CULTURE, LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY: TOWARDS A SYNERGY IN IGBO VIDEO-FILM

Chukwuma Anyanwu, Ph.D.
Department of Mass Communication, Faculty of Social Science,
Delta State University Abraka
bonnyanyanwu@yahoo.com

Bifatife Olufemi Adeseye
Department of Theatre and Media Arts, Faculty of Arts
University of Oyo Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria
bifatife.adeseye@fuoye.edu.ng

Abstract

Nollywood, the adopted name of the Nigerian Film Industry, can be argued, would not have been but for Igbo movie makers and business men and women. This is not a mean contribution to the economic, social and political life of the nation. But how much and to what extent has the industry been utilized by the film makers to uphold the integrity, culture, language and overall image of the Igbo nation? This paper tries to examine how the Igbo movie has been used or not used to rebrand the Igbo ways of life. How it has fared in the hands of the people, the makers and viewers and how it has treated the issues dear to the people, such as culture, language and identity. How far has the Igbo video film been faithful to, projected, or tried to preserve these ways of life of the Igbo people? The movie has become one of the major items on the people’s daily conversation menu and as such, cannot be ignored except by the most backward of people. This is why this paper sets out to examine ways via which the medium can be utilized to appeal more to the people, make their culture more relevant and create avenues for its projection and preservation.

Keywords: Culture, Language, Identity, Igbo, Video-film, Synergy

Introduction

Many people believe that no nation can rise above its media. The media in question however, are the conventional or traditional media of print, radio and television. The cinema, film or movie, on the other hand, seems to be a medium among media. It not only supports the others, but it can do all their works with ease. The film can be used to project culture, reveal identity and preserve language. Opubor, Nwuneli and Oreh (1979) have noted that:

Of all the media of mass communication, the motion picture has perhaps the most universal appeal and impact. Properly
conceived and executed, a film can rise above the limitations of language and cultural barriers by the powers of its visual images, its use of music and sound effects, and can succeed in conveying much the same message to audiences of heterogeneous backgrounds (p.1).

The film as a medium of mass communication has the power not only to synergize and syncretize the functions of all the other media, but it is an event in itself and can both build and destroy simultaneously. The motion picture as a medium can be used to do just about anything: from creating and executing wars to brokering peace and sustaining it. It can be used for all manners of education; it can be used to illustrate and demonstrate what is and what ought to be. It has the ability to exhume the past and bring it to the present. It can also project into the future and make the viewer long for it. Given the above instances of what the movie is capable of, it becomes rather surprising that any people would fail to capitalize on the offerings on the menu of the motion picture to better their lot. Having given a brief introduction of the video film and what it can do, it becomes pertinent at this point to examine one by one, the concepts which constitute the topic of this discourse at the end of which we will now discuss how the Igbo video film can be better employed for greater benefit to Igbo people and humanity at large.

Culture

Culture, which Hall (1973) sees as “the silent language” finds a more elaborate definition in Ekwuazi (1992) when he cites the East African writer from Kenya, Ngugu Wa Thiong’o, who says that:

Culture in its broadest sense, is a way of life fashioned by a people in their collective endeavour to live and come to terms with their art, their science and all their social institutions including their systems of beliefs and rituals. In the course of this creative struggle and progress through history there evolves a body of material and spiritual history and ethos. Such values are often expressed through a people’s songs, dances, folklore, drawings, sculptures, rites and ceremonies. Over the years, these varieties of artistic activity have come to symbolize the meaning of the word culture. Any discussion of culture invariably centres around these activities, but we must bear in mind that they are derived from a people’s way of life and will change as that way of life is altered, modified or developed through the ages (p.80).

Following from the foregoing, culture is the way a people live, how they handle their daily affairs, burials, celebrate their births, organize their festivals and
ceremonies, how they speak, eat, dress, and generally follow the course of their lives as a people.

Adefuye (1992, p.1) says that “culture is a complex phenomenon. It is subject to several definitions and capable of being viewed from many angles.” He then said that in simple terms, “it is the sum total of a people’s way of life.”

Now, since culture is so much and more, it stands to reason that whoever wants to discuss it must do so from a given perspective. For this reason, this paper will examine culture from the Igbo world view and with emphasis on how certain aspects of it, precisely language and costume or mode of dressing have been handled in the Igbo video films and how this has on its part affected the identity of the Igbo man.

The understanding of culture is a life-time project. This is so because as man lives and grows from one stage of life to another, he evolves, generates and regenerates culture. Thus, culture is dynamic and centrally also, it is community based; people oriented. One cannot, therefore, be an expert of a culture even his own from a distance. In an interview re-issued by Vanguard newspaper a few days after his death was announced, Chinua Achebe, the iconic symbol of Igbo literature and culture said:

I’d like to pursue my own understanding and study of Igbo culture, which excites me more and more every day. You can’t do that from America—you need to get back to the soil (Vanguard, 24 March 2013, p.12).

He goes further to say, “this (Igbo Culture) is one of the major cultures in Africa and it’s received SCANT (emphasis mine) attention. And somebody ought to get down to work on it.” We will examine the exact nature of this scant attention under the sub-heading: Igbo Video films and the Igbo culture.

In line with the foregoing, in his famous war time manifesto called The Ahiara Declaration, the Biafran war lord, Chukwuemeka Odimegwu Ojukwu (Ojukwu 1969, had said:

The Biafran revolution will also ensure, through education; that the positive aspects of Biafran traditional culture, especially those which are likely to be swamped out of existence by introduced foreign influences, are conserved. The indiscriminate absorption of new ideas and attitudes will be discouraged (p.44).

Indeed, as has been noted above, innovations are good provided their introduction is not at the detriment of extant positive traditional practices. But, in the present situation, what seems to obtain is the throwing away of the child with the bath water!
Language

Language has been seen as “an undeniable index of culture and identity”. (Uroh, 1994. p.30); “as a very important phenomenon in the life of an individual and the acquisition of the ability to use language is one of the most impressive pieces of learning that an individual achieves in the course of his life” (Ajisafe, 2009 p.1).

Anyanwu (2013.p.5) has noted that “Language is one of the most dynamic cultural, and, or traditional elements in the heritage of any society. Its survival and continued existence is inexorably linked with its users’ ability to employ it in their daily transaction.” Language is such an important element in a society that its demise marks the extinction of the society/community which uses it. The reason is that a people and their language are two sides of the same coin. Language in whatever form is the central means of communication and since no society can survive without communication, it then follows that no society can survive without language. Should the language, therefore, stop to exist, the community which uses it inevitably becomes extinct.

Identity

The Oxford Dictionary Thesaurus & Wordpower Guide (2001p.634) sees identity as “the fact of being who or what a person or thing is.” When somebody is confronted with the question, “who are you?” The answer reveals the person’s identity. So, identity consists of those traits or characteristics including mode of dressing, language, facial or tribal marks, unique or peculiar ways of doing things, manners and methods of organizing ceremonies and festivals, planting, reaping, congregating, even of dying by which a people are known and recognized.

Inevitably, culture, language and identity though distinct nevertheless merge and come together to constitute the fabrics of knowledge about a person or a people. They are so distinct in making a people stand out such that an Igbo man, a Yoruba, Hausa, Urhobo, Bini, etc, who is properly arrayed in his/her traditional attire stands out like a sore thumb in a crowd, such that without any likelihood of error, a kinsman picks out his own kinsman without a word having been exchanged. This makes culture a silent language as Edward Hall has said.

To identify a person means that such person can be situated within a given ethnic or national milieu. The implication is that such a person has a base, an origin. But when a people are unmindful of where they come from, they can be considered to be rootless and can therefore attach themselves to whichever people, proximity or circumstance foists itself upon them. Invariably, being the minority, they soon get swallowed up by the larger group. As Echeruo, (1979) has observed, “a crisis of origins inevitably leads to a crisis of institutions and ultimately to a crisis of identity,” (p.16).

The attitude of Igbo people to Igbo affairs reflects negatively on Igbo polity, politics, culture, language, economy, tradition, social institutions, family, unity, and
just about our entire existence. This is why it becomes imperative and the time is now, to employ Igbo video film to revive Igbo consciousness in Igbo affairs. The Igbo language has no place in the universe except where the Igbo from Nigeria put it. We have no other language which we can truly call our mother tongue but Igbo. This is because “we have a language which is so efficient in its structure that some say it was first spoken in Eden.” (Echeruo, 1979 p.6).

As Ojukwu (1969), says in the manifesto already quoted, “any attempt to deprive a community of its identity is abhorrent to the Biafran people. Having ourselves suffered genocide, we are all the more determined to take a clear stand now and at all times against this crime,” (p.36).

**Igbo Video Films and the Igbo Culture**

The major concepts of this discourse—culture, language and identity are so interwoven that any discussion of one which does not dovetail into the others would be deemed incomplete. Again, they are the constituents of any good movie. The film has the power to bring them all into one story and to make them stand out to project the relevant meaning which the director seeks to pass on to the viewer.

The Igbo video film, more than any other medium of cultural, economic or political projection and emancipation, has the power to reposition both the Igbo people and their culture in the minds of the people and other peoples of the world. But this has not been the case. Or rather, this has been done but with little or no recourse to how it affects the overall image and existence of the Igbo as a nation. It must be recalled that when in 1975, *Amadi*, the first indigenous language film in Nigeria, was made; the Igbo did not flock to see it. Also, among the first generation independent film makers was Eddie Ugbomah, and that of his twelve films, none was done in Igbo. It is equally true that after *Amadi* in 1975, it took more than two decades for another film, this time on video format to be done and that was in 1992, when Kenneth Nnebue came up with *Living in Bondage*.

The arrival of *Living in Bondage* in 1992 has helped to give Nigeria the much needed movie industry now called Nollywood. What has it done for the Igbo? Barring pockets of individual achievement and occasions of temporary employment here and there, what have the Igbo gained from Nollywood as a people? In the first instance, the legendary Igbo love for money has taken on a new dimension by way of rituals; the family and kinship, both hallmarks of Igbo unity are decimated and desecrated; individualism holds sway, the Igbo language struggles with English language in supposedly Igbo language movies; movie titles are in English, costumes in Igbo are a carnival of wears from all cultures! Especially where Kings are concerned; the Igbo tradition, norms and values have been jettisoned and one can hardly point to an Igbo film as a movie to watch in terms of its cultural richness!

This contrasts sharply with what obtains in other cultures. The Yoruba, Hausa and Bini movie cultures celebrate their ways of life via their movies. When the movies from these cultures portray issues such as greed, sibling rivalry, etc. other elements such as costume, set, dialogue among others, showcase the richness
of such cultures. There are movies from Yoruba, *Egun* (2007), Bini, *Ikoka* (2007) and Hausa, *Jidda* (2010) which are written in their languages beginning from opening credits to characters, dialogue, narration to end credits and even jacket cover! But one cannot find that in Igbo Video Films. In churches, in Igbo land, one hears Yoruba songs, Hausa, Calabar, Urhobo and practically all languages spoken in Nigeria. But in Yoruba land, Hausa, or any part of Nigeria wherever one hears an Igbo song in the Church, Igbo people, are in the choir! In Igbo households, other languages are spoken. There are children whose parents are Igbo and not too well educated, but they can hardly understand Igbo language let alone speak it. They would rather converse in Yoruba, English, Hausa and lately, Pidgin, or the languages of the people where such families are resident.

A weekly Igbo language request programme, *Ozi Ekene*, aired on Saturday 30th March 2013, between 8-10pm on Blaze 91.5FM, and anchored by the duo of Benjamin and Chukwuebuka, had a Yoruba jazz music-* (Baby mi shokalere...*) - by Ayinde Marshall (aka, Kwam 1) for its theme and background!

Whereas one is in no way advocating that cultural integration and acculturation should not be encouraged, the idea one is trying to put across is better captured in a proverb to the effect that “a rat should not engage in a dance with a lizard in the rain.” Conversely, a man about to be burnt should not soak himself in oil. The Igbo personality as noted elsewhere is such that engenders unhealthy interest; it behooves the Igbo man, therefore, to ensure that such interest is not negative most of the time. To project other cultures to the discomfort of his own culture cannot therefore serve the interest of the Igbo.

The issues raised above are obvious to any discerning person. One does not need to belabour them nor blame the filmmaker who in the first instance is in the business to earn a living. Indeed, the filmmaker can hardly be expected to engage in creativity which is designed to elevate the arts without filling his pocket especially when such filmmaker is a businessman, who probably failed to get sponsorship from the government or a corporate body. These issues are not to be left for the movie maker alone. It is a task which the governments and corporate organizations in the Igbo nation should be involved in.

**Culture, Language and Identity: Towards a Synergy in Igbo Video Film**

It has been noted that the film as a medium of mass communication can be used to do just about anything. The African film on inception faced a challenge which is to try to counter the prejudices of the white man against the black race. The challenges which face an Igbo filmmaker in the present day Nigeria are enormous and similar to that which the African Film faced. Movies should be made, preferably documentaries, designed to woo our brothers in the north, for example, back home. In section four of the *Film Policy for Nigeria*, the following are spelt out as per how the film should be used:

(a) encourage the adoption of themes which shall emphasize the desirable, rather than the negative aspects of our present social
existence, including belief in the capacity of our people to overcome extreme adverse conditions of nature and socio-cultural arrangement;
(b) encourage the use of film potentials to counter PREJUDICES and MISCONCEPTIONS (emphasis, mine) of the international community about the black race.
(c) encourage the use of film potentials to establish the common identity and interests of all black peoples and cultures throughout the world;
(d) to encourage the extensive and authentic use of indigenous costumes, make-up, music and dance in Nigerian films. (Film Policy n/d.p.6).

The case for the filmmaker to use his art to uplift the people is a case for all those in show business including writers, comedians, broadcasters, musicians, plastic artists, even politicians and pastors, to use their media and calling to better the culture of the Igbo man. But this call and focus is more on the movie maker because his medium subsumes the others and can be used to project, preserve and propagate them. The Igbo language is a rich harvest of what is best in the communication experience and the Igbo people have a responsibility to uphold it and pass it on to the future generation. Achebe (2012), writing on the challenges that faced the first generation writers of Africa says:

A major objective was to challenge stereotypes, myth, and the images of ourselves and our continent, and to recast them through stories prose, poetry, essays, and books for our children (p.53).

Given the present situation in the country today, the challenges which confront the Igbo filmmaker can be no less than what is stated above and more. But a situation where the language is anglicized, names of people abandoned, their traditional mode of dressing preferred to others not superior to it, can best be described as unfortunate. It does not augur well for the people or for their culture. Prominent Igbo people of the yesteryears pride themselves in the names they bore. One recalls and even wonders whether such people had English names. People like Chief Ozurumba Mbadiwe, Akanu Ibiam, Nnamdi Azikiwe, the Owelle of Onitsha, Aguiyi Ironsi, Mazi Mbonu Ojike, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, Chike Obi, Chuba Okadigbo; whom one recalls in his native Igbo wears while in the National Assembly, Chinua Achebe, etc.

Elsewhere, you hear of Obafemi Awolowo, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, Moshood Kashimowo Abiola, Bola Ige, Ahmadu Bello, Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Olusegun Obasanjo, among others. Each of these people is a subject that can be recreated in film and in art. Each represents an attitude, a culture, an identity, a people. They are individuals as well as cultural sign posts.
Critics have argued that what the filmmakers do is to reflect what is obtainable in the society. But as Amuecheazi has noted:

I agree that some themes treated in these films, such as the terrible rituals, armed robbery, occultism and so on, mirror what is going on, but they should be depicted with some reservations, some decency and there should be a conscious effort to depict more of the positive aspects of our society and our rich, varied and peculiar cultural heritage (Amuecheazi, ND p.23).

The point has been made. Portray the society, show the ills in the society but do it in such a way that leaves hope for the future. Let there be moral compensation when the criminal is punished and virtue rewarded. Let the society have confidence in itself for this is the difference between historians and the artist. The historian dwells on the past even the present without projecting into the future. But the artist/filmmaker can not only predict and project into the future, he has the responsibility to set standards of correct behavior and uphold societal values and ethos. He should not forget that the society looks up to him to direct it on what path to follow, what role to play. The Igbo movie maker in particular should adopt the motto of Zik’s *West African Pilot: Show the light and the people will find the way*

The true artist has no business in rehashing the prevalent situation in the society. His is the duty to direct the society on the route to follow, the attitude to adopt and the path to avoid. He is not stagnant like history but is dynamic and must respond and advance according to the mood of the times. Bamidele (2000), puts it better when he says:

But as society changes, new roles and new attitudes are assigned to the artist and to art. Artists become more sensitive to their roles depending on the nature of society in which they operate. For instance, modern writers who are touched by the stigmata of modern consciousness in terms of social disintegration, in terms of the widening chasm between the individual and his moral and material environment see their roles as that of redeemers and their art as a redeeming agent. They make statements that are very succinct, or implicit, about their desire to reach towards a metaphor of desirable wholeness through their art, ( p.29).

Given what has been said by Bamidele (1981), above, the film artist should look beyond personal gains and try, no matter how little, in setting the example that will guide the society right. But he must know the direction before he can show the way. This is important given that the film embodies the totality of a people’s
culture—language, costumes, lifestyle, ceremonies/festivals, etc. MacBride Commission (p.75) says:

The cinema is a complex aesthetic, psychological and social phenomenon. Films are “documents”, comprising pictures and story, accompanied by words and music; they are thus highly complex and multi dimensional productions. Throughout its development and much earlier than the emergence of other non-specialized media, film has played a multi-faceted role, providing information, drama, music and so on, either singly or in varying combinations.

That the film has played and continues to play a multi-faceted role is without doubt. That it purveys culture, language, identity, a way of life as well as the ability to prescribe norms of correct behaviour, there is also no doubt. This being the case, the onus then rests on the governments of the Igbo states, to sponsor filmmakers along lines of desired interest, so that this most creative and encompassing of the media can be properly utilized for the good of the people.

A close study of the ways of life of the Igbo people today will reveal a fast-diminishing past. It will show a people whose love for erudition and religion has exposed their weakness for other life-styles to the detriment of their memorable past. In my local government for instance, Ngor-Okpala, a child born in 1990 would not have heard or seen the following: a celebration of new yam festival; plays by moonlight, Mbari, Nwaokorobo, Ojonu, Ulaga, Ogbonwangelenge, Abigolo, Eshe, dances; nor would he have experienced traditional forms of wrestling; other forms of life are being driven away by civilization—palm wine tapping, thatch-making, basket making, among others, because no one is willing to learn even if those to teach them are still in existence!

Yet, from other cultures, we dance awilo, azonto, kpuru kere, even in churches without knowledge of their origin! These are doubtless issues of the greatest concern to the Igbo nation. The human and material resources as well as the technical know-how are there. What remains is the will, the creative first step to be taken and the movie can give the Igbo nation the much needed cultural renaissance. The cultural harvest and sense of belonging which the Igbo have reaped over the years as a consequence of the Ahiajoku Lectures, is a testimony to what we hope to gain if the Video Film is put to good use.

Conclusion

The Igbo say that a people who are not found in battle, are victims of war. Such people may fail to realize that:

Their culture is their way of life—it is their manners and mannerisms, their customs and costumes, their characters and characteristics, their philosophy and
ideology, moral values and religions; indeed it is the totality of their lives’ experience.

One may go on to add that it is their language, their identity. Every movie is an event as already noted. In this event, all that the people hold dear are revealed. For the Igbo, it has become a matter of survival in the face of global technological advancements where cultures are giving way to new ways (albeit foreign) of doing things. What seems to be left for the Igbo now and in the not so holistic shape are the ritual of the kola nut and the chieftaincy way of greeting, three back-hands and the normal frontal hand-shake.

Barring these two, our costumes, our language, ceremonies, festivals, dances, even our names are fast phasing away. A people without these things soon give way to a hybrid with hyphenated names. The Igbo have come too far for that. We know we are adventurous; ingenious, creative, outgoing and generally hospitable. But these should not make us abandon the things that make us a people, a nation. The video film can help bring the much needed synthesis and synergy in our culture and traditional ways of doing things if only we can employ its potentials for such ends.
References

Achebe, Chinua (2012) *There was a Country: Personal History of Biafra*.


