the case of films like *Living in Bondage* (1992), *Rituals* (1999), *Abuja Boys* (2004), *Billionaire’s Club* (2004), *Dons in Abuja* (2004), etc. In most cases, the ritual genre features lead characters in conventional actions. An example of such actions is the characters’ drive for quick wealth irrespective of whatever it takes to attain this fortune. This leads them into a continuous sacrifice of their most cherished relatives which often times turn out to be an impossible task for the lead characters to fulfill. What necessarily follows is a reversal of fortune leading to a fall, and a sort of plot resolution that involves religious *deus ex machina*. This point explains why most ritual or occult genre films are often times placed under the sub-genre of Christian films. Laramee argues that *Living in Bondage* (1992) for instance, “is a film lying at the intersection of a few different genres of Nigerian film, including the occult genre, and the Christian conversion story which serves as the basis of the Pentecostal fervor in the second part of the film” (2013, p. 44).

Something quite remarkable about most of the Nollywood films of the first decade between 1992 and 2002 is that all age grades of the society were negatively depicted in various acts of immorality in the different genre films. The men were portrayed to be at the forefront of the quest for insatiable wealth in ritual/occult films, while the women were shown engaging in adulterous acts for the sake of superfluous money for showoffs at women’s annual meetings (like in *August Meeting*). Also, the girls were at the vanguard of prostitution in the films that trailed same time the ritual genre like *Glamour Girls 1 & 2* (1994), just as the boys were developing a new economy in advance fee frauds alias *yahoo-yahoo* which accompanied the arrival of cyber systems to Nigeria (like in *Yahoo Millionaire* - 2007).
Conclusion
Ayakoroma (2014) identifies thirteen (13) generic conventions in Nollywood, these are ritual genre, epic or historical genre, prostitution and ghetto life genre, traditional belief genre, love and romance genre, crime and vigilante genre, thrillers, Christian films, gender films, comedy genre, adventure films, political film genre, and horror films (pp. 89-96 ). However, this categorization of genre in Nollywood still does not document all forms of popular expression repeated in generic cycles in the industry. “Particularly in Nollywood one sees this point playing a significant role as in the case of so many subgenres that cannot outrightly be classified as distinctively standing on their own” (Uwah, 2013, p. 101). This is hinged on the argument that Nollywood thrives on topical issues. While these issues are still on the lips and eyes of the populace, Nollywood is already mass producing their fluid representations which highlight not only the stories, but the central conflicts, problems and audience perspective to these issues.

References


