Abstract

In this paper I show how Nigerian Urban Video Films portray the contemporary city as a place dominated by rampant materialism and the desire for economic success of the so-called “big men and women” (new urban rich with a penchant for conspicuous consumption). Big men and women are subject to the egotistical desire to succeed and to the power of money (unya ukwu). This burning ambition and the corresponding actions they put into practice to become richer and richer (magic and juju) is what is called “big-manism”. I aim to show that the videos, far from being mere pieces of entertainment, act as a catalyst for social change.

The recent phenomenon of Nigerian (Nollywood) videos emerged spontaneously in the early nineties without foreign or government support. Due to socio-economical factors such as the drop in the price of the Naira and the decline of cinema-going as a result of rising urban crime, film made in celluloid proved to be unsustainable. Entertainment therefore shifted from theatres to households, and Nollywood began when some merchants decided to make films cheaply and quickly using home video-cameras and catering exclusively to Nigerian audiences. In this paper I review the representation of the urban space in Nigerian video films and its link to big men scenarios. This review led me to conclude that these new videos contain valuable social criticisms that can act as a catalyst for social change in a deeply troubled society.

Unlike francophone African cinema, where cities and their monuments are reminiscent symbols of colonial rule and post-colonial disparity, in Nigerian video films, urban settings do not point to the confrontation between Europe and Africa, but rather signify the evils of modernity. As scholars such as Lawuyi (1997) and McCall (2002; 2005) have pointed out, modernity has brought about a search for personal achievement and materialism in post-colonial societies, which can be seen in the houses and offices of the big men that dominate the setting of Nollywood urban films. These big men have accumulated considerable wealth and are often believed to rely on corruption to maintain their power. In this paper I will show how Nollywood filmmakers portray the evils of city life, specifically materialism and crime and these “evils” are linked to “bigmanism”.

1. Nigerian videos and contemporary socio-cultural dynamics

I agree with O.Okome (2001) and McCall (2002, 2005), amongst others, that Nigerian movies are an urban phenomenon and they can offer a great deal of information about how the Nigerian urban population see themselves. In fact, popular culture has proved to show the preoccupations of the society that consumes it, and in which it emerges.

1 One of the most remarkable examples is Borom Sarret (Sembene, 1976). At the end of this short film, after the poor cart-driver has confronted the police, the force that sustains the unequal status quo brought about by modernity in the rich areas of Dakar, he is made to cross the monument of Independence. As he does so, his voiceover questions the improvements brought about by an Independence in which the white rulers have been replaced by a black post-colonial ruling class.

2 Tanzanian urban theatre, for example, reflects the changes of the African identity as a consequence of modernity and so does Onitsha pamphlet literature. They both show the preoccupations of the urban
What does this new African cultural phenomenon then have to offer about Nigerian society and audiences? According to Frank Ukadike in Anglophone Africa “celluloid cinema has never been used to address the contemporary historical and sociocultural dynamics of the people as do the new video works” (2003: 128). Ukadike goes on to mention that unlike celluloid films, Nigerian video films deal with characters who know the people’s culture and speak their language (Ukadike, 2003: 129) providing, consequently, an interesting object of discussion for Nigerians. This is because Nigerian movies feed themselves with the social imaginarius, and producers and screen-play writers get inspiration from stories and newspaper reports of the events that take place in society, as well as about the preoccupations of the average Nigerian. The videos thus question the effects of the impact of modernity on people’s lives and interrogate contemporary urban society and its many values, power and corruption being some of them.

2. Images of “Big-manism”

Francophone filmmakers have often depicted the post-colonial city as split into two very distinctive poor and rich zones. Similarly, the drastic class differences in a city like Lagos are portrayed in video-films, where signifiers like cars, clothes and houses distinguish big men and women from the average Nigerian. As Okome (2000) has explained, the contrast between rich and marginal areas of the city can be seen in a video entitled Onome after the poor female protagonist. When the rich man, Dafe Fregene, enters a decrepit neighbourhood, his facial expression shows his disgust as the camera pans into the muddy floor and derelict houses.

The film opens with a clear demarcation between the rich, elaborately furnished home of Dafe Fregene in a highbrow neighbourhood in Lagos, with its chandeliers and gorgeous window drapes, and the poverty of Ajegunle, the Lagos slum where Onome and her family live (Okome, 2000: 151).

Although one of Nollywood filmmakers’ favourite locations are the scenarios of “big-manism”, they, however, show ambivalence between attraction to these luxurious settings and criticism of the sources of big men’s money: Nigerian video-makers aim to dig beneath the opulent surface in order to question the means of achieving wealth. Instead of simply being intoxicated by the glamour of wealth, they critique key aspects of its dynamics. To Lawuyi in many “big-manism” is characterised by moral decay and political instability and their wealth is shown by means of “accumulation metaphors”, i.e. big stomachs, elegant women, expensive cars (frequently Mercedes or Pathfinders) and big houses (1997:478-484). Moreover, these big men and women socialise with the members of their own class in parties where alcohol is abundant and casual sex very common.

Even more damaging to the search for progress is the focus on the success of the young boy to become rich and find a suitable wife in an urban environment, as well as the ambivalence between the village and the city.

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3 McCall has noticed how Nigerians quote videos in their discussions about societal issues (2002:85), and I have similarly noticed how they provide food for thought in chats on the Internet.

4 This is especially the case of movies about “vigilantes” and the motif of human body market.
body: vibrant and energetic (rotating, gyrating, rolling); very active, but hardly focused, in the consumption centres, namely hotels, dining rooms, streets and dance floors. The spectacle is one of ecstasy, and from it has emerged a focus on potentiality as hope or as despair; as symbol of joy or of frustration. For success produces ecstasy; failure is a lack of ecstasy (Lawuyi, 1997:480)

This “success of the body” as Lawuyi terms it, is represented by a grandiose mise en scène provided by luxurious hotels and houses. This can be noted in the opening scene of The Last Party in which the camera moves constantly to capture the rotating bodies of fashionable ladies in Western attire and men in the finest agbadas5, as they drink, dance, or chat each other up.

Nigerian contemporary society, in this view, is one that aims to achieve power and success, a phenomenon traditionally viewed as an illness and recognised in the dibia or practice of the Igbo native-doctor. The desire to achieve money and success (unya ukwu) may result in ogwumaka (money-squandering) or madness (ara), and also people affected by this “disease” may try to get a “money-medicine” or ogwu ego, which will make them richer. Hence the prominence of secret societies and satanic cults in Nigeria, whose members get involved in black magic or juju, sometimes using human bodies for their money-making rituals (McCall 2002: 83-84). The effects produced by unya ukwu (success) in individuals and the community where they belong, is indeed, a favourite topic in most Nigerian video films.

3. Materialism and “blood money”. The Juju video film

Blood Money portrays big-manism and explores the rise and fall of a man who becomes extremely wealthy after joining a secret society known as the Vultures Society, which deals with dead bodies. In his analysis of this Igbo video John McCall has realised that the vulture is not a symbolic animal in Igbo culture, but is, however, a current element in the Lagos landscape. The vulture, often placed on top of waste mountains, is a metaphor for the rampant consumerism and materialism (McCall, 2002:86-87) associated with “big-manism”. Nigerian people often wonder how some people can achieve such immense wealth, as in The Beatification of Area Boy, a Lagosian Kaleidoscope (Soyinka, 1995).

BARBER: You know, Mr Sanda, to you it may seem a joke but these things really happen you know (...) those who make money with black magic. I mean, there are people who do it. It is bad money. It doesn’t always last, and the things people have to do to get such money, it’s terrible business. Sometimes they have to sacrifice their near relations, even children. It’s a pact with the devil but they do it.

5 Men attire for festive occasions, a wide armed piece of clothing long enough to reach the floor.
SANDA: It’s a pact with the devil, alright, but it doesn’t produce any money. They just slaughter those poor victims for nothing.
BARBER: Those overnight millionaires then, how do you think they do it?
SANDA: Cocaine. 419 swindle. Godfathering or mothering armed robbers. Or after a career with the police. Or the army, if you are lucky to grab a political post. Then you retire at forty - as a General who has never fought a war. Or you start your own church or mosque. That’s getting more and more popular. (Soyinka, 1995: 13-14)

In Soyinka’s play Barber associates big men’s wealth with magic, whilst Sanda prefers a more realistic explanation. Similarly in a video called *Circle of Doom* wealth is acquired through the drug-trade, and in *Dirty Deal* big men steal other people’s land. Yet, magic or juju (as Barber points out) is frequently given as the explanation for wealth accumulation. According to John McCall the videos that deal with juju and power dramatise the conditions of postcoloniality through the use of the satanic:

Public representations frequently return to an idiom of transnational satanic cults and malignant money fetishism to explain the sources of endemic consumption and the kleptocratic hierarchy of criminality that plague many African nations (McCall, 2002:81)

*Blood Money, Living in Bondage, Heartless* and *Church Business* all explore the conflicts of the individual who gets into secret cults to become rich and powerful. They are victims of *unya ukwu* (success) and make use of the satanic, their “money-medicine” to achieve wealth and power. Andy in *Living in Bondage* does so by killing his beloved wife in a satanic ritual. The protagonist of *Blood Money*, Mike, kills seven people and then, one by one, all the members of his family. Similarly Pastor Peter in *Church Business* is made to “donate” seven human heads to renew his “contract” with Princess, the River Goddess, a contract that has made him immensely rich. The satanic sources will in turn make their followers rich and powerful or, as in the case of Jimmy in *Church Business*, provide him with a special charm to make miracles so that his Church may be able to prosper out of what people donate. These videos seem to suggest that everything can be turned into business, even church-going.

As pointed out all the characters experience the maladies associated with materialism and individualism recognised by the dibia. Consequently these characters go insane at the mere thought of losing their money and power. Thus, Rose, the protagonist of *Heartless*, sees how her ex-husband, whom she had put into prison to get hold of his wealth, takes over the business. Maddened by rage, she then flees away. Yet, more interesting are the endings of *Living in Bondage* and *Blood Money*, whose main characters become mentally ill after they are pursued by the ghosts of their victims.

I agree with Hyginus Ozo Ekwazi (2000) that these video films aim to pursue the rehabilitation of a society that is deteriorating rapidly as a consequence of egotism and materialism. In view of Ekwazi they exemplify the clash between the
“particularistic achievement pattern”, one characterised by communality, and “the universalist achievement pattern”, typical of contemporary Nigerian society.

The universalist achievement pattern emphasises those values and behaviours required in an industrial and commercial economy - thus it is the exact opposite of the particularistic achievement pattern. Where the one makes for an open class system with free occupational mobility, the other makes for a closed system where occupation is defined by lineage. Where the one emphasises the individual, the other emphasises the community (Ekwazi, 2000:134-5)

As one may notice in the case of Rose (Heartless), Jimmy (Church Business) or Andy (Living in Bondage), big men and women do in fact embody the clash between these two patterns and tragedy strikes when they forget about traditional values such as the love for one’s family, the importance of sharing, and the respect for human dignity.

4. Conclusion

Nigerian urban video films explore the conditions of post-coloniality through the representation of big-manism as associated with the satanic. The urban space is no longer divided by the colonial rulers and the black colonised, but is split into very distinctive areas (big men and average Nigerian), the dividing line being money not colour. Nigerian video films reinforce people’s view that these big men and women achieve their wealth through endemic means and in relating their wealth with the satanic, videos criticise the evils of modernity: materialism and the loss of traditional communal values. Contrary to what many people may think, Nollywood is not just an entertainment industry, but it seeks to make people think about the current issues of society, criticising the emphasis on materialism brought about by modernity. Thus, by portraying endemic consumerism as reflected in big men’s bodies, and in exploring the ways they achieve money as harmful to society, these video films can be considered as catalysts for social change.

Referentes


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6 This is very much reflected in the character Rose in Heartless, who becomes insensitive at the death of her boyfriend’s mother, forgets about tradition and treats poorer people with disdain


