# MORALITY AND VIDEO FILM IN A GLOBALIZED SOCIETY:

# THE NIGERIAN EXAMPLE

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**Abstract**

*Video film is one of the most potent art forms for entertainment and pedagogy. Being an audio-visual medium of socialization, it has the capacity for shaping the shared views, opinions, attitudes, beliefs and values of a particular human society. Thus, the arbitrary consolidation of disparate cultures into one whole – the global culture – portends danger to the moral codes of any society. Employing the qualitative analysis methodology, this study assesses the moral compass of Nollywood video films, using Hunted Wealth as a case in point. The focus is on filmmakers' recent obsession with quasi-pornographic themes, marked by obscenities and debauchery. The study traces this thematic shift to the gradual collapse of cultural boundaries and utter violation of the Nigerian Film and Video Censors Board Enabling Law. Tise situation has occasioned the escalation of profanity in Nollywood video films and, by extension, the Nigerian society. Consequently, the paper argues for a moderation in the acquisition of alien cultures as well as the need to censor video films before they are made available for public consumption. The intention is not to suppress immoral conducts in the Nigerian society but to portray them with the mindset of condemnation.*

## 1. Introduction

Video films mirror human society. They capture the habits, attitudes and cultural ethos of a given people. Through "the combination of sight, sound and motion…" video films "make their representation of reality very vivid to the audience" (Ayakoroma, 2006, p. 3). The audio-visual quality of the video film medium privileges it to create acceptable narratives for a

given society. This is especially so because video films capture life with a fidelity that minimizes the gap between reality and make-believe. That is, they have the capacity to influence or re-write the cultural narratives of a people, either positively or negatively. Indeed, the video film industry of any society provides an alternative means of socio-cultural documentation.

The Nigerian cinema, popularly referred to as Nollywood, has directed the attention of Nigerians to their documented shared experiences. Nwogu, citing ZebEjiro, notes that:

> Before Nigerian home video came, we watched foreign movies in our homes and during the vacuum created by the non-existence of an indigenous entertainment, the foreign movies took over the market. 90% of what Nigerians were watching was foreign movies. But when Nigerian movie came, we (the practitioners) fought the battle and the reverse is the case. Now, 90% of what Nigerians watch is Nigerian home movies, only 10% of foreign movies (Nwogu, 2010, p. 26).

The assertion above clearly demonstrates Nigerians' current preference for Nollywood video films over Western videos. Shaka observes that there is a scholarly consensus that "the video film industry in Nigeria was firmly established by the NEK video links of the chartbuster *Living in Bondage I & II* in 1992" (132). Today, the Nigerian video film industry has become a success story, in spite of its many battles ranging mainly from poor storylines to mediocre acting, directing, technical finish and the unethical compass of the video films (Omoera & Anyanwu, 2015, p. 1).

Being a docu-drama, Nigerian video films deal with both historical events and current realities that define the moral sensibilities of the people. The earliest Nigerian video films emphasize the applause and peril consequence of moral and immoral conducts, respectively. These include the incarceration of criminals, and the eternal restlessness or insanity that befalls characters who indulge in vices; or the handsome quid pro quo that awaits characters of good virtues. No doubt, this trend endeared Nigerians to the then emerging Nollywood video films.

At present, however, video film makers place emphasis on negative themes. Their tendentious obsession with glamourized obscenity, crime, rape, copulation, nudity, vulgarity, curses, indecent dressing, murder, smoking and women battery, has injected profanity in the psyche of an average Nigerian youth. This is especially so because youths tend to learn and imitate the actions of their choice screen 'idols'. Consequently, the moral fabric of the Nigerian society is being threatened with video films of obscene thematic pre-occupations. Critics have condemned this trend in the Nigerian video films. Shaka has expressed amazement that the Nigerian video films have hardly focused on serious issues such as bad leadership and corruption which have resulted in mass poverty in Nigeria (Shaka, 2011, p. 242). On his part, Ekwuazi laments, thus:

> As spiritedly as the Nigerian image project is celebrating those individuals and institutions and agencies that are proudly Nigerian, the Nigerian home video is doing the greatest damage to Nigeria and her ethnic nationalities. For the home video has continued to produce those negative stereotype images which find a resonance in western consciousness. What then happens is this: on the one hand, with its

> superior technology, the west repackages and propagates those same images; on the other hand, the western correspondent reporting Africa, filters his dispatches through the layers of those same stereotype and negative images (Ekwuazi, 2006, p. 172-173).

From the assertion above, it is apparent that Nigerian video films are laden with negative themes that blacken the image of the country on the global stage. Shaka blames this trend on "the search for financial redemption by any means necessary on the part of the video film producers" (2011, p. 243). The profit-oriented businessmen who sponsor video film production in Nigeria also dictate its direction.

Beyond the above, we must acknowledge that the scopofilic disposition of the Nigerian audience encourages immoral themes in Nigerian video films. It is against this quagmire that the present study seeks to examine the moral implications of *Hunted Wealth I and II*, with a view to proffering a way out. However, before we proceed, let us examine the concept of morality.

**2. Morality: Towards a Conceptual Framework**

Generally, morality applies to the dialectics of rightness or wrongness. It refers to a set of principles that forms the bedrock of socially accepted conventions. The moral system of a particular society differs from another's. What may seem ethical or right in a society may be abominable – if not laughable – in another. The point being made here is that scholarly attempts to define morality – as controversial as the term is – subscribe to its society-specific disposition.

Maheshwari and Suraksha (2013) explore the concept of morality beyond the societal realm. According to them, the term can apply in three contexts: "individual conscience systems of principle and judgments … moral values shared within a cultural, religious, secular, humanist or philosophical community, and codes of behaviour or conduct derived from these systems" (Maheshwari & Suraksha 2013, p. 1). This means that morality can exist at the levels of personal morals, socio-cultural morals and the morals contained in the state's Code of Conduct.

Cooper narrows these three contexts into two – positive and autonomous morality. According to him, positive morality is "a social phenomenon… a framework of rules and ideals conformity which is enforced by a distinctive kind of social pressure or sanction, 'the reproaches from one's neighbours" (cited in Singer, 1971, p. 1). Cooper's classification of morality emphasizes that autonomous morality is the set of principles developed and enforced by an individual on himself/herself. These personal ethics are subsumed into the positive morality. This researcher views positive morality as communal morality that functions on the basis of prior consensus. They serve as a model to which autonomous morality must be aligned. In other words, in the absence of societal/communal moral structure – positive morality, autonomous morality, especially of deviants, would set the society on the path of anomie. This explains why a society's ethics is widely propagated through its different media, including drama.

Aristotle is the foremost theorist to examine the issue of morality in drama. While discussing the concept of 'Reversal' – peripeteia, he expounds the kind of action and character that has the capacity to generate pity and fear in a tragedy, thus:

> (tragedy) should, moreover, imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic action. It follows plainly in the first place that the change of fortune presented must not be a spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity, for this moves neither pity nor fear, it merely shocks us. Nor again, that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity. For nothing can be more alien to the spirit of tragedy. It possesses no single tragic quality, it neither satisfies the moral sense, nor calls for pity or fear (Aristotle, 1980, p. 42).

He also states that tragedy should not entail the downfall of a total villain because it does not elicit pity and fear. Recall that pity and fear are realized when the spectator indulges in sympathy and empathy, leading to a feeling of personal danger. And since no moral spectator would sympathize with a fallen villain, his (the villain's) downfall is not a good action for tragedy. To evoke tragic feeling therefore, Aristotle posits that the tragic hero should have a harmatia – that human factor that facilitates his tragic fall. This can manifest as a miscalculation or hubris, as is the case with King Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. It is this miscalculation that trepidates the audience into imagining themselves in a possible or similar circumstance as the tragic hero. The cathartic effect emphasizes the moral lessons learnt by the audience.

The morality of any literary piece, video films included, is designed for the audience's consumption. This explains why the Neoclassicists established the French Academy to uphold such ideals of the Neoclassical age as Verisimilitude – a concept that emphasizes simulation of truth which "must be didactic and show

societal morals" (Nwabueze, 2011, p. 50). A society derives a moral system from its culture. In corroboration, Bardi, citing Shehu, notes that, "film is a powerful cultural resource and inherently laden with potency for fostering greater understanding among people of varying cultures" (Bardi, 2012, p. 108). It is against this background therefore, that this researcher shall analyze *Hunted Wealth I and II* , using the Nigerian morals codes – positive morality – enshrined in *The Nigerian Film Policy*.

### 3. The Issue of Morality in *Hunted Wealth*

*Hunted Wealth* tells the story of lust for wealth. Afam (Emma Umeh), who left village for the city and vowed never to return until he became rich, eventually returned after ten years. He is very affluent now. His relations, including Nwanyi-Igwe, his paternal grandmother, and Nwanne – his sister, celebrate his return. Afam is now a member of a dangerous secret cult which made him rich. He and his friends, Emeka Million and Chief Eddy (Clem Ohameze), live in stupendous wealth and frequently engage in multiple sex escapades. Their sex partners usually die mysteriously afterwards. Having killed many, both Afam and Chief Eddy meet their deaths in hands of their deceased wives whom they sacrificed for money. It is on this note that the video film ends.

From inception, the Nigerian video film has been accused of several offences. These range from poor storylines and themes to lack of moral lessons. *Hunted Wealth I and II* do not prove to be innocent of these charges. Afam, the protagonist, lives in extreme affluence acquired through human sacrifice. Expectedly, his return to the village after ten years, sparks off a wide celebration of his success. Every member of the community admires and glorifies him without questioning the source of his sudden wealth, considering his hitherto poor background. This glamourization of

ill-gotten wealth constitutes a tacit rationalization of his wealth and induces unsuspecting young viewers into imitating him.

The foregoing frustrates the Re-branding Nigeria Project. Afam's success after ten years is a graphic recommendation of ritual sacrifice as a reliable means of becoming affluent. "Inasmuch as these vices exist in (Nigeria), they should not be glamourized in our (video) films. Instead, they should be shown with the aim of criticizing them" (Okhakhu & Bardi, 2008, p. 234).

Chief Eddy, Afam's colleague in the secret cult, randomly copulates with young girls, who eventually die, to increase his wealth. He gives his first victim, Naomi, the sum of five hundred thousand naira (₦500, 000) after an eventful night. According to Chief, the money "is to encourage you. Next time, you do it again." Indeed, the money is enough encouragement not only to Naomi but also every other young girl in real–life circumstances. Naomi narrates her 'success' story to Betty, her roommate, and demonstrates some sexually obscene movements to drive home the point that she is extremely skillful in a bedroom situation. Continuing, she says, "Na immaculate white handkerchief e take (clean me up)." Unknown to her, the handkerchief is Chief's instrument of killing his sex victims.

Betty's expression of reservations over Chief's handkerchief provokes Naomi who insists that all she wants is money. Naomi's terminal ailment afterwards makes Betty to resist Chief's handkerchief when she eventually encounters him in a similar circumstance. Indeed, she outsmarts Chief Eddy successfully without any negative consequence afterwards. Her success can be interpreted as an endorsement of prostitution. Rather than discourage the trade of prostitution, Betty's success encourages its key players to be wise in dealing with their customers. This is a violation of the *National Film and Video*

*Censors Board (NFVCB) Enabling Law* which states that: "The Film Censors Committee shall not approve of a film which in its opinion depicts any matter which is: (a) indecent, obscene or likely to be injurious to morality; or (b) likely to incite or encourage public disorder, or crime (c) undesirable in the public interest (20). Indeed, art should sanitize the society.

Although Hegel argued against an exclusively moral art, we must exercise causion in applying his opinions. According to him, the work of art should "bring a content to mind's eye, not in its generality as such, but with its generality made absolutely individual, and sensuously particularized" (2). He contends that universalizing the arts towards upholding morality creates an antagonism between the inward sensuous feeling and creative ideas of the artiste and the conduct of law which ties him to the promotion of morality. This, according to him, reduces arts to "a toy of entertainment or a means of instructing only morality" (2). He therefore defends immorality in the arts – "we must know evil, sin, etc. in order to act morally" (2) – and calls for a kind of art that is self-contained, without being restricted by objective and natural necessity.

In contextualizing Hegel's opinion, this researcher calls for a balance. Inasmuch as immoral scenes should be presented in Nigerian video films, they should be implied and suppressed, not glamourized. The point being made here is that the protraction of pleasure derived from immorality presupposes that the gains of crime are long-lasting. In other words, a belated consequence of immorality diminishes its impact on the perpetrator. After all, there is no empirical evidence that poverty and morality guarantee long life. To this end, the prolonged enjoyment of the trio – Chief Eddy, Emeka Million and Afam – from *Hunted Wealth I* to towards the

end of *Hunted Wealth II* emphasizes the gains of immorality over an inevitable end that awaits both the moral and immoral – death.

In conclusion, the moral compass of *Hunted Wealth I & II* is equivocal. It rather widens the gap between didactic themes and the video film genre. It is for this reason that this researcher calls for stricter measures of censoring Nollywood video films before they are laid out for public consumption. Indeed, the implementation of the *National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) Enabling Law* would also encourage the injection of positive themes in Nigerian video films.

## 4. Conclusion

This study examined the subject of morality in Nigerian video films, using *Hunted Wealth I & II* as a framework for the analysis. Evidently, video film makers often glamourize nudity, murder, prostitution, ritual killing, ill-acquired affluence and other related crimes in Nigerian video films. Consequently, this emphasis on negative themes generates a corresponding harmful influence on not only Nigerian youths but also the country's image on the global stage. Based on this observation, this study calls for a strict implementation of the *National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) Enabling Law*. While advocating for the suppression of immoral acts in Nigerian video films, this researcher also preaches against the quest for profit-making over professionalism. In addition, this paper constitutes a clarion call on the Nigerian government to commence the sponsorship of video film production in the country. It is hoped that such financial intervention from government would encourage the mass participation of people with the requisite training in film arts, especially graduates of Theatre and Film Studies who may be financially unfit to produce a video film at present. Through such a move the tyranny of the money-

bag producers and marketers would be diminished and the government would have created more job opportunities for graduates of the Theatre and Film discipline.

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