

Challenges and Prospects of the Igala Movie Industry (Igawood) in the Quest for Global Relevance

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ABSTRACT

Beyond the more popular indigenous movie industries from the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, the Nigerian Movie Industry has witnessed the upsurge and establishment of more indigenous regional and ethnic movie industries. This development is born partly out of the desire of indigenous Nigerian ethnic groups to tell their own respective stories, an effort towards sustaining the diverse culture which together makes one Nigeria and promotes respective cultures globally. Adopting a qualitative design, this article examines the prospects and challenges of the Indigenous movie industry of the Igala ethnic group in Nigeria: Igawood in the quest for global relevance. The article projects that Igawood is an efficient tool for cultural integration, propagation, and sustenance, firstly, among people of the Igala ethnicity spread across the globe and also among other tribes of the world with interest in the Igala culture. Among other challenges, the paper points at finance, the quest to make a profit, the star actor syndrome, relatively poor presence on satellite TV Networks, and lack of requisite technical know-how as factors militating against Igawood. The paper identifies the need for re-orientation and adequate technical training for players in the industry to meet up with the standard and global best practices.

Keywords: Igawood, Igala, Nollywood, Indigenous Film, Ethnic Groups

1. Introduction

The Nigerian movie industry has witnessed tremendous development and popularity within these almost three decades of the emergence, acceptance, and recognition of Nollywood, following the production of *Living in Bondage* in 1992. It has remained at the core of entertainment, information, and education. It has also remained at the centre of attempts to take Nigeria/Africa to the world and bring the world to Nigeria/Africa. Movie production in Nigeria

has grown and is still growing under the appellation 'Nollywood'. A name that is tagged 'the larger' in this paper as a result of the upsurge of 'other woods' consequent upon several factors, which will be pointed out later on in this paper. Nollywood as a name has been considered controversial and somewhat alien. For example, Akinwunmi Isola describes it as "a banal extension of the Indian Bollywood, which is a corruption of the American movie land, Hollywood" (12). Isola considers the term (Nollywood) to lack a Nigerian footing/authenticity. This is correlated with questions on the 'Nigerianness' of the term (Nollywood) and those who may have coined it. This notwithstanding, it is glaring and as Chukwuma Anyanwu submits, that the name has come to stay and the arts in it are multiplying by the day (235). Anyanwu elucidates thus;

Nollywood has come to be identified with the essence of movie-making in the country. Naturally, we know that the term is more applicable to movies done in the English language or its adulteration, pidgin. All other indigenous language cultures have a right to tag along. But tag along or not, Nollywood rides the waves of all criticisms and cannot be stopped; the more the critical outbursts, the better it gets, and each voice, negative or positive, becomes part of the main success story of Nollywood, The Nigerian video film industry (235).

With the establishment of a national movie presence in Nollywood, it is also historically observable that the different ethnic backgrounds in Nigeria have, at one point or the other, made attempts to establish indigenous movie sub-industries rooted in such ethnicities and directly reflective of their culture. This move is generally on the pretext that the larger Nollywood is not sufficient to undertake the job of presenting a good national image and favourably showcase Nigeria's multiple ethnic colourations or place Nigeria and her cultural diversity on a global pedestal. According to Gbemisola Remi Adeoti, "Nollywood is limited in range and cannot accurately account for the robustness, dynamism, and richness of popular culture that goes on within the industry" (201). Sadly, this is not Nollywood's only grey area. It is also seen to either propagate foreign culture or bastardize the indigenous culture that should instead be propagated. Sufficing to say that Nollywood has somewhat become an indirect accomplice in the propagation of foreign culture. Elo Ibagere laments that "worse still is that when they are not imitating or indigenizing foreign content, they would be presenting indigenous content that does not edify the national image (550). Thus, Ibagere insists that the smaller indigenous woods are "...an African response to the invasion of its cultural ethos" (549). Based on this, there are a plethora of 'other smaller woods' (movie sub-industries) in existence today from different Nigerian ethnic backgrounds.

In the same critical way the term 'Nollywood' was assessed, the other indigenous woods are lambasted for following suit, especially since they find a prefix to add to the default 'wood', and then a sub-industry is found. Notably, Anyanwu mentions tags such as Yollywood from the Yoruba ethnic group, Urhobowood from the Urhobos, Ijawwood from the Ijawas, Kannywood from Kano (and in the context of this paper, Igawood from the Igala ethnic group) (224). Though these appellations have been tagged ridiculous, they seem to be waxing strong and becoming household names for movie productions within their source environments and beyond. With their peculiar stories cutting across history, myth, legends, etc., they restate their significance in the presentation and propagation of the people's culture, thereby making

indigenous movies reliable materials to fall back to in cultural studies across the globe. Again, it allows Nigeria to show her diverse culture, irrespective of which ethnicity puts a story on screen. In this direction, Anyanwu affirms that, be it from Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, or any minority indigenous language movie cultures like Igala (Igawood) in this paper, it manages to show an aspect, a uniquely part of Nigerian life (234). Once Nigerian movies (irrespective of what 'wood') gets out of Nigeria, they become representatives of not only Nigeria but of Africa and the entire black world (Anyanwu 235).

Given the ongoing, it is imperative that neglecting 'other woods' from the minority is seemingly impossible. This is because of the level of their acceptance within their immediate environment of origin, arising from affiliations with the language in use, setting, actors, story, and expectedly, originality, and authenticity.

Unfortunately, some indigenous movie industries face great challenges inhibiting their growth and affecting their optimal productivity, thereby reducing their chances of being recounted or recognized on global fronts. This paper examines some of these challenges with particular reference to the Igala indigenous movie industry.

2. Igawood: Historical Overview

Igawood refers to the appellation ascribed to the home movie sub-industry of the Igala ethnic group of Kogi State, Nigeria. Oja Paul Egwemi and Faith Salami note that the Igala home movie sub-industry has its root in residual folk media and ritual masquerade performances. Unlike other indigenous sub-industries like the Yoruba, they clarify that Igawood "does not have its roots in the activities of drama groups (220). This is irrespective of the fact that the earliest Igala Television Drama aired for 10 minutes preceding the discussion program titled *Iko Oluka Ameluche* (Farmer's Forum). While the TV drama lasted 10 minutes, the discussion program ran for 20 minutes weekly on the National Television Authority, Makurdi, in 1982 (Egwemi 40). Suggestively, the TV drama was first meant to enlighten the Igala populace, who were, at that time, mainly farmers. On a second note, it gave the Igala populace a sense of belonging in the then Benue state, where the Igalas belonged until the creation of Kogi State in 1991. The TV drama was not pivotal to the emergence of an Igala indigenous movie industry. Perhaps, this is confirmed by the number of years between 1982, when the TV drama started airing and 1994, when an Igala movie was produced. Moreso, the TV drama of Igala extraction remains scarce today.

The Igala ethnicity is one that is endowed richly with distinct folk forms; rituals, myths, folktales, folksongs, and actual historical events that provided materials for the earliest films of the ethnicity and that are still available, largely untapped. Aduku Armstrong Idachaba's *Ame Oboni* (1994) is noted as the first successful Igala movie, drawn from the realities of the historic events of the life and death of the Igala mornarch, Ata Ame Oboni. The movie is credited with cultural propagation and awareness. It also set the ball rolling for subsequent Igala movies, such as *Ebili D'oji Ukolonwu* (1995). The worthy of mention are *Otidi* (1998) and *Agbene* (1999), both by Aduku Armstrong Idachaba. Following these productions, other known Igala movies of that time such as "*Acholo, Akuna, Akanya, Ukwuma kpaba, Ule Achigili, Enu'fedo, Ajuma, Akanya kidubi Oya, Alachi, Abuche, Oko Abuja, Akanya Lampo, Ejufufu*, and many others graced the Igala film market"(Abdul and Musa 130). As

typical of movies of indigenous sub-industries, Igawood movies are made largely in the Igala language, with a good number of them subtitled in the English language.

3. Igawood and Global Igala Cultural Awareness: Prospects

The historical essence of a people dwells largely in their culture. For this reason, many nations and tribes exert constant efforts to preserve their original culture and sustain the same in the face of the tremendous adverse effects of globalization. The Cultural Policy for Nigeria, launched in 1988, describes culture as the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenges of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms as well as modes of organization, thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours.

The various indigenous movie industries in Nigeria are a vibrant organ in the process of the preservation, presentation, and propagation of the culture of their various ethnicities. These they do through contents and elements of their movies such as plot, theme, characterization, language, setting, music, costume, etc. In the Igala ethnicity, the indigenous movie industry, Igawood, is prospective in the process of redeeming the entire Igala tribe, which according to Emmy Unuja Ikanaba Idegu is “with the obvious threat of extinction”(53). The indigenous Igala movie sub-industry (Igawood) is a potent force in preventing projections of loss of the Igala language. Idegu points out threatened minority languages in China, Russia, Africa – Nigeria and dwells greatly on the Igala case. In Nigeria, he presents the Bauchi example where several tribes, numbering up to about 60 ethnic groups, were pronounced before 1804. Out of them, the following are listed;

Hausa, Fulani, Ajawa, Gamo-Ningi, Kubi and Mawa, Lere, Shau and Ziriya... Bure, Bole, Daza and Deno in Darazo Local Government Area... Dugiri, Dass and Giwo who are found in Alkaleri Local Government Area and so on... In partnership with the National Geographic Society, the living tongue institute of languages (in 2007) listed among the dead languages of the world, Ajawa, Gamo-Ningi, Kubi and Mawa, Lere, Shau and Ziriya, all in the present day Bauchi state of Nigeria (54).

With the after-effects of the Jihad in 1804 and what Idegu describes as “convenience or historical laziness”, all these tribes (that may have survived) have gradually been lumped together as Hausa – Fulani. This situation of subdue and total loss “is staring Igala language and people in the face (Idegu 55-56). Igawood, through her movies, therefore, bridges the gap or, as Idegu prefers, delays the extinction of the Igala language and culture.

On the national and, by extension, global front, the movies are capable of aiding speaking of the Igala language by serving as a pronunciation guide for natives and learners spread across the world; this is, in fact, potent given the controversy around an approved and generally accepted Igala orthography if it were to be written. This is, however, not to undermine the necessity for an approved/generally accepted Igala orthography.

Through movies, natives and learners of the language remain abreast or are acquainted, respectively, with the meaning of Igala names. This is because character names in most movies of Igawood are given based on the motivation for the respective roles. In clear terms, a character plays out the actual meaning of the name he bears (a pointer to the Igala culture of naming

children according to the circumstances of their birth/peculiar trait). For example, a warlord or warrior is named *Ajogwu*, a beloved daughter is called *Inikpi*, a philanthropist who does well is named *Achenyo*, and a harbinger of joy is named *Uyo*, etc. In the process, the meaning of names, good or bad are passed across. In *Anyikene* (produced by Akpa Udu, 2020), *Olo*, a man of wickedness and hot retaliation, plays out the direct meaning of the name, ‘*Olo*,’ which translates to ‘poison.’ In the same way, *Agude* (fighter) fights both physically and diabolically. *Jekeli Anwago* goes about setting friends against themselves. His name, *Anwago*, translates to trial, temptation, or examination. Such exposition may educate people about the actual meanings of Igala names, thereby making a distinction between bad ones and good ones. Truthfully, Idegu observes how “Igala parents (at home and especially outside Nigeria) are speedily assisting other challenging factors to extinct their identity inherent in the names they bear” (63). This consequently rubs off on the christening of their children, thereby accelerating the speed of extinction and irrelevance. Movies function in this regard as, eventually, the true meaning of names is expressed within the context of the character’s action such that the meaning is effortlessly passed across.

In the same way, the dress culture of the past and present are showcased via costume, which is in itself an ethnic and cultural identity. This includes all other basic cultural aspects like marriage, burial, festivals, songs, dances, etc., as well as materials such as food, colours, marks, signs, and symbols.

4. Igawood and Global Relevance; Challenges

Several factors have become a cog in the progress wheel of the Igala indigenous movie sub-industry. Some of these challenges are highlighted below;

4.1 Relatively Poor Presence on Satellite TV Networks:

Irene Isoken Agunloye observes that Nollywood is “arguably the most popular African cinema on the continent currently” (91). According to her, Nollywood’s popularity on national and international fronts is “aided by an abundance of free-to-air satellite channels that habitually show Nigerian (African) movies. In this age where CDs and DVDs are phasing out, such channels spur the interest of many Nigerians in movies with their indigenous content and, by influence, attract the attention of other tribes, nations, and races of the world, to at the least, show interest or be exposed to Nigerian (African) contents. In the same way, the existence of channels such as Africa Magic Yoruba, Africa Magic Igbo, Africa Magic Hausa, and the likes open up the consciousness of other Nigerian tribes and particularly; the Igala tribe in focus to yearn for their peculiar content on similar networks. This has not been substantially achieved. Efforts in this direction include the creation of Ufedo TV, Oma Igala TV, Igala Movie TV and works from the Arise Igala magazine team, among others. Most of these have, however, not transcended Youtube and other social media platforms. Also, the uncontrolled plurality of such platforms on social media leaves none of them as a household name. Thus, there is no popular satellite television network that is solely dedicated to the display and promotion of movies of Igawood. There is so much excitement, for example, among some Igala viewers when Africa Magic Epic, NollyAfrica, Wazobia TV, or any of their likes occasionally air movies with stories of the Igala concerns. However, most of these films are from ‘successful’ Nollywood actors and producers/actors such as Mercy Johnson and Esther Audu, Ajanigo Simeon, and recently, Thomson Makolo Jnr and Edime Edime II, who are of the Igala extraction. Their movies, however, wear a semblance of the larger Nollywood and are not rooted in or reflective

of the types that could be wholesomely called Igawood. This is partly because most of such films are guilty of the same aspersions cast on Nollywood films with respect to their leitmotif and cultural representation. The nearness of such films to the Igala people is most times only in character names and sometimes, language. Also, the same excitement and reception greet experimental Igala stories like *Inikpi* produced by Mercy Johnson and *Iyioma my Pride* produced by Godson Uzor Nwosu in 2019 (with mercy Johnson as Iyioma) despite their pitfalls of being situated largely out of their ethnic boundaries in terms of language, verisimilitude, and representation.

In essence, creating a platform (channel) on accessible satellite networks to promote movies of Igawood is a step forward in the process of placing Igawood on a wider show board. This, therefore, will increase her chances of mention in global movie analysis, at the same time, letting the globe in, on the problems, beliefs, and beauty of the part of the world where it is coming from.

4.2 The Quest to Make Profit

While Igawood is on the struggle to state her national presence and, by extension, establish her global relevance, it is already bedevilled by ‘commodification of culture’ – a phrase which Abdalla Uba Adamu describes as “industries with profit, rather than cultural aesthetics or preservation as the primary motive” (2). This phenomenon is responsible for the production of incomplete stories, lacking professionalism through its stages of pre-production, production, and post-production. Citing Ekwuazi on an instructional note to the larger Nollywood, Ayakoroma emphasizes that “the industry be organized in such manner that it goes beyond the creation of a commonwealth that is quantifiable in more than monetary terms (99). Against inordinate and excessive drive for profit, Igawood should rethink the direction of Barclays’ thoughts that “...the bastardization of the African culture could only be checked if our filmmakers produced films that would adequately promote our cultural values” (99-100).

4.3 The Star-Actor syndrome

The star actor syndrome is infiltrating into Igawood. Particular characters are sought after to appear in productions, not necessarily because of excellent acting and role interpretation but because of their public appeal. This does not only bore viewers but pushes such characters into a stereotypical zone. In the larger Nollywood, for example, the second decade of movie production made Patience Ozokwor (Mama G) a known face in the role of a wicked mother-in-law who will go to any length physically and diabolically to break a marriage, punish or destroy another character. She played such roles in a lot of movies. Few are; *My Evil Mother In-law*, *Wicked and Jealous Mother In-law*, *Alice My First Lady*, *Omugwo*, *Upside Down*, *Submission*, and *Evil woman*. Though a talented actor, such stereotypical casting became a turn off for a good number of viewers. In a similar lament but about the Hausa indigenous film industry, Adamu states that such few (perhaps less than five) came to dominate almost every ‘big-budget Hausa film. By 2017, their stars had started fading; audiences became tired of seeing them in almost the same film with different names... (20). The same fate has befallen some faces in Igawood. From the Anyigba axis (the host community of Kogi State University), Haruna Umar (Attai Edogbanya) has lost the attention he received after starring as Attai Edogbanya. This is because of the replication of the same character with different names

and in movies of different titles. He is often the funny old man, witty and with recurring Igala phrases. From Ajaka axis (Close to Ida, the ancestral home of the Igala people), there is also Agula who wore the semblance of a stock character; bearing the same character name in different titles and retaining the same traits. She is always at the centre of stories requiring a character potent with charms. “In the long run, we no longer hear their names as we use to. Also, plots from their movies are predictable and, to many, too common to behold” (Ugbede Ochalifu, Interview). Remarkably, Jonathan Haynes calls this “a notorious old habit” (81). Another dimension that this ‘notorious old habit’ thrives in Igawood is the rush to use recognized ‘Nollywood actors’ especially that may astonish the average Igala man (speaking their language, telling their story) not minding unpreparedness evident in tonal faults of Igala statements. This puts Igawood at risk if the trend continues.

Therefore, irrespective of the gradual process it demands, a long term and better acceptability are guaranteed with either the Igala people (star or not) taking lead roles in their own stories (especially told in the Igala language) for the sake of authenticity or by other people trained enough to be proficient in the correct presentation of the language. This will place mastery of the art above stardom, thereby creating new appeal for every release rather than a stereotypical import of ‘already known’ faces and repetition of already told stories using the same roles but under different titles.

4.4 Finance

The financial implication of movie production has posed a great challenge to players in Igawood. Over the years, individuals and independent producers have been the principal financiers of Igawood movies. There is no substantial support from the public sector, financial institutions, and other private sector players other than the production houses themselves. This particular challenge births others like technical pitfalls, inordinate drive for profit, and the consequent littering of the industry with substandard productions.

Putting forth productions of global technical standards requires huge funding. Given the relatively low external support, the individual/independent producers also resort to working within the limits of their resources because of their profit orientation and the obvious chances of irrecoverable loss associated with investing in movie productions. This, therefore, joins other factors in contributing to the production of substandard movies that end up within the locality of their production.

4.5 Lack of Requisite Technical Know-How

Keen observation and practical evidence have shown that the high rate of interest and passion of untrained artists in the art of movie production in Igawood supersedes the participation and involvement of trained ‘professionals’ in the field. Irrespective of this not-so-good exchange, a good number of untrained artists continue to roll out productions that are inevitably reckoned with as ‘the movies of the area’ and the sub-industry. While the subject of relative apathy by ‘trained professionals’ calls for more academic investigation, the implication is that the actual players on the field require proper training in the art to complement their talent and passion. Such training is required in scripting, acting, directing, editing, advertising,

marketing, etc. This is to enable professionalism and to measure up to generally expected standards.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined the prospects and challenges of the indigenous movie industry of the Igala ethnic group of Nigeria. Igawood, as an indigenous movie sub-industry, needs intervention and support in areas of technology, profit orientation, finance, and specialized training in areas of acting, directing, editing, scripting, etc., to enable practitioners to operate in a better standard and wider scope. The inordinate drive for profit is responsible for the littering of the indigenous movie industry with half-baked plots, stories, and substandard movie qualities. Financial support will enable proper scripting and production of several culturally relevant stories that have done great injustice of wrong portrayal or those still lying fallow. As Haynes notes, “no single African culture has expressed itself so fully and so long in the film”(69). This is even though they convey more of the grain of particular cultures (76).

We should cast thoughts on the fact that *Living in Bondage*, marked Nollywood’s first film, was made in an indigenous language (Igbo) in 1992 and was further subtitled in English. The translation came as a result of the story’s essentiality to urban Nigeria and its general acceptability. This goes in the popular parlance to say that ‘something good can always come out of the various indigenous movie industries of Nigeria.’ Meanwhile, the appropriateness of their contents and standard, which determine their relevance nationally and globally, will then be a product of how much attention is given to the indigenous industries by the government, professionals, and able (independent) individuals in the light of tackling the challenges that have been herein, identified.

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