

RE-IMAGING SOCIETY THROUGH FILMS FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: A LOOK AT THIRTY DAYS IN ATLANTA

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Abstract

The images of several facets of the Nigerian society have suffered terrible blows from the hands of many practitioners in the entertainment industry. The same goes for the content of many media products produced in Nigeria for global consumption. The Nigerian media and entertainers have fecundated the minds of outsiders with aberrant typologies of several Nigerian societies by constructing horrendous images of particular places in the jokes they make and the content of some media products. Unfortunately, these images or stereotypes coined from the way of life or culture of such places have far reaching consequences both economically and socially. This aberrant trend which has drawn the ire of residents of such places calls for change. This paper looks at how the media can correct this anomaly using the film "Thirty Days in Atlanta" as a case study. It goes on to prove that the culture or way of life or certain people can be positively utilized as source materials for media content without damaging the image of such places.

Introduction.

Since the inception of the Nollywood industry, many dangerous stereo types have been constructed about certain cities and ethnic groups in Nigeria. These constructs, which are by all means socially denigrating, have created dastardly pictures of the country, making it an anathema for foreign investors to invest in. The ritualistic posture of early Nigerian films like "Blood money", "Nneka The Pretty Serpent" painted several societies in Nigeria as fetish and unsafe for human habitation because the greed for money warranted the use of human beings for ritual sacrifice. While it is permissible for art to draw its source materials and subject matters from the context of society, it is worrisome that many artists prefer showcasing the negative aspects of society rather than the virtues to the outside world. In an era where media content now has a global

market due to internet marketing, one wonders if most producers recognize the fact that their contents are cultural artifacts and a prism through which our society is viewed, evaluated and judged by the outside world. The injurious consequence of the negative portrayal of society on the social and economic life of the nation necessitated the call on the media to exercise restraint. It has become exigent that our media content deconstructs many of the negative social constructs and stereotypes built over the years. To achieve this will require the retracing of steps from negative to positive portrayal of the nation so as to encourage a favourable socio-economic atmosphere for meaningful development of the nation. Among several attempts at showcasing the beauty of our land and culture. One film "Thirty Days in Atlanta" has succeeded in tapping the cultural resources of the nation without defacing or denigrating its image.

This paper therefore seeks to examine this film so as to show how the filmic resources of society can be tapped for use as media content without recourse to defacing its image through negative stereotyping and stultifying socio-economic progress.

Stereotypes and Negative Constructs Of Nigerian Societies

A stereotype is a thought that can be adopted about specific types of individuals or certain ways of doing things [McGarty, et.al, 2002]. These thoughts or beliefs may or may not accurately reflect reality. (Cox, et.al, 2012 and Judd, and Bernadette 1993). According to the free dictionary on line, it is "a conventional, formulaic, and oversimplified conception, opinion, or image. One that is regarded as embodying or conforming to a set image or type". From the above definitions one can deduce that stereotype is the ascription of characteristics to members of a group be it true or not and could be negative or positive.

Over the years the Nollywood industry has succeeded in constructing several negative stereotypes of several Nigerian societies evident in many Nigerian films. The Ibo speaking people have been portrayed as money mongers and die hard marketers who would sell their souls to the devil for profit. In this vein, fake products came to bear the acronym "Aba Made" as evident in the films "blood money" oil money" billionaires club". The Hausa's were often portrayed as illiterates, good only as cobblers and gatemen. Their illiteracy is made evident in the farcical mode of communication bothering on outright stupidity evident in the television series title "White House".

Examples include "Where I dey go" for "where are you going" The Calabar people are portrayed as hapless cooks, house helps and cleaners. Their accent delineates them as people fit only for the low down profession for example "Oka maram I don dike yohn at all" for "I don't like John at all". examples include films like "Calabar Chic" The most injurious of this portrayals or stereotypes is that of Warri a metropolitan city in Delta State known for their peculiar and much touted pidgin English that is laced with an uncommon slang. Such films include "Bubemi The Warri Girl, and "30 days in Atlanta" The most excruciating image of the place as portrayed by the media and entertainment personnel is that of hooliganism, aggressiveness and dare devilry. In addition, the people are portrayed as intemperate, cantankerous and violent while the place is painted as a haven for criminals. These aberrant imageries have created a perception of the city as a dreadfully unsafe zone. It is not surprising therefore that the town has suffered socially and economically. Paradoxically, most of the progenitors of these aberrant images are indigenes of the land who while plying their trade, deface their origins for fame and profit. Surprisingly, the area is a haven for diverse ethnic groups who for ages have coexisted harmoniously. In this paper we shall be looking at the negative stereotype of Warri City and how the film "Thirty Days in Atlanta" has helped to correct the negative stereotype of that society.

Warri City and Constructed Stereotypes

The metropolitan city of Warri in Delta State, Nigeria on which the film 'Thirty Days in Atlanta' is based, is an oil hub that is bounded by Ughelli, Sapele, Okpe, Udu and Uvwie local government areas. The unique

history of the city dates back to the 15th century, when it was visited by Portuguese missionaries. Warri served as the base for Portuguese and Dutch slave traders and became established as a provincial headquarters by the British in the early 20th century (Ekeh,2005). Warri has a population of over 311,970 people according to the National Population Census figures for 2006. The Urhobos, Ijaws and Itsekiris are the major people in Warri. However, its urban status has attracted a large influx of people from all over the country.

Since the inception of Nollywood, several cultural traits of the Warri people have been lavishly showcased in most of the films as well as in live comedy performances and musical productions. Warri has been portrayed as a peculiar society with many touted traits that are hard to demystify. Such traits include the peculiar language, their dare- devil nature and the aggressiveness evident even in their everyday conversations.

In this modern era where synergy between developing and the developed countries favour technological and economic growth, pains are taken to eschew societal maladies that militate against positive perception of society so as to engender foreign investment, partnership or collaboration for societal development. Ironically there seems to be a lacuna in the quest for rebranding and re-imaging the nation, with the constant influx of local Nigerian media content in foreign marketing platforms showcasing indigenous cultural traits in a negative light. Due to the manner of presentation and language barriers, some cultural traits and actions depicted in some Nollywood films still get negative readings abroad. There is

need to create an understanding of a way of life of the Nigerian people. We shall be examining how some cultural traits played out in the film "30 days in Atlanta", produced in 2014 by Ayo Makun.

The Film 30 Days in Atlanta The film "30 Days in Atlanta" is a comedy that became an instant success grossing over 100 million naira in cinema (Husseini 2015). The story is centred on Akpos (played by Ayo Makun) who wins a 30-day all expenses paid holiday for two and was accompanied by his cousin Richard, an I.T specialist. (played by Ramsey Nouah) to Atlanta, Georgia. "30 Days In Atlanta" is an adventurous love laced story with lots of action and exciting moments. This highly hilarious story celebrates the hugely popular character Akpos. Right from the onset and when he got to Atlanta, Akpos brandished his dynamic personality, displaying his wit, naiveté and pristine Warri idiosyncrasies in a hybrid of mind blowing rhetorical and comical acts. Akpos' Warri accents and instincts was very distinct in his encounters as a first timer in a foreign land. In the film he traversed moments with varying peaks and valleys in his daily encounters and emotional escapades, dishing emotional turmoil and getting embroiled in it himself. He never shied away from making mistakes and learning experientially. Despite his escapades, he remained the typical Vintage Warri boy and come home rich with experience and leaving many with unforgettable experiences.

Socio-Cultural Constructs in 30 Days in Atlanta

The film, which in all ramifications is a patriotic glorification of Warri city and the

way of life of its people, succeeded in reconstructing several seeming negative and denigrating constructs about the city and its people held by the outside world. Several Nigerian cultural traits are proudly flaunted and portrayed in positive light. We shall examine them in details.

Pride of Place

In contradistinction to the negative impressions painted by some musical and comic artist about Warri city, the film is replete with eulogies of Warri city with Akpos showing extreme pride in his origin and heritage. When he won the holiday ticket in a draw, he shouted in ecstasy "Warri! Warri! This is a praise chant analogous to the saying "Warri nor dey carry last" meaning that Warri people are winners. He seemed to attribute his luck to his origin portraying the city as an exceptionally good place to hail from.

Showcase of Indigenous Culture

The ascription of value to any particular cultural traits comes with the manner of presentation, its appeal and functionality. Music, dance, language and art are integral components of a people's culture that could be imbibed by others when it is presented and appreciated. The film succeeded in packaging and presenting several indigenous cultural traits in an appreciable manner. The native song and dance steps of the Warri people was amply showcased with pride when Akpos entered into a street dance and took over the show with his native music and dance steps to the admiration of his foreign audience. In their first outing to visit Uncle Wilson (played by Kesse Akamune) The duo of Akpos and

Richard were looking resplendent, decked in native attire. This showcase of our beautiful fashion style and taste that is apropos to the western fashion styles was beautifully presented.

Reverence for parents and elders, a valued Nigerian culture, is succinctly underscored when Akpos confronted an American kid who persistently declined her mother's instruction. In a typical Warri fashion, he tells the kid "If na me be your papa I for use you take exchange recharge card". Though he gets a reprimand from the child's mother it foreshadows the discipline that attends proper upbringing of children by our parents who would hardly condone such juvenile delinquent action.

The most glaring feature is the elevation of the Warri pidgin which in some quarters is looked down upon not only as an adulteration and bastardization of the English language but also as a hallmark of illiteracy. In the film, pidgin becomes a cultural artifact that a foreigner not only found intriguing and amusing but is eager to learn. This is made evident when Clara, a high profile immigration lawyer (played by Lynn Whitfield) asks Akpos to teach her the language.

Another cultural trait underscored is the masculinity of the Nigerian/ African man and the industry of the African women. While it is normal for the American man to do domestic chores and receive instruction from their wives, back home in Nigeria it is a near anathema. Akpos wasted no time showing his disapproval of the obsequiousness of his revered Uncle Wilson who undertook domestic chores -cooking,

cleaning and baby-sitting- for the sake of love, while his young wife was busy dishing him instructions. Akpos' position is a lampoon on Africans in Diaspora who flagrantly deride their culture and blindly imbibe western cultures. Little wonder then that cross cultural marriages between some Nigerian men and western women are frowned at by our aged parents who will view such cultural traits where the men do domestic chores as sheer laziness on the part of the woman and stupidity on the part of the man.

The pristine forthrightness and doggedness and survival instinct of the average Warri and Nigerian man came to the fore in the movie when Akpos, though uneducated, was able to get himself a job oblivious of its illegality as a vacationer in America. His forthrightness and courage enabled him to be himself and display his comic talents which earned him a job as a stand-up comedian in Odiye's (played by Mofe Damijo) restaurant. This doggedness and astute survival instinct demonstrated in the bid to eke a living deconstructs the myth that Nigerians are mainly fraudsters averse to doing a descent work for a living.

Another obvious trait is the penchant for equity, fair-play and the aversion for oppression. The worst traits of gambling and fighting exhibited by Akpos when given a connotative reading will reveal some virtuous qualities. These virtues include freedom of association, confidence, courage and hatred for oppression Akpos, stumbled into some Americans gambling in the street and joined them in the game. This of course translates to free association. Confidence was displayed in his belief in his gaming

prowess. His courage and abhorrence of oppression was displayed when the losers tried attacking him with a gun after winning the game. He refused to be cowered and to their consternation broke a bottle on his head to fight in self defense which scared his assailants. Courage was also displayed in the love encounter between Akpos and Clara. Despite the differentials in age, social and educational status, Akpos defied the odds to ask Clara out and was so resilient in his entreaties that Clara had no option but to capitulate in admiration of his courage, forthrightness and doggedness.

Despite all the brazenly exhibited blunders in Akpos' character his true personality was clearly exhibited for all to see and admire. It came as no surprise, that despite the strain in the relationship between him and Clara, both Kimberly (played by Karlie Redd) and Clara surfaced at the airport at the point of departure not only to reunite with their loves but to accompany them back to Nigeria. This ending buttresses the fact that the positive portrayal of the country, its people and way of life was enticing enough to make a visit to Nigeria worthwhile.

Social Economic implications

This attempt by the film at reimagining a negatively stereotyped society like Nigeria has far-reaching socio economic benefits. The film was able to shoot Nigeria and the Nollywood industry into global limelight having gained a feature in the *Guinness Book of Records 2017* as a film with the highest domestic gross in Nigeria (Odujole 2016). It also corrected the impression that not only negativity sells in the movie market. The film grossed over 100 million naira airing

in cinemas and earned a huge income for the government through tax. Again, it has shown that the movie industry if encouraged could become a high source of income generating activity that is capable of creating an alternative to the nations monolithic oil dependent economy.

It has the potential of attracting tourists and boosting tourism in Nigeria as people would be eager to know more about the so well eulogized city of Warri not to mention the ancillary benefits that will accrue to the hospitality industry and others. The negative portrayal of Warri city as a haven of kidnappers, crime, militancy and civil strife will change over time with the positive portrayal of the nation, its culture and people. Also it has created a different reading of our traditional and cultural traits such as our native fashion and the pidgin which was positively showcased.

From the ongoing it is obvious that the film "thirty days in Atlanta" is a candid example of how a film can re-image society for socio-economic development to thrive. It is believed that the success of the movie at the box office will inspire filmmakers to invest in the production of quality films with appealing stories (Hussein 2015) that positively reimage the nation.

Summary

This work succeeded in x-raying the dynamics of cultural way of life and attempt to show how a reimagining of society in a positive light could result in socio-economic development of the nation. The film, *30 days in Atlantawas* used as a prototype to

show how films can be effectively used to promote the nation, its people and cultures in a positive light, to a people from a different cultural milieu. The work shows that some of our cultural traits which hitherto have elicited negative impression may not be anomalous after all and would be better appreciated when the different culture interface. The work revealed that films have many socio-economic benefits for the country.

Conclusion

Conclusively, one can say that films can show certain culturally universal traits prevalent in both foreign and Nigerian indigenous cultures that stands us out as a unique people. The film thirty days in Atlanta succeeded immensely in exporting several indigenous cultural traits that will indeed enhance better understanding and appreciation of the way of life of the people of Nigeria and Warri city. This in turn will encourage bilateral relationship with other countries and attract foreign investment necessary for socio-economic development of the nation.

Recommendations

It is recommended that media producers should positively portray aspects of our culture to the outside world rather than aid the imitating foreign cultures. This will enable a better understanding and appreciation by those with alien cultures. It is also recommended that script writers should dig deep into the culture of our people in the quest for source material in film making. This will be very beneficial not only for them but also for the film industry and the nation. Lastly the

government and other cultural agencies should encourage the globalization of our rich culture through films so as to ensure that we are accorded the respect we deserve as a people.

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