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# **Thematic Motifs of Modern Nollywood Films and Nigeria's Culture Indigenization Agenda**

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## ***Abstract***

This study examines the culture-indigenization agenda of the Nigerian government. This is the mandate of the Ministry of Information and Culture and the National Film and Video Censors Board as checks on cultural productions such as Films. This study is guided by postmodern consciousness. In Nigeria, films and culture are mutually inclusive. Nollywood professionals make their modern films Western because the Nigerian society is inevitably Euro/America-centric. The phenomenon contravenes the current government's culture-preservation efforts. The government has not achieved its goals on cultural indigenization. The first contravention is the cultural globalization policy of government itself through the UN-UNESCO alliance. Another is the extravagant Western lifestyle of Nigerian public office holders. Also, the mercantilism of film registration leads to doing the bidding of film-makers. The power of digital globalization is immense in irresistibly transporting Euro-American values to Africa. The government should therefore consider a developmental culture civilization through digital globalization for global visibility of the indigenized culture.

**Keywords:** Nigeria's Culture Indigenization, Nollywood films, Digital globalization, Censor Board, African culture

## **Introduction**

Nigeria is at the crossroads in the efforts towards national rebirth. One of the pathways the country has charted to achieve global relevance is the maximization of its cultural potential. When it is considered that Nigeria does not have the technology that is globally competitive, it can be averred that maximization of cultural endowments, which are rich and abundant in the country, can drive Nigeria's development. One culture-mediated industry capable of enabling Nigeria to achieve this objective is the Nigerian film industry, Nollywood. The practitioners in the film industry in Nigeria and the government, in particular, have claimed that Nigerian films are capable of transmitting Nigerian culture to the rest of the world. For example, they are of the view that Nigerians themselves can be re-orientated on the beauty and strength of the local culture. The Nigerian government and traditional institutions are of the view that the Nigerian social system will be decolonised through the reorientation of the people towards the Africanization (indigenization) of their lifestyles and tastes.

In line with this goal of cultural rebirth and the sustenance of the sanctity of the indigenous culture, the government has made cultural promotion a cardinal objective. To this end, there is the Federal Ministry of Information and Culture. There is also the National Council for Arts and Culture, which oversees developments and practices in the craft industry, which include cinema, film, oral tradition, traditional architecture and so on. Most States in Nigeria also pay critical attention to culture through appropriate ministries. There is also the National Festival for Arts and Culture, where all the 36 states of Nigeria, including the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, showcase their cultures. All of these are matrices of cultural localization efforts by the government in Nigeria.

To this end, film productions in Nigeria are censored by the National Film and Video Censors Board, whose goal is to regulate and control the film production practice in Nigeria. This is with a view to maintaining the standard in film and video productions in the country. What is meant by “standard” here is promotion of Nigerian (African) cultural identity and values. On the merit of seeking and protecting personal good, national and continental interest, or indigenous renewals, it is posited that this pursuit by the government is laudable. This is also likely to benefit Nigeria and Africa in the long run. However, it has been observed that the localization of culture undertaking must contend with the immense influence and necessity of digital modernity and globalization. The unmatched utilitarian essence of digitalization of social routines, even in Africa, has made the government’s cultural advocacy have no impact on the film industry and the larger society in Nigeria, though this has been enabled by internal compromise within the responsible agencies. Evidence of the impact of the government agenda on culture not being felt exists because there is still palpable ascendancy of Western culture in the films produced in the country and in the ways of life of the people.

The ascendancy of Westernization, ironically, is visible in Nigeria these days despite the official activities of the Nigerian government’s culture-preservation agencies, which include the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM), the National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC) and the Nigerian Tourism Development Authority (NTDA). The goal of these agencies is to promote Nigeria’s indigenous cultures (Babatunde, 2025). This study examines this paradoxical situation in relation to some vices in governmental administrative structure which serve as factors banes of actualizing the vision of government about Nigerian culture promotion. Some of such vices include official ineptitude, financial corruption and nepotism interrogated as as the factors responsible for the non-actualization of the government’s initiative. Both the evidence analysis and attributive factors for the non-actualization are supplemented with a workable suggestion in the study. This suggestion is aimed at enabling Nollywood as a cultural industry in the country to reconcile the contents of its products with the government’s culture-oriented undertakings. It also enables the government to navigate between the localization of the people’s ways of life and the realities of the digital revolution in contemporary times, as palpable in the Nigerian social and cultural system.

## **Review of Relevant Literatures**

Many scholars have expressed firm views on the capability of the Nigerian film industry as a cultural agent to project Nigeria’s national development. In the opinion of Ogbe et al. (2020), such potential for developmental cultural projection consists in the control over the effect of globalized media and its contents on Nigeria’s socio-cultural development and national integration. However, controlling digital globalization poses a huge task. This opinion on development aligns with the view that Nollywood has the capacity to positively

influence society and support Nigerian development (Gobo, 2020), as evidenced by gentrification by professionals and aesthetic renewal in the industry (Ezepue, 2020). In Nigeria these days, films are seen as a premium user of culture resource aimed at cultural reflection and promotion targeted at achieving national development (Udomisor, 2012). Film productions and culture in Nigeria are mutually inclusive, and this is instrumental to the feasibility of Udomisor's culture reflection position. This is because Nigerian films draw from and promote societal culture. Okpara (2020) argues that the Nigerian film industry has been impactful in promoting and developing Nigerian culture. This is because the films from Nigeria have emerged as a strong element of the country's popular culture. Nigerian films have also established so firmly the unique characteristic of Nigerian society and the ability to meet the entertainment yearnings and educational cravings of the cross-spectrum of Nigerians. This is due to the fact that Nigerian films are patronized by various classes of the population, including the elite (Oparaugo, 2021).

### **Methodological Approach**

This study employed the principles of qualitative research. By this, it drew conclusions based on the rationalization of available data from the tenets of globalization and the author's local knowledge of the Nigerian social system and Nollywood. In addition to this methodological process, Hegelian Social Change Theory also guided the study. This theory echoes the advancement of society. This has been considered appropriate in this context because the ultimate goal of the Nigerian government's emphasis on cultural rebirth through the localization of people's ways of life is to promote indigenous culture. Additionally, the YouTube platform has been chosen as the host and repository of the films used for the study because of the ease of accessibility of the films and the universality that characterizes the YouTube platform. Such affords the resources for the research to be visible rather than abstract. Some of the films were high-grossing while others were regular films. Some were by resident filmmakers, while some by Diaspora filmmakers were also selected for representation and balance.

### **Conceptualization of "Digital Globalization"**

The term "Digital Globalization" in the context of this study is understood as the phenomenon of the cross-globe externalization of ideas, concepts, innovations, or cultural practices disseminated through the internet and computer-mediated means. This phenomenon is relevant to this study because in the world today, as applying to Nigeria, ideas and values from certain countries are visible in other countries, and countries that do not fit in this new world order will lag behind in most things. Digital globalization affords many people many things. It enables many people and many things. In this study, digital globalization manifests in the strategic exploration of the YouTube platform for the purpose of global access to the films used for the study. Digital globalization has been adopted in the research for two purposes. The first is that it allows unrestrained access to the films analyzed in this study for further viewing. The second essence of the adoption of digital globalization through its agent, YouTube, is that it emphasizes the justification for the assertion that Western features will continue to be seen in Nigerian films because of the universal nature of digital globalization. This, therefore, is a huge challenge to and a frustration of the cultural standards that the Censors Board in Nigeria has the mandate to uphold.

### **Nigerian Government and the Promotion of Nigerian Culture**

The Nigerian government takes issues concerning indigenous culture(s) very seriously (Oloidi et al, 2025). This is in terms of revamping and promoting the various local cultures in the country. The strategic ways the government hopes to achieve this are through

widespread use of local languages, eating local food, use of indigenous clothing materials, use of local apothecaries and spirituality, as well as adoption of indigenous religions, to mention a few. Specifically, various levels of the government's structure have taken some steps in line with the government's culture-promotion agenda. The first of such is the decision of the Lagos State House of Assembly to conduct House business in the Yoruba language, and this decision has engendered advocacies for other Southwest States to adopt Yoruba at their sessions. This is because this legislative decision was appropriate to the foremost royal figure in Southwest Nigeria, *Ooni of Ife*, who is reputed to be the custodian of the Yoruba culture and who, six years after the Lagos Assembly's decision, charged members of the Lagos Assembly to persuade other state assemblies in the Southwest region to conduct business in the Yoruba Language (Mecha, 2022). The government in the Southwest region has also declared August 20, every year, as *Isese Day* – a day for celebrating indigenous religious practices. This was a response to the perception of December 25 and Eid al-Fitr as promotion of foreign religions and cultures. The Federal Government of Nigeria also organises the National Festival of Arts and Culture, which performs a critical social function in the country, including fostering national unity, according to Omotoso and Ogundiran (2016). The government also supports the Argungu Festival in Kebbi State. The Argungu fishing festival, alternatively referred to as *FashinRuwa*, is the people's way of celebrating life. It also serves as a tool for conserving natural resources in the Northern part of Nigeria. It maintains and promotes traditional life experiences (Shyllon, 2007). All these, and many more decisions and practices by the government at all levels in Nigeria, emphasise the government's particular concerns for the promotion of culture in the country.

## **The Nigerian Society and Peoples**

There are three major peoples in Nigeria. These include the Yoruba, the Hausa, and the Igbo. There are other minority groups such as the Tiv, the Ibibio and so on. The country returned to democratic governance in 1999 and the government is making frantic efforts to indigenise the Nigerian sensibility, occupation and consumption. This is a manifestation of the government's policy to attain self-reliance and independence. This has culminated in the government's closure of its land borders in the West African sub-region with some dire implications (Omodele, 2021; Abegunde and Fabiyi, 2020; Uwak and Edem, 2023; Emenike and Enwere, 2020). The government claims that the protectionist policy has been put in place so that the people will eat what they produce and produce what they eat (Ajoje, 2022; Haddabi et. al., 2019).

## **Characteristics of Nigerian Society and Culture**

The Nigerian Society is a vast community in West Africa with a colonial link to the United Kingdom (Ajayi, 2022). It underwent many military coups and a devastating civil war (1967-1970). These experiences have shaped the Nigerian society of today. The social system in the country today is tailored to Western (British and American) lifestyles (and this is the phenomenon the government is working to check, officially). Two major religions from outside the country, Christianity and Islam, are predominant, while a vast majority practices the traditional religion. The concept of Nigerian culture is a generic colouration of the philosophies and ethical principles of the different peoples in Nigeria. According to Isah and Mohammed (2023), in reality, Nigeria has many cultures. The people in Nigeria are a culture. However, there is a generalization in designating these cultures as one because of the common features they share. The first is moral uprightness. Another is the supremacy of Nigerian culture, while the third is the belief that the West was responsible for the social woes of Nigeria and that only decolonization can detach the country (and the continent of

Africa) from the bondage of backwardness. This is executed in different forms, especially in Africinity among local intellectuals and in different campaigns among culture custodians such as royal figures, as well as in different government policies, including the policy on consumption of local productions.

## **The Nigerian Film Industry – the Nollywood**

The codification of the term ‘Nollywood’ is often attributed to the *New York Times* article in 2002. According to Jedlowski (2011:228 ): “The name “Nollywood” appeared in Nigeria for the first time in a NewYork Times article by NorimitsuOnishi in September 2002 and was republished by the Nigerian newspaper *The Guardian* few days later... it quickly became irresistible for the local press and fans who started using it ubiquitously.” Jedlowski states further that by the beginning of the following year, 2003, *Daily Times* already had written a column titled “Inside Nollywood” and just about this time, the term began to appear regularly on many sites on the internet and fora. On the practical production of the maiden film in the industry, the 1992 film *Living in Bondage* has been identified as marking the beginning of Nollywood. Peaceman (2023) states that 1992 was crucial to the formation of Nollywood because it was this year that gave rise to the pioneering professionally produced home videos in the country. On the live performances as the origin of the Nigerian film industry, Azeez (2019) holds that the Yoruba live theatre practice of the 60s played a significant role in the formation of the film industry in Nigeria.

## **The Typical Cultural Features of Nollywood Films**

There are certain features that are peculiarly Western in films from Nigeria. These include the application of technology to daily life. Use of internet, banking system as in operation in today’s format, gender/feminist principles, importation system, modern architecture, use of Automated Teller Machine, diplomatic relations, wearing three-piece suit, Medical operation procedures such as dialysis or kidney transplant and separation of conjoined twins, use of English or French as language of communication, use of liquefied natural gas as source of cooking energy, use of manufactured home appliances, the culture of calling the Police on 911, as well as gun culture.

The Western preferences of the professionals in Nollywood have been conditioned by the social and societal situations, as well as people’s consumption patterns and tastes. The social situation is the irresistible infiltration of globalization, while the consumption pattern is the choice of films that Nigerian citizens watch. These two situations are mutually inclusive. The character of cultural globalization is incoming and is desired to be outgoing. That is, it conveys Western values while the professionals in filmmaking also put the international audience in mind in determining the contents of their films. This is because the professionals want to win international laurels such as the Oscar. In addition to this, there is an ascendancy of Western values in Nollywood because of a number of factors. The first is that there are many Westernized actors and actresses in the Nigerian film industry. They are Western because they have stayed abroad or were even born abroad. Their consciousness and social awareness are pro-West. In fact, many of them may not be aware of the core Nigerian tradition. Adunni Ade is a classy example in Yoruba Nollywood. She is substantially Euro-American. Related to this is the fact that many professional filmmakers hold dual citizenship. Also, there is a wing of the Nigerian film industry in the Diaspora. They also produce films for Nigerians. This situation makes their productions outside of the control and censorship of the Censor’s Board. The same applies to the Nigerian population, which has a substantial proportion of young people, accounting for a large share of the total population (Eremosele, 2022). To this end, the audience, one of the major factors of the contents of the film industry, has lost touch with or may not be aware of the tradition. This

is especially true because the social sensibilities of the young are being redirected by cultural content disseminated across Africa through the Internet and globalization. These factors and many more are responsible for the sustenance or preponderance of foreign (Western) cultural contents in the films in the Nigerian film industry.

## **Reconciling Cultural Indigeneity and Globalization Principle**

In this study, cultural globalization is conceived as the externalization of the culture, traditions, mores, festivals, as well as the artefacts of a people by the people through their government for the purpose of gaining international admiration and recognition. The Nigerian government could be seen as prioritizing the globalization of Nigeria's cultural elements. This could be seen in the government's quest for the UN's validation of Nigeria's traditional festivals, cultural sites, heritage, as well as artifacts through the global body's agency, UNESCO. Such a craving for UNESCO's cultural cooperation is age-long, as this agency of the UN co-organized the 1977 Festival of Arts and Culture, FESTAC '77, with Nigeria. The cooperation still exists, as could be deduced in Adeniyi's (2021:1) report that: "The Federal Government has said it would seek the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's recognition for more cultural festivals in the country. It added that this is to complement the inscription of Argungu Festival as cultural heritage by UNESCO."

This effort towards the internationalization of Nigerian culture is laudable when considered on its own merits. However, when it is considered in relation to the current culture-preservation agenda of government and in relation to the social consequences of such, then it becomes obvious that the globalization effort needs to be reconciled with the culture indigenization principle of government. This is because UNESCO is an organ of an international organization that is run on Western ideals. This goes a long way toward asserting that such principles will be introduced in Nigeria in the form of advisories. For example, the introduction of technology to culture would become inevitable. Also, incantations are likely to be translated into notable world languages. Additionally, secrets of the cults of the deities behind the arts would be prone to modification for accessibility. All of these will make Western values more visible in the Nigerian society, especially in the traditional spiritual realm. If there is more manifestation of Western indices in Nigerian society, this will result in a situation where the films that are produced in Nigeria will reflect more Western values since these are palpable in society and Nigerian films draw subjects from the same society.

## **Factors against the Workability of the Culture-protection Mandate of the Censorship Board**

A number of factors hinder the realization of the mandate to protect the local culture, which the Culture Ministry and the Censors Board are saddled with. It needs to be stated that in the context of continued sustenance of Western traits, the gradual erosion of Nigerian local culture, and in spite of the government's monitoring through the Culture Ministry and the National Film and Video Censors Board, the factors, situations, and practices below have hindered the attainment of the culture-protection agenda of the government. One major avenue for the dissemination of Western values throughout the world is the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund, including the World Bank. These are International Organizations that direct the local domestication of their policies and initiatives. Nigeria is a member of many Western global organizations, such as the United Nations. The more the country sustains membership in these organizations, the more Western cultural values will thrive in Nigeria. For example, child rights protection, affirmative action, as well as animal rights and protection, are global best practices. They are not original to Nigerian culture. In

addition, the limited influence of Nigerian culture is another factor facilitating the sustenance of Western culture in Nigeria and in the films produced in the country. What this means is that the cultural principles that someone imbibes may not necessarily be useful if that individual leaves the country for another. This is unlike Western culture, which applies in many countries in Europe or the United States of America.

The third factor militating against the realization of the culture-protection agenda of the government is the foreign tastes of the political leaders. Many of them send their children to universities abroad and these individuals in the elite class also secure foreign citizenship for their children, and when the children come visiting, they speak foreign accent. This usually has psychological consequences on resident Nigerians. Similarly, the treasures of the elite are kept in foreign vaults for maximum safety and to secure the family's future. The political leaders in Nigeria also obtain medical treatment abroad because they cannot receive top-notch medical services in local hospitals. The lavish lifestyle of the political leaders of the commonwealth of the people has necessitated the quest of the common people to strive to migrate abroad so that the exposure and wealth will empower them, such that they will not be intimidated by the children of the public office holders in future when their fathers attempt to restate them in political offices as successors. An additional factor, the fifth, is the heterogeneous composition of Nigeria and the cosmopolitan formation of its cities and towns. This has heralded the emergence of English as lingua franca, thereby resulting in English subtitles of local films, which is a Western trait. This is to allow wider audience and reception.

Another factor that stands against the success of the government's culture-promotion intent through the Censors Board is the mercantilist dimension of the process. Filmmakers pay for the assessment of their works, which indicates that the Board is an income-generating outlet of government. The Board would want to remain relevant to government; hence the interests of the payees would matter, because if the payees are not allowed to meet the tastes of the market, they too would be incapacitated. As more payees fall into this category, the less money the Board would generate and the less relevant the Board would be to government eventually. Related to this is financial corruption, which individual officers may perpetrate to hasten the approval process. Diaspora film-making is also a factor that brings in Western social features into Nigerian films and society. The location of the producers and cast of the Diaspora films in Nigeria is outside the jurisdiction of the Censors Board. YouTube's release and publication of such films make them accessible to resident Nigerians, who emulate the Western ways of life depicted in them. This frustrates the cultural standards that the Censors Board has the mandate to uphold.

## **Conclusion**

Modern Nigerian films are inevitably replete with features of Western social and cultural systems. This trend persists despite the government's efforts to promote local cultures. It needs to be underscored that the government's agenda to promote Nigerian culture is in the national interest. It could then be described as a laudable undertaking. However, one may wonder why the content of films from the Nigerian film industry is at odds with the government's cultural agenda. This is because some social inconsistencies exist between people's behaviours and the government's policies. It is critical to begin with the irresistibility of digital globalisation, which is essentially a Western phenomenon. The universal character of digital globalisation makes it visible and compelling in all societies of the world. It is a conveyor of cultures in contemporary times. This is to the extent that digital globalisation, symbolised in a phenomenon such as YouTube, which hosts most Nigerian films, could be assessed as mightier than the indigenisation aspiration of the

Nigerian government. The might of digital globalisation consists also in its all-round benefits to all-round peoples in all places. Nigeria and Africa may want to harness the potential of digital globalisation. To this end, globalization traffic will be inward Africa and outward the Continent. The might of digital globalization in the Nigerian cultural context has been pronounced due to two major factors. The first is that the government's culture promotion policy is plain, ordinary, and rhetorical.

The Nigerian culture-promotion campaigns are plain-ordinary because the advocacy is not predicated on or designed to advance another cause. That is, there is no service or local innovation such as research-based or laboratory-tested medical products, for example, local apothecary made from local leaves, roots or barks of trees, so efficacious that the rest of the world may be compelled to imbibe the Nigerian local culture. Many Nigerians had to learn the computer language when it spread across the world and into Nigeria. Computer technology is in the Western cultural context. Nigeria (Africa) could have stunned the world and satisfied the commodity requirement for cultural advancement and dominance if, for example, it had provided a cure for COVID-19 when the search was open in 2019/2020. This was contrary to what Africa claimed to be capable of. Secondly, the culture-preservation advocacy of government is rhetorical because the culture advocates themselves, for example, government officials and royal figures, are Western in their lifestyles. The foreign tastes of the culture custodians themselves constitute another social inconsistency that militates against the government's cultural agenda in Nigeria. Many of the culture custodians actually live abroad. They constantly travel overseas and return there after service. Many royal figures in Nigeria fly private jets and use foreign products. They play to the gallery on culture advocacy. The culture custodians include government officials in general, curators at culture artifacts preservation centres, as well as royal figures. They celebrate aspects of local cultures at public exhibitions, but do not live those cultures in reality for people to emulate. These are inimical to the culture-promotion advocacy of the government.

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