

Nollywood: A Viable Vehicle of Public Diplomacy in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper explores the Nollywood as a viable vehicle for projecting the Nigeria's national image in the international community. National image remains a crucial and indispensable variable in any nation's quest for survival. Consequently, a developing country has to invest both human and economic resources towards building and enhancing a favourable and positive international image. Hence, the aim of the paper is to examine how Nollywood which has carved a niche for itself internationally has been able to achieve significant public diplomacy. The paper concludes by making necessary suggestions for the purpose of rapid and dramatic image redemption through cultural diplomacy.

Keywords: Nollywood, diplomacy, culture, image, films.

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1. Introduction

In recent times, Nigeria which was once referred to as the 'giant of Africa' has suffered various setbacks as a result of social political and economic factors. Also, in reality, people conversant with Nigeria's global image might argue on the justification behind this assumed status of Nigeria in Africa. But for her population strength, one might reluctantly agree with the supposed gigantic status of Nigeria. Although, the fact that Nigeria is the most populous black nation in Africa is not debatable. Yet, population index is not enough to judge the super power standing of any nation.

Nigeria ranks as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. The corruption era can be attributed to the military rule. The military leadership era was marked with the onset bribery, kidnapping, advance fee fraud, ethnic cum religious crisis, gross embezzlement of public funds, political instability, high level of insecurity and various other anomalies. The Nigeria experience at the military era was described as total madness (Nwosu 2004: 88). Hence, the need for rebuilding the international image of Nigeria becomes imperative. It is against this background that this paper reviews the Nigeria film industry, otherwise known as Nollywood as a social avenue for revamping the thwarted international image of Nigeria.

2. Public Diplomacy

The use of the phrase 'public diplomacy' can be dated back to 1856 in a leader piece from *The Times* where it refers to civility in a piece criticizing the posturing of President Franklin Pierce. But Edmund Gullion gave a modern approach to the meaning of public diplomacy in 1965 when he founded a center of public diplomacy. Wikipedia aptly describes public diplomacy as 'the communication with foreign publics to establish a dialogue designed to inform'. Also, in Okpoku (1982) view 'the process by which national interest is projected into the international arena with the view to maximizing acquisition to the world's limited human, intellectual, material and other resources which entails use of rhetoric's coercion, subterfuge, use of financial, military or other might, or by other means now known or hereafter invented national self interest is pursued; This definition adequately provides the springboard of meaning for this paper's approach to public diplomacy.

Diplomacy is the normal means of conducting international relations: Although international relations may sometimes be portrayed as a distant and abstract ritual conducted by a certain group of people such as presidents and diplomats. Nancy (2009) posits that public diplomacy is linked to power. No wonder, her submission on public diplomacy is all encompassing. She aver thus.

Public diplomacy is all about image, it is the way a country portrays her national image to other countries of the world, the relationship of a country with others which in turn becomes the image the world sees of a country..... (it) deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations, beyond traditional diplomacy. The cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries, the interaction of private groups and interest in one country with another, the reporting of foreign affairs and its impact on policy.

Public diplomacy could also be referred to as government sponsored programs for the purpose of influencing public opinions in foreign countries. Thus, considering the various definitions by scholars, it is noteworthy that public diplomacy is still as fresh and relevant in the polity of any nation. It is along this reasoning that Taylor (2009) avers that:

It is tempting to see public diplomacy as old wine in new bottles, official communication aimed at foreign publication. Image cultivation propaganda and activities that would be labeled public diplomacy are nearly as old as diplomacy itself. Even in ancient times, prestige princes and their representatives never completely ignored the potential and pitfall of public opinion in foreign land. Reference to the nation and its image go far back as the Bible.

It is crystal clear from the above submission that diplomacy has developed through history as an instrument of foreign policy.

3. The Nollywood

The development of Nollywood (Nigeria movie industry) dates back to the colonial era (Ibie 2004). Proper film production in Nigeria was piloted by the likes of Ogunde Huber and Balogun Ola in the 1960s. This portrayed the Yoruba filmmakers as the pace setter in the film industry. The Yoruba ethnic group is one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria (Akinkulore 2011).

Suffice to say that the Nollywood is ranked the third largest film industry in the world, after Hollywood and Bollywood. The Nollywood films locally outsell foreign ones and are also appreciated all over the world (Akpabio, 2007). It was actually the success of the blockbuster, Kenneth Nnebue's *Living in Bondage* that brought Nollywood into limelight in 1992. The fact that records show that over seven hundred and fifty thousand copies have been sold further strengthen the argument that Nollywood enjoys international acceptability. Thus, it is along this reasoning that Adesanya (2004) posits that 'Nollywood's appeal has reached far and beyond Nigeria, and its films are watched all over Africa and beyond. Multichoice a cable television business offers channels, devoted to Nigeria films'. In Nigeria, films are channeled through language, and since language has intrinsic relationship with culture, films, therefore reflect the culture of the people in the physical context or country. Wikipedia is of the opinion that films are cultural artifacts created by specific cultures, which reflect those cultures and in turn affect them.

The enormous roles of films can never be over emphasized in Nigeria, the roles range from being a popular source of entertainment to a powerful method for educating or indoctrinating citizens. No wonder, Dipio (2007) points out that 'although set in a particular context, and meant to cater for domestic needs. Nigerian film has become popular diet in video studios and living rooms of many African countries, and beyond. It has traversed national borders to become a money making business'. From his view, the context reflection and economic benefits of Nigeria film are highly stressed. Hence the need to examine the potential of Nollywood as a public diplomacy tool with focus on the culture.

4. Film as a Public Diplomacy Tool

Ansen (1998) cited in Okunna (1999) notes the importance of film as a tool for transporting cultural value of a people and selling a nation as a brand in the international scene. Okunna (1999) further submits thus:

Writing about the success of *Titanic* in the United States, Ansen points out, that one amazing thing about the movie is the great audience which it drew to Americans. Films draw 2% audience, but by February 1988 *Titanic* had drawn 20% of the world to Americans. Like all megahits, the movie had become a kind of religion.

A film like *titanic* has made 'Non Americans to recognize the power of America culture more than Americans themselves (Hockings 2007) as Okunna (1999) points out that the dimension of the mania that the film generated was extraordinary. It was the most successful movie ever in Mexico, in Hong Kong, in France, in Brazil. They love it in Slovenia, in South Africa. On the internet the movie website was averaging 4 million hits daily. The impact of *Titanic* became an avenue for Americans to sell themselves internationally since falling in love with the film is tantamount to falling in love with the culture that produced it.

Nigeria as a country is not left out in terms of using film for public diplomacy as Ndukwu (2010) positions that:

Nigerians can use their films to talk to the world citizens and explain the true position of things, even our fellow Nigerians abroad who are afraid to come back and invest in the economy. We can reach out to the world and consciously transmit pictures about the true situations at home. We can use our movies to explain our big brother role in Sierra Leone, Liberia, project our tourism potentials and destinations and as well attract foreign Direct Investment.

The above mentioned suggestions are made premised on the achievement of other developed countries through the role of film as a public diplomacy tool. The Americans, Indians and Chinese have reached out to the international scene with rebranding messages through their films. During the tenure Prof., Dora Akunyuli as the Minister of Information, she made landmark renaissance at promoting Nigeria public diplomacy through reorientation projects for Nigerians both Diaspora and at home. The film is not left out of the 'Rebranding Nigeria' project as Hockings (2007) agrees that 'the proposition of the electronic media (film) is no longer a tool for government public diplomacy strategy, but it is now itself capable of determining foreign policy especially, in situation of dramatic humanitarian cases, such as is enshrined in the much CNN effect'.

To Hockings, the film is not just a necessary condition but it is the sufficient condition for public diplomacy. Hence Ndukwu (2010) avers that diplomacy is no longer confined to political and economic relations its activities now embrace educational and cultural relations.

It is no doubt that Nigeria film industry has made great and positive impact on the cultural public diplomacy within and outside Nigeria over the years as film exposes people rich cultural heritage of the country.

5. Nollywood as a Cultural Diplomacy Tool

To Onyekakeyah (2009), 'anybody who has travelled abroad and had opportunity of interacting with people about Nigeria, would agree that Nollywood and Soccer had one well to lift the image of the country! In collaborating with this view, Sharka posits that if there is anything making Nigerians hold their shoulders high anywhere in the world, it is Nollywood and the other football'. These submissions portray the extent to which Nollywood has impacted on the public diplomacy of Nigerians especially abroad.

Popular artistes like Genevieve Nnaji, Rita Dominic Richard Mofe Damijo, Jim Iyke, Stella Damascus, Omotola Jolade Ekehinde, Desmond Elliot and the likes have risen in the film industry to an extent that they are treated as 'cultural ambassadors'.

Film makers in Nigeria have introduced new dimensions and other positive sides that reflect the society's norms and values. It is noteworthy that Nollywood has become a worldly acclaimed new film culture which could, when properly channelised, become a veritable tool in repositioning, rebranding and ultimately rebuilding the previously shattered image of Nigeria.

Although, Nollywood is not without its negative side that demands improvement since it will wrong to assume that Nollywood is perfect as regards cultural diplomacy. In fact, it is still a far cry from being perfect. Thus, there is the need to look into such areas with necessary recommendation for improvement.

6. Repositioning for Effective Cultural Diplomacy

Before delving into areas that need repositioning, there is the need to mention areas of weaknesses in Nollywood. To some extent, Nollywood has portrayed the unfair aspect of Nigeria culture to the international community. Mba (2006) observes this anomaly and opines thus:

Various aspects of this countries culture that is morals, values, indigenous religion political life etc have become verbatim of acclaimed negative portrayal. Negative phenomenon like, corruption, armed robbery, fraud, murder, violence, rituals, witchcraft, drug trafficking and son on has become dominating factors in Nigeria films.

This area could be perceived as weakness of content quality, just as there is poor quality production. Also, the Nigerian video censors Board and the copyright protection Agency of Nigeria are hell bent on reducing the high level of piracy that pervades in the Nigerian film industry.

Yet, the Nollywood is a double edged sword that could be repositioned to towards a positive and effective cultural diplomacy programme Ndukwu (2010) suggests that:

One of the ways to counter cultural imperialism and restore the dilapidating image of Nigeria in the global scene is through, strategic and dedicated cultural diplomacy ... Agencies like the Nigerian film corporation should be mandated to research and design procedures to pursue an articulated public diplomacy regime through our films and to ensure successful intervention in the area of pervasive cultural intrusion in our society.

Movie makers need to consistently introduce new dimensions and other positive sides that reflect our society's norms and values into stories. Although the fact remains that most negative stories represents what obtains in our society. Yet, more of cultural positive stories should be promoted for diplomacy.

Film making serves as an opportunity of showcasing the rich cultural heritage in Nigeria as stakeholders, consultants and practitioner in the film industry should themselves as cultural ambassadors that should shoulder the responsibility of portraying Nigeria's culture in right perspective. It is along this reasoning that Ndukwu (2010) suggests 'that any time we produce films, soap operas and documentaries, any time we premier a movie, any time we exhibit a film festival, anytime we screen our films in cinemas, any time we distribute video tapes, VCDs and DVDs, we should always think proudly Nigeria first'

Hence, the onus lies on the government and private individuals should be committed to contributing their quota towards the advancement of the industry.

7. Conclusion

It is high time Nigeria used Nollywood film industry to achieve objectives in the international sphere. Agba (2002) advised Africa to assert herself in international communication. Nigeria could indeed rise to the assumed status of being the 'giant of Africa'. By this, her broken image in the international community will be restored through cultural diplomacy. Hence, the Nollywood film industry is a potential tool for changing the dented image of the Nigeria.

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