

Nollywood: A miscellany of western and Nigerian cultures

Introduction

This analysis examines the influence western culture is having on Nigerian culture as portrayed in Nigerian video films (NVF). The Nigerian video film industry is identified as Nollywood, which according to Larkin (2005) refers to feature films that are shot and distributed on video and VCD; the word Nollywood itself was coined by western journalists (p.1). The paper utilizes cultural exegesis to study the departure of Nollywood directors from traditional Nigerian female types to the adoption of western image(s) and ideal(s) and how these are espoused by Nigerian women who are “the biggest consumers of Nollywood products” (Onookome, 2004, p.5).

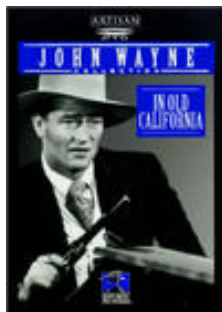
This study explores the question of whether the western influence on young Nigerian women (who have been exposed to these western images since NVF’s started in Nigeria over a decade ago) is predominantly from the images they see in Nigerian video films. One Nigerian video film – Nwadike’s (2004) *To love forever* – is used to explore this question; the text(s) of the movie are analyzed and a juxtaposition of Hollywood to Nollywood reveals hybridization of cultures. For the purpose of this study, western culture is represented by the images portrayed in movies that are produced by Hollywood filmmakers while Nigerian culture is represented by images that are depicted by Nollywood filmmakers; the analysis focuses on Shankman’s *The wedding planner* (2001) and Nwadike’s *To love forever* (2004).

Brief history of Hollywood and Nollywood

According to Cinema (para.1) the American film industry has had a profound effect on cinema across the world since the early 20th century. In early 1910, director D.W. Griffith filmed the first movie ever shot in Hollywood called *In old california*. Before World War 1, movies were made in several U.S cities, but filmmakers gravitated to southern California as the industry developed (para.4). Hollywood’s first film studio was opened in 1911 by the

Nestor Company (Short history, *para.1*). New immigrants, particularly Jews, dominated the filmmaking industry as racial prejudice prevented them from penetrating other industries. At the height of the popularity of motion pictures in the mid-1940s, the studios were making about 400 movies a year, seen by an audience of 90 million Americans per week (Cinema, *para.5-7*).

Onookome (2004) recalls that from its humble beginning in the late 1970s, the Nigerian video film has transformed itself into a national art, creating its own version of the world and attracting the serious attention of the government cultural sector for the first time. Local newspapers refer to video films as motion pictures, a curious imitation of the way Americans describe the moving images. “The motion picture business grew from an estimated turn-over of about N250 million (US\$1.9 million) in 1994 into a N3.4 billion (US\$26.4 million) nationwide enterprise in 1999” (Onookome quoting the Nigerian film and video censorship board). The Nigerian video film is the link between Nigeria’s transnational community and their homeland (*pp.4-5*). The development of this decade-old phenomenon has resulted in the production of over 600 films a year and this makes Nigeria one of the largest film producing nations in the world (Larkin, 2005, *p.1*). Ken Nnebue, a resourceful Nigerian entrepreneur, pioneered the Nigerian video film industry by producing *Living in bondage* in 1992. Nollywood is arguably the third most vibrant film industry in the world, after Hollywood and Bollywood (Oguine, 2004, *para.1*).



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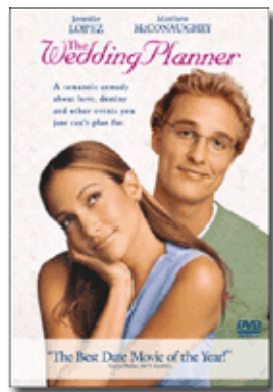


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The wedding planner and To love forever

Shankman's *The wedding planner* (2001) tells the story of an ambitious, hardworking, and extremely organized wedding planner, Mary, who literally falls in love with a handsome doctor. Both her private and career lives are turned upside down when she discovers that her 'charming prince in shining armour' is the groom in the biggest wedding of her career. She has to choose between either denying herself love and pursuing career goals or accepting true love at the risk of sacrificing her career accomplishments.

Nwadike's *To love forever* (2004) is about a bruised, assiduous, yet determined young career woman, Esther, who is separated from her first true love, Philip, because of differences in societal and economic strata. Her career as a wedding planner reunites them when Philip's patrician mother engages her to plan Philip's society wedding to a homosexual. She has to overcome her bitterness and resentment of his family's interruption of their former relationship and decide if she would love again.



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Real (1996) asserts that female stereotypes that are circulated over the past few decades are the creation of Hollywood's hegemony and dominance of world cinema as the industry sprang to life in the early 20th century and systematically fed the world, through motion pictures, Hollywood's idea of an ideal woman (pp. 163, 174). These clichéd images display the patriarchal Hollywood 'male gaze,' which though still exists today in many movies, have been challenged by productions like Campion's (1993) *The piano*. In the past 15 years, young Nigerian women who have been exposed to NVF's reflect the effects of these clichéd images as their identities are influenced by hybridized images adopted from Hollywood movies which are presented in Nollywood productions.

Onookome (2004) notes that "in the set of images we confront from one video film to the other, we find the 'suffering mother,' the 'weak and feeble mind' caught in an incomprehensible whirlpool, the prostitute who lives the precariousness of city life and the housewife who must suffer for the sake of her children" (p.6). This is in line with Real's inference that gender analysis indicated that female representations in film consisted of only mothers and sex objects, or even worse, the femme fatale (p.174).

Similar images to the ones described above are found in Nwadike's (2004) *To love forever* - Esther, the wedding planner who lost her chance of true love at an early age, is shown in her early years as a confused, naïve, disadvantaged girl who didn't have a say in the course of her life; Philip's mother was the "suffering mother" who though aristocratic, rich, and wielding societal influence, has a son who may be unfortunate in love, for the second-time; Maggie is the homosexual bride-to-be whose sexual orientation is still so unrecognized in Nigerian society to the point that it could not be given a vocal label in the movie and was presented as precarious. Maggie's character (albeit without the producer's intention) adequately speak for 'the other,' (Real, 1996, p.172) a class of people (both male and female) who are still struggling to find a voice in a society that frowns on any form of relationship that is contrary to the traditional male-female association. Ethnic and sexual divisions are still strong forces in Nigeria and it will definitely take more than one 'Maggie' to effect a change but the depiction of homosexuality as a reality signals the possibility of a debate of this sensitive subject.

In the same breadth, the movie also presents the aspiring and emergent images of these women as ambitious, vocal, and triumphant – Esther is a successful wedding planner whom, despite being a single-mother, built a thriving business and became triumphant in love by eventually marrying her first and only true love; Philip’s mother is portrayed as an industrious, successful, and rich society woman who is fulfilled as her son finally finds true love and lives happily ever after; Maggie is the young woman who has a stereotypical and abominable sexual orientation yet conquers in the end because in the course of the exposure of her sexual orientation, her father (though still not accepting of it) is able to face the reality of Maggie’s homosexuality, and she also ends up with her true love.

Shankman (2001) presents similar images in *The wedding planner* – Mary is ambitious, hardworking, extremely organized, and successful at her career, but unfortunate in finding true love; however love eventually finds Mary and prevents her from making a wrong choice when her ‘prince charming’ doctor decides to follow his heart instead of bowing to economic or societal dictates. Intermittently throughout the movie, Mary is presented as being at the mercy of her father’s tradition and cultural practice of marrying, not necessarily for love, class and societal echelon, but because a man cares about her, is willing to take care of her, build her a home and keep her safe, which in today’s love phraseology, could be termed ‘settling for second-best.’ This was the path she finally chose before fate interrupted her when the ‘male forces’ in her life plotted to prevent her from making a mistake in love by reuniting her with her true love so they could live happily ever after. In some of these acts, there is an element of the woman as partially helpless and incapable of directing the course of her own life.



Mary being ‘saved’ by ‘the doctor’

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Some Nigerian women who were in their late teens when NVF's started in Nigeria over a decade ago are now leaders and commendable achievers in diverse career fields both in Nigeria and around the world. Though statistical figures are hard to find, a sweeping look across the nation – especially the south, central, and mid-western parts – reveal an increase in educational and career ambitions; even some of the northern women who have been known to bow to male dominance as a result of their adoption of Islam and its teachings, are making viable contributions in politics, economy, medicine, and other fields. The majority of Nigerian women living outside the country are also doing considerably well and embracing the evolving new roles 'other' women have as leaders, trailblazers, inventors, and scholars.

There is a gradual departure from the old image of subservient, inconsequential, and silent woman of the house that previous generations of Nigerian women lived even one or two decades after the end of colonialism. However the patriarchal male gaze is still very strong in NVF's; as Oguine (2004, *para.8*) notes, tawdry sex scenes have been a favourite selling point. These sex scenes were moderately exploited in Nwadike's (2004) *To love forever* when the lens focused extensively on Maggie and her same-sex partner's smooching while sharing a bath; though it also shed light on a taboo subject which would hopefully leave viewers debating the reality of the existence of homosexuals in Nigerian society and the need to recognize their rights to a chosen sexual orientation.

An examination of the aesthetics of the music and costumes in Nwadike's (2004) *To love forever* reveals an excessive tilt to adopted western tastes. The theme and background music are from hybrid pop-culture – Marc Anthony, R. Kelly, Westlife, Enrique Iglesias, Earl Klugh, Kenny G. It is remarkable that the parents in the movie wear traditional Nigerian attires while the youth wear western costumes. This tells of cultural imperialism, an adoption of a dominant culture by a minority, which Williams (2003) notes has the ability to shape the cultures of the nations of the global South, ensuring their 'westernization.' Williams submits further that "these values conflict with local cultures,

often leading to the erosion of local values, and threatening the national and cultural identity” (p.217). In several scenes of Nwadike’s *To love forever*, young Nigerian women are scantily dressed (indeed half-naked, even by western standard) yet the women in the movies are suggesting (by their roles and attires in the movie) to young Nigerian women that these attires are acceptable for everyday business. In some scenes, Maggie and her homosexual partner are in various stages of half-nudity even when they are assumed to be dressed and in public. These images of half-nudity were prominent in Hollywood over five decades ago – “the whore-virgin dichotomy took hold with vengeance in the uptight fifties, in the dialectical caricatures of the “sexport” and the “nice girl” (Real, 1996, p.174, quoting Haskell, 1974) – but they are just taking hold and further gaining ground in Nollywood, as Oguine (2004, *para.8*) notes that for a few weeks recently, a poster for a new movie showing a plump woman with enormous breasts wearing only a net top was pasted on nearly every billboard in Lagos.

In contrast and as a proposed view that Hollywood is curbing its exploitation of the image of women as “sexport” and “nice girl,” the aesthetics in Shankman’s (2001) *The wedding planner* presents the women in mostly decent costumes that would serve as professional day-to-day attires like evening wears, business suits and casuals. The theme and background music are however local to Shankman’s characters, unlike Nwadike’s *To love forever*, which used foreign music for its theme and background music, thereby surrendering to the hegemonic force of pop culture as a preference to local Nigerian music.



Mary and her boss



Mary and her friend



Mary and her client

Conclusion

Real (1996, p.163) observes that male domination and female stereotypes have served Hollywood throughout its history and are deeply embedded in the culture that Hollywood's hegemony produces. In Onookome's 2004 study of *Women, religion, and the video film in nigeria*, he asserts that the video film is itself a tool in the hand of the patriarchal system to define and discuss women's issues for women, thereby withholding women's collective voice for the now. These assertions are strongly reflected in most of the images portrayed by the women in both Shankman's (2001) *The wedding planner* and Nwadike's (2004) *To love forever*, albeit diminishing and/or elevating of women as the images and ideals may be. In the attempts at creating elevating and positive images, the evident and strong male gaze in these two movies attempt to steer away from the established stereotypical images that have previously been promoted of women by the same oligarchy. It is evident through most of the images shown in Nwadike's *To love forever* (women as subservient, subordinate, yet accomplished, successful, rich, and driven) that the western influence on young Nigerian women is predominantly from the images they see in Nigerian video films (which have a high dose of hybridized and pastiche culture borrowed from several western communities); most of the vices (and some of the virtues) evident in the lives of young Nigerian women today are resultant effects of exposure to, consumption, and adoption of images portrayed in Nollywood, an industry which takes most of its cues from Hollywood.

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