



Nollywood and Churches' Oriental Fantasies: Its Impact on Art Reception, Patronage and Expression in Contemporary Nigeria

Clement Emeka Akpang

Department of Visual Arts and Technology, Faculty of Environmental Sciences, Cross River University of Technology CRUTECH, Calabar
Email: clementakpang@yahoo.com

Abstract:

The visual arts still suffer low reception and patronage in contemporary Nigeria as a result of an ongoing oriental stereotypical representation in Nollywood, the media and churches. This paper interrogates this problematic to address the subtle subversion of the arts that continues to grossly impede its development. Adopting the analytical tools of Content Analysis, this paper traces the origin of anti-art propagandism to missionary and colonial activities in Nigeria and establish its continues adverse propagation in Nollywood and modern churches. Findings from this paper conclude that the portrayal of visual arts in Nigerian movies as the instrument of dark practices and the further condemnation of the arts in churches as symbols of heathenism is responsible for the disdain towards the arts in contemporary Nigeria and responsible for its poor reception and patronage. The research contends, therefore, that both the media, Nollywood and churches must rethink their oriental fantasies about the arts because until that happens the anti-art culture inscribed in the consciousness of many Nigerians will continue to impede artistic progress and visual/aesthetic illiteracy.

Keywords:

orientalism; Nollywood; stereotypes; reception; contemporary; art; patronage; Nigeria

I. Introduction

Although art has made considerable inroads in Nigeria, the discipline is still shrouded by negative imagery and disdain. This disregard for the visual arts in contemporary Nigeria is akin to a negative cultural consciousness inscribed in the fabric of our collective existence. Visual arts in contemporary Nigeria experiences poor reception, patronage and appreciation and the cause of this contemporary menace can be traced to media activities, Nollywood fantasies and modern Churches. Nollywood refers to the brand of home movies produced in Nigeria defined by dramas that focus on Nigeria lifestyle, culture and peoples as well as contemporary existentialism inspired by global multiculturalism. The activities of the aforementioned with regards to their portrayal of the arts can be equated with Orientalism. I deploy the term Orientalism fully aware that the context of its construction by Edward Said is rooted in his deconstruction of colonialism and the West's relation to the East (that is the Orient and Occident relationship). But in a broader context, Edward Said classifies Orientalism as a system of representation used in constructing and imaging the 'Other' (imperial classification and categorisation of all cultures outside the Western mainstream). It is this representational context of the concept that is employed to deconstruct the clandestine attacks on the arts in Nollywood and the mass media through a systemic subversive and derogatory representation.

In his widely read book *Orientalism* 1978, Edward Said argues that the most dangerous weapon used during colonial subjugation is the misconstrued classification of colonised cultures through a system he described as Orientalism - a framework of representation developed as lens or compass through which to view the colonized to force them into an inferior status as sub-humans. This representation he continues was aimed at manufacturing the 'Other' for purposes of domination; it was an organised form of writing quite consistent with itself having very little to do with the actual people been represented. Orientalism was an unrealistic representation that is construed realism manufactured to create the ideal 'Other' for Europe and this facilitated their intrusion of 'Other' civilizations (Said 1978). The concept of Orientalism in Said's theory, thus, becomes a way of seeing that imagines, emphasizes, exaggerates and distorts differences. This is the philosophical mindset with which the imperial West approached Africa, Nigeria to be specific. Imperial Britain using the expedition reports of Napoleon and especially Captain Clapperton of 1825 manufactured Africa as a set of degenerate heathens, savages and naïve primitives – this was a new hyper-real stereotypical vision of the colonized to facilitate and rationalise imperial domination.

Listening to modern Church evangelicalism and watching media shows, as well as Nollywood drama in contemporary Nigeria, reveals a problematic representation of the arts that is consistent with itself which is akin to Western orientalist fantasies that manifested in the negative and derogatory representation of 'Other' cultures in the Nineteenth Century. There is a projection of negativity towards the visual arts based on stereotypes created by the colonialist and missionaries from the 1850s in West Africa. This paper focuses on analysing the problem of such orientalist fantasies and the continuous propagation of negative stereotypes about the arts in contemporary Nigeria and how such representations not only impede art appreciation but equally stifles patronage and artistic expressionism. It will first deconstruct the clandestine ways stereotypes are been propagated in Nollywood and modern Churches then describe the many ways it affects contemporary art since no essay or commentary till date has been tailored to address this new ideological attack on art through psychologically deception and colonization. But first, a bit of historiography will suffice at this point to establish the origin of art stereotypes and attacks in Nigeria and the political inclinations behind.

II. Review of Literatures

2.1 Content Analysis

Content analysis is a research tool that determines the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within a given qualitative data. It enables researchers to analyse data to establish the meanings and relationships of such words, themes, or concepts in articulating a particular viewpoint. Two main features of content analysis are central to its adaptation in this study – Krippendorff (1980) opines that it constitutes a technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying special characteristics of messages; while for Berelson (1952) content analysis is envisaged as a research technique for the objective and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication. These theories point to the fact that content analysis helps to identify the intentions, focus or communication trends of an individual, group or institution, and it reveals patterns in communication content. Applied herein, this analytical tool is used to determine the content of themes and concepts in Nollywood movies and church sermons to unearth a consistent trend of negative dramatization using art forms that contributes to promoting disdain for the visual arts. It is used to deconstruct the many ways in which art is represented in Nigerian mass media and how that affects art perception, appreciation and patronage.

2.2 Colonialism and the Origin of Art Stereotype/Attacks in Nigeria

Colonisation is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. But by a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it (Fanon 1961, pp.199).

The process of colonisation often involved warfare, deformation of existing traditional structures and interference with the cultural existence of the colonised (Ayandele 1966). This was the case in West Africa as the British government to a great extent, deformed or erased African customs and cultural values which they branded 'primitive', to impose Western supposedly 'superior' civilisation. This deformation and erasure of established traditional structures adversely altered the African continent. Missionaries sent to Africa from the 1840s paved the way for this cultural dismantling of African traditions. Coached in Western imperialist ideologies, missionary propaganda in West Africa was politically inclined (Venn 1865, pp.10).

While they arrived Africa with codified message of 'salvation' and the gift of 'civilization', they had their minds firmly fixed on the material resources of the continent (Galloway 1960), because missions were part of Western symbols of power, and "Christianity was integrally saturated as part of a larger order, comprising Western education, colonial administration, commerce and industry, with which everyone had henceforth to reckon" (Horton 1971, pp.91). With this juxtaposition of Church mission and colonialism, missionary enterprises set out to achieve a new social order in Africa using radical evangelicalism. Propelled by the idealism of a faith which they believed was instrumental to enlightenment, social progress and technological advancement, compromising with primitive values was inconceivable. Their first step was to erase all aspects of the colonised customs/cultural idiosyncrasies, perceived as stumbling blocks. This presupposition led to traditional African religion and art coming under extreme Western attacks because in pre-colonial Africa, Africans way of life was defined by traditional religious belief systems and cosmologies, thus, tenaciously adhered to the laws of the land and the ordinances of gods and ancestral spirits as templates for their existence.

This reliance on traditional belief systems and ideologies provided Africans spiritual indemnity, which missionaries and colonizers soon realized was a major hindrance to evangelicalism and a threat to the establishment of colonial rule (Goldie 1890). As Henry Carr observes, "it is to be remembered that at the initial stage work, the first duty is to create new social order; the first battle is with superstition and the old other of things" (Carr in Gallwey 1900, pp.29). To overcome these perceived hindrances, missionaries adopted a negative approach of viciously attacking African religion and its paraphernalia by branding them evil, barbaric, ritualistic, idolatry and superstitions (Bascom 1953, pp.495). This outright condemnation by resorting to stereotyping of African religion and customs was the greatest tool adopted by missionaries in their quest to reconstruct African social order and plough the way for colonial rule. This is because, by creating derogatory representations of the colonized culture and customs, the imperialist formulated a construed moral justification, a rationale to underpin the erasure of existing traditional structures in order to facilitate imperial conquest and domination. This theory is put forward on the basis that the formulation of stereotypes by the West was a strategy aimed at gaining power over the stereotyped since as Sander Gilman points out, "stereotyping was a political rhetoric to gain and exercise control over the stereotyped," (Gilman 1985, pp.21) also, because "power encourages stereotyping while stereotyping helps to maintain power" (Fiske 1993, pp.621). Projecting negative imagery unto the 'Other' became a form of power, of control and domination associated with colonialism.

The condemnation and stereotyping of African religion and art as barbaric, superstitious and evil, was rooted in this imperial philosophy of domination which Africans could not decipher immediately. Art was the fulcrum of traditional African religion and the focal point for supreme deities, resident ancestral spirits and revered natural phenomena, since “traditional African art evoked and abstracted the powers central to human life” (Hackett 1994, pp.294). It abstracted African beliefs, religion and cosmology as a result of which, it became the major object of attack by the West. Sermons were used by missions to debunk and dispel traditional ideologies/beliefs from the minds of converts, and from 1847 that Church missions established and monopolised schools in West Africa, mission schools were used as podiums for vicious attacks on African art (Ogiube 2002). From 1906 when the British government took over control of schools in Nigeria, following the blueprint set by missionaries, they omitted art from colonial schools and used military force to eradicate all forms of traditional art, as adduced by the Benin Expedition of 1897, the Ijebu Expedition of 1908 etc. Besides, the colonizers developed the racist stereotype that Africans lacked intellectual and creative capabilities to create art, to ensure that art wasn’t practised in any form in colonies under Britain and those who attempted to create art were sternly rebuked (Ogiube 2002, pp.245).

Problematically, through the adoption of the strategy of stereotyping by the West, Imperialist projected onto Africa, its arts and religion negative imagery of primitivism/barbarism, and inferiority as sub-humans. Church missionary enterprises which instigated these stereotypes did so on the paradoxical premise that African religion and its paraphernalia, prevented the colonized from attaining civilization, or gaining salvation and social progress. However, a deconstruction of colonial intent using postcolonial analytical tools and Edward Said’s Orientalism proves otherwise. The stereotyping and condemnation of African art and culture was politically driven to achieve the following; a) to exterminate traditional African religion and stripe traditional African arts of its powers thereby disorientating the natives for imperial subjugation, b) Stripe traditional African rulers of their powers and the visual symbols upon which their divine authorities where inscribed, and c) ensure the erasure of traditional African heritage, structures and reference to their very existence. But the major problematic created by church missions and imperialist condemnation and stereotyping of African traditional art and religion was the creation of a new culture of disdain for the arts and traditional values by psychological imprinting negative stereotypes about art in the minds of Nigerians using the weapons of evangelicalism, church podium and military might. That culture of art attack created by the colonialist has persisted and continues into this contemporary era with far more damaging consequences. Nollywood and Nigerian churches still propagate the same colonial rhetoric and negativity towards the arts and are responsible for poor reception, appreciation and patronage of visual arts in contemporary Nigeria.

III. Discussion

3.1 Orientalist Fantasies in Nollywood and the Mis-representation of the Arts

a. The Dramatization of Art Objects as a Mechanism for Evil

Nollywood seems to be consistent in its attack on art by continuing the propagation of the stereotypes about art created by the imperialist as a vehicle for heathenism. Although postcolonial studies have largely debunked such representation as misconstrued and politically motivated, Nollywood continues to do otherwise by propagating negative imagery that poses the biggest challenge to artistic expressionism and appreciation in contemporary Nigeria. Many home movies are consistent in their expression of two forms of narratives – on the one

hand, the narrative of the prevailing of good over evil and on the other, the canonization of westernization as the ideal form of civilization, thus, projecting the ideology that identifying with cultural norms amounts to associating with primitivism and evil. These narratives are construction of hyperrealism to foster the supposed assumption of high spiritual status in the religion of the West by the writers of such scripts. To dramatize the prevailing of good over evil, Nollywood writers draw upon physical forms as a representation of the transcendence or metaphysical realm and forces of African evil which must be destroyed. Storylines are constructed that portray the presence of evil forces in society through their physical occupation of relics or other art objects. Evil is often dramatized to extrude from a physical form to which it returns to reside after perpetuating its act. The problematic lies in the fact that following the narratives created by the missionaries in the 1850s, sculptural forms or three-dimensional art objects are mostly used in these representations. In doing so, Nollywood dramatizes art objects and artefacts as a mechanism for evil, making it appear as though art is synonymous with dark practices. This ideology is best captured when dramatizing the prevalence good to prevail over evil in Nigerian home movies. Scenes are created in which artefacts are burnt or destroyed by pastors who represent good forces, and the scenes that follow next portray the liberated society or person in a better place. In summary what they peddle in their construed fantasies in such storylines is that when art objects and artefacts are destroyed, evil disappears and good prevails then the society is transmuted from primitivism to modernity and from barbarism to civility.

b. Association of Traditionalism with Backwardness

Nollywood also constructs a representation that associates traditionalism with primitivism and backwardness. Writers of home movies create a binary of difference that separate those considered civilized in cities and the primitives in villages or the countryside. City life is canonised as modern by invoking Western cultural assimilation and identification with Christianity. On the other hand, village life is constructed by reference to traditional cosmologies, customs, food, festivities etc. This narrative constitutes seventy per cent of all Nigerian movies, thus, formulating and propagating a problematic ideology that those who identify with traditional customs automatically become primitive, evil and backward. This celebration and canonization of westernization as the compass for civility and contemporaneity is similar to the cultural imperialism imposed on Nigerians and Africa during colonialism. In contemporary society, such a narrative is adversely dangerous because it threatens to completely erase African cultural identity and uniqueness. This is because Nollywood representation creates a difference by constructing orientalist visions of communities/villages and traditional customs that are far from the real or truth and inconsistent with the lifestyle and values of people who live there. This is consciously done by the scriptwriters to sell a sense of contemporaneity constructed around modern cities and the assimilation of western lifestyle, dressing, food, culture etc., as the model for civilization, thus, influencing consumers of such movies to turn away from traditional customs and material culture which they frame as the complete opposite of civility and modernity.

In framing such anti-art scripts in Nollywood and their subsequent broadcasting through the media, it inadvertently propagates widespread disdain for the arts which in turn impede both artistic expressionism, perception and appreciation. This theory is based on the fact that the fantasies of art constructed in Nollywood are problematic/dangerous dissemination of fallacious colonial ideologies. The dramatization of art as a mechanism for evil perpetuation alienates the Nigerian artworld by constructing and inscribing negative imageries, stereotypes and fantasies about the arts in the minds of the citizenry who now continue to look at art through the negative compass dramatized Nollywood movies. The

resultant effect is the poor patronage, appreciation and the overt disdain for the art visible in our contemporary society. Galleries are often empty during private views and unlike the West, you can never see families taking day trips to galleries and museums in Nigeria to assimilate artworks on display as part of their holidays or weekend outing. Nollywood has a close companion in its anti-art propaganda and that is Nigerian churches. Christianity in Africa was developed by the missionaries on anti-art, anti-culture and anti-customs foundations and modern churches are keeping that stereotypical torch alight and unwittingly contributing immensely to damaging art reception and development in contemporary Nigeria.

3.2 Anti-Art Propagandism in Modern Nigerian Churches

In many ways, the main obstacle to appreciation and reception of art in contemporary Nigeria is the Church. Modern churches framed in colonial ideologies and Eurocentrism continue to propagate white supposed supreme religion, thus, engage in the condemnation of art especially visual arts by associating it with evil. Inspired by the construed missionary narratives contemporary churches also problematically associate the manifestation of any form of evil with the presence of artefacts. In essence for many in the religious spheres in Nigeria, art forms constitute focal points for resident evil hence are the medium by which evil reside in society. Using such misconstrued lens to look at art, churches have created a borderline between the church and the arts. In the views of many in the Christian realm, it is inconceivable to practice certain aspects of art and still be religious or spiritual. This is reminiscence albeit in a negative sense of the same narrative developed by missionaries in the 1850s, but which now forms a major feature of Christianity in Nigeria. The Church continues to advance a new culture of art attack turning the arts into the major punching bag by some men of GOD to display their supposed spiritual prowess. They demonstrate this through the destruction of art objects as the physical manifestation of the supposed spiritual overcoming of dark forces. During deliverance exercises, these religious men and women engage in such display to promote what Michel Foucault described as Pastor Power (Foucault 1979), a mechanism of psychological wheedling to colonise members for their churches. Although fully aware that spiritually evil is surpassed through prayers without resorting destruction of material culture, these religious still engage in the condemnation and destruction of artefacts knowingly or otherwise to extend missionaries stereotypes and cowing religious followers into believing their divine mandate.

Churches create narratives that associate every challenge with a metaphysical interference hence propagate the need for deliverance to free members. Although the concept of deliverance is laudable, the major problematic lies in the fact that to make such narratives believable, religious men and women interpret metaphysical realities as resident in the physical world through the presence of artefacts especially sculptural relics. And very often deliverance is said to be complete and effective done only when certain artefacts in believer's homes are destroyed by burning. What this has done for decades now is continue to add to the culture of art attack through the projection of negative stereotypes that associate art with evil hence hindering art appreciation and enjoyment. This is because churches have succeeded through such negativity towards the arts in instilling fear in the minds of followers that owning artworks almost tantamount to associating with evil. The sight of art forms especially sculptures in contemporary Nigeria stir sentiments of disdain amongst many Nigerians since the nation is highly religious. Some parents even forbid their children from studying art by threatening to disown them, which goes a long way to demonstrate the implications of churches attack on the arts. This religious attacks on the arts grossly affects artists who struggles to get clients or patronage for his or her art.

3.3 The Impact of Nollywood and Churches Stereotypes on Contemporary Art

a. Poor Reception, Patronage and Appreciation

The combine onslaughts of Nollywood and contemporary churches' orientalist fantasies of art has contributed in impeding the development of art in contemporary Nigeria in many ways. The problematic propagation of negative stereotypes about art has resulted in poor reception, patronage and appreciation of art amongst the citizenry. Nigerians show very little regards for arts since it has been drummed into the core of their consciousness through Nollywood and churches that association with art will draw the negativity of traditionalism and primitivism. As a result, some who have designated themselves Christians though exposed educationally, distance themselves from certain art forms such as sculptures. According to Yemisi Shyllon churches and the negative stereotypes about art they project through "overbearing religiousness presupposes orthodoxy, is the greatest enemy of art as religion is being used to destroy the psyche of Nigerians to art" (Shyllon 2013, pp.97). This is particularly true because Nollywood and modern churches continue to create the impression that in contemporary the context, appreciating art and having artefacts adorn ones homes, automatically amounts to paganism.

This negativity towards art developed through stereotype filters into government, so that from the government angle art is equally attacked and degraded. This is more so because many who occupy public offices are equally cowed through misconstrued church sermons. As Mamza observes,

One of the problems affecting art teaching and learning in Nigeria, is the ambivalent negative attitude of Nigerian society and the government towards the subject and lack of recognition of art by government, as well as societal misconception that artists have inferior personality constitute more problems (Mamza 2007, pp3).

Government policies on art are at best fire brigade approach or cosmetic policies when it comes to matters of art development and inclusion in national planning. Government or institutional negativism towards art occasioned by misconstrued stereotypes about art has directly led to problems of art development in Nigeria derived from the ineptitude in the administration of art and indirectly from the ephemeral interest of government. To adduce institutional disdain for art one need not look further beyond the overarching governmental emphasis on science and technology and complete relegation of art to the background (Kashim & Adelabu 2010).

The major problem with this inscription of negative stereotypes about art in the minds of Nigerians through Nollywood and contemporary churches, is the drastic reduction in art patronage. Besides turning people away from art by influencing their appreciation of the field, Nollywood and churches contribute to discouraging patronage of art in Nigeria. Outside graphic art forms used as souvenirs during social functions and political events, many Nigerians shy away from patronising artworks with subversive, abstract or controversial content or formalism. The very few who patronise art are mainly those with global orientation who see beyond the orientalist fantasies peddled in Nigeria media and churches about art expressionism. The remaining 95% of Nigerians are psychologically colonised by the misconstrued condemnation of African cultural values and material culture as primitive or barbaric, as result distance themselves from artefacts.

b. Discouraging Artistic Expressionism

The culture of art attack in Nigeria for which Nollywood and Churches are culpable, problematically discourages artistic expressionism and creativity in contemporary Nigeria. Firstly, the stereotypical representation of art causes disdain for the field and very often misguided relegation of artist to the background of society. This has overbearing impact on the contemporary Nigerian artworld in two perspectives – firstly is dampens the creative spirit of professional artists who because of low patronage and the attacks on arts shy away from engaging in the creation of highly expressive, subversive or philosophical magnum opuses which often not unpatronised. Artists in this condition are forced into penury with many abandoning the field completely for other respected and lucrative careers like banking, pastoring, politics etc., to be economically able to sustain their families. Secondly the culture of art attack leads to lack of creative engagement to the highest level in Nigeria. This is because knowing full well that only graphic communications such as poster designs, banners, souvenir branding etc., flourish and are acceptable in Nigeria, many artists abandon the creative fields of painting, sculpture, ceramics, animation etc., to pitch their tent in the functional fields of graphic communication, printmaking and fashion design. In this sense, creative thinking that combines the imagination of an artists with his technical dexterity to codify forms with content that address various notions of power to bring about societal transformation are abandoned. Thus, the arts suffer greatly because gradually artist have lost their subjective powers of expression occasioned by constant art attack and misrepresentation in the media. As Oscar Wilde opines,

The moment an artist take notice of what other people want, and tries to supply their demand, he ceases to be an artist, and becomes an amusing craftsman...an honest or a dishonest tradesman, since art is the most intense mode of individualism that the world has known (Wilde 1891, pp.40).

Art in Nigeria has unfortunately been reduced to amusing functional crafts as a result of artists been forced to abandon their creative subjectivity and imaginative individualism, to rather embrace the economically profiting genres of graphic communication and printmaking patronised many Nigerians.

IV. Conclusion

For contemporary Nigerian art to grow and become widely accepted, a re-orientation is needed to change the negativity surrounding the field informed by continues misconstrued representations propagated in Nollywood and Nigerian churches. What this research has done is to create a link between the current poor patronage and disdain for the arts with activities within Nollywood and Churches. The paper asserts that continues association of art with heathenism and primitivism is directly responsible for the decline in art appreciation, patronage and most problematically the decline in subjective creative expressionism in the arts. The Nigerian artworld as pointed out is a victim of the combine onslaught of the Nigerian media, home theatre and churches, thus, stifling its development and growth and impeding the development of individual artist many of whom have since abandon the arts as a result of poor patronage. For art to excel, government must stop the relegation of the arts to the background and begin funding the arts in the same magnitude science and technology are funded. Made in Nigeria art and products should be patronised and art/design should be repositioned for national development as is obtainable in other advanced countries. It is also contended in this paper that those who attempt to authenticate their script writing prowess by condemning the arts through derogatory dramatization should attuned themselves with the current ideology of postcolonial cultural promotion as a variant of asserting a distinct African

modernity and pride. Finally, modern Nigerian churches should begin to view art through renaissance compass where the visual arts contributed immensely to the visualisation of religious ideologies to promote worship. Until this is done, contemporary art will not be fully embraced in Nigeria and harnessed for national modern development.

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