

The Aesthetics of Akpogbeku, an Urhobo Home Video Film: Issues and Concerns

Mabel Ewwierhoma

Abstract

Within the Nigeria context of home videos, the Urhobo film is relatively new. This creates the need to seek and make some clarifications on what constitutes the Urhobo home video; as a home video shot in Urhobo language, or one that concerns the ways of life of the Urhobo people, or one shot on Urhobo soil? In discussing these parameters, this paper attempts to look at the Urhobo nation and how the filmic experience has enabled a rapprochement of its development and sustenance in the face of huge socio-political, economic and sundry challenges. The analyses of select films are expected to assess the adversarial environment which some of them reflect vis-à-vis the culture of the people in the face of contemporary global confrontations. As an emergent form, it is hoped that the home videos about the Urhobo would help to internalize the aspirations of the people even as they grapple with the demands of the Nigerian state.

Introduction

In recent films about Nigeria and Nigerians, it is apparent that a lot of development has taken place where output, practitioners and even the consumption of the films are concerned. I have chosen to read select Urhobo films with a view to unearth the mediation of what it means to be Urhobo.

Geiger and Rutsky see reading a film as not akin to viewing the film, as reading is more analytical and critical, 'to look beyond its obvious meaning' (19). The attention to narrative home videos from Urhobo is borne out of a concern with the culture of my home land, especially its literature and film. Most essays on the home video in Nigeria often leave out the Urhobo home video perhaps because it is a late entrant on the Nigeria home video scene.

According to Adeoti, the Nigerian home video in indigenous languages is a phenomenon. However to him:

There is a deep concern among critics, practitioners and patrons that the industry suffers significantly from technical and managerial inadequacies: Questions are often raised about originality of stories alongside poor conception and facile resolution of conflicts. Also worrisome are issues of performance aesthetics, décor, colour sound tracks, costume, make-up. The management aspect of the shooting, editing, production and distribution also reveal a need for greater professionalism and practical competence (199).

In the opinion of Cook, the home videos “have become as popular as those from Hollywood and “Bollywood” with Africa’s English-speaking audiences and have had a broad influence on Africa’s popular culture... and had developed its own star system as well as bludgeoning bootleg market” (825).

Earlier Brian Larkin had averred “video culture had thoroughly altered the landscape of Nigerian media, but it is only within the last few years that Nigerians have begun to use the technology to produce their own works” (209). Larkin opines that video culture in Nigeria “represents a fundamental shift in the structure and style of media production” and these he says are “based on the privatization of media production and consumption” (210).

The Urhobo People

Who are the Urhobo people? “The Urhobo nation consists of twenty-four autonomous republics or Kingdoms” (Website of Urhobo Association of New York, New Jersey and Connecticut). The culture, environment, history and contemporary realities of the Urhobo people therefore provide us the context from which to view the Urhobo film, its gaze backward historically and forward towards the future and in coming to terms with the contemporary world in the films. The ethnic group known as Urhobo can be found in Delta State of Nigeria. Different accounts exist of how they arrived their present abode. One of such is that they are recognized to be of Benin descent, having moved abroad from Benin during the Egbeka Dynasty. Jacob Egharevba and Onigu Otite support this claim. Another scholar, Peter Ekeh, refutes this claim as it would mean Urhobo country was uninhabited long before the Portuguese incursion into the region. According to Ekeh, “We do have a legitimate ground for proposing that Urhobo country was long settled

before the first arrival of the Portuguese in the Western Niger Delta in the early 1480s" (11). That the Urhobo people had lived in the various settlements for several centuries before the colonial contact and rule is therefore certain. To Ekeh again, "Urhobo towns do not simply represent physical space. They also bear cultural meanings, with each town serving as headquarters for its satellite sub-towns and villages" (22). They speak Urhobo language, with some variants from clan to clan.

In the words of Regina Otite, "The Urhobo are a strongly male-dominated society..." (xv). The Urhobo people are also patrilineal even when the force of matriarchy is recognized. Otite advances the fact that the five neighbours of the Urhobo people are: the Isoko to the south-east, the Itsekiri to the west, the Bini to the north, the Ijo to the south and the Ndokwa to the north-east. With this contiguity, Otite asserts that the people share a lot of cultural and geo-political affinities (2).

Historical reports detail the migration of the Urhobo people from Benin through the wetlands of present-day Rivers and Bayelsa States to their present location in Delta State. This has made two notions of the Urhobo people to emerge: as one ethnic group, or different indigenous polities.

The Entrance of Urhobo Home Video

The Urhobo home video film is a video film shot in purely Urhobo language, with or without subtitles or one that concerns the ways of life of the Urhobo people. It can also be a home video film shot on Urhobo soil, depicting the culture of the Urhobo people. This kind of film may however document the lives of the Urhobo people and may be referred to as a home video film 'about' the Urhobo people. Nevertheless, Urhobo films dwell on the experiences of the people and they have become increasingly popular among the viewing elites and commoners alike at home in Nigeria and in the Urhobo Diaspora. There are different characters in these films like the: oppressor, victim/oppressed, loyal wife, patriarchs, loafer among others.

As it is, the film industry is divided. In Okome's interview with Helen Ukpabio, the ethnic problem is summed up in her words thus:

... Nigeria today, the home video industry is about ethnicity ... if you are Ibo, you will have to find yourself trying to gather your Ibo people around you. Even amongst the Ibo people, there is also internal discrimination. There are factions amongst

themselves. This is also the case even amongst the Delta people in the industry.

There are those who come from Zeb Ejiro's place. This group is called the "Urhobo mafia". There are also factions within this mafia. There is the Isoko faction. You will surely find this kind of discrimination in the industry (3-4).

Any look backwards affords the opportunity of employing memory in productive forms. One form is the film that helps its maker to engage in 'intermediality'. Boulou Ebanda de B'beri sees intermediality in films as a means of bridging cinema practices and the discursive enunciation that connects past and present contexts (33). It speaks of (inter)connections, inter-weavings. This look also affords the viewer the chance to assess the diegesis or the *weltanschauungen* of the film, within the frame (on screen) and out of it from a historical perspective. In the opinion of G. G. Darah,

[a]bridged histories of major events and achievements of the Urhobo people and their heroes/heroines should be available in Urhobo and translations in order to inspire the younger generation to venerate them and strive to surpass their accomplishments (110).

Many Urhobo films attempt to focus on pre-colonial times but the elements of design fail to reveal this period in the home videos. There is need for technical assistance to be rendered to the producers of Urhobo films as this expertise is a major challenge. In the film chosen for this study, *Akpogbeku*, the attempt to use costume to denote a look at olden times does not succeed. This means there is need to look forward or at least at contemporary events to interpret the reality of life in Urhoboland. This forward gaze in home video films is considered by this writer to be :

- A new reality of social reconstruction through films
- Ideological base that adequately raises the viewer's consciousness
- Use of standards in film production
- Censorship of all that goes contrary to the Urhobo world view
- Local and global relevance of the films.

The above are expected to make the environment for Urhobo films to be profitable. Producers should exercise due diligence to attract attention to a committed film regime in Urhoboland. The growth of the Urhobo film industry depends much on the visibility it can attract

and sustain. The established Urhobo film makers are expected to leave legacies in terms of skills and competencies in film production. The films of Sembene Ousmane have left such legacies in Senegal. When competencies are to be grounded, film schools, universities and other institutions for the teaching of film may assist the Urhobo film industry. To Adeoti,

The existence of a robust connection between the universities as research and training institutions and the home video as a cultural production is quite essential, if the latter will develop and overcome its identified limitations. Universities are strategically placed not only to enhance the quality of service and living in the society, but also to ensure their preservation (199).

This collaboration between scholars and film makers was brokered in 1992 between the 25–28th of May. To Okome, the medium “provided for the first time a meeting ground for academics, scholars and practical workers of the film industry” (1299). He asserts further that the event brought about amity reducing the ‘the mistrust’ among the academic and practical arms of the industry before then.

The Nigerian film, ditto the Urhobo film should strongly exercise this ability to interrogate events and challenges as they help to reinvent communal ethos. The film selected for analysis is an Urhobo language film, produced in Warri and its environs. The influences in this film are mixed, a fusion of European, Edo and Urhobo influences. They are not dominant especially as the language of the film is the Urhobo language. In the film, the men play domineering roles to corroborate the fact of the Urhobo people as male-dominated. Reality in the film shows new realities of cultural transgression, as they do not owe much to tradition save for little links with history, material culture like dress style, accessories, and other tangible cultural expressions like the hat, neck or waist beads, and wrapper as well as few ethos of Urhobo life, like the system of paying fines, resort to the gods as final arbiter.

In discussing the strategy of looking back and forward, we see a deliberate attempt by the producers to actualize the peoples’ hopes, fears and challenges. There is a concrete connection between the old and the new, tradition and modernity in the film. In it however, one cannot hold onto any deliberate/conscious call for change. The producers are not change drivers who boldly cash in on the past to profit in the present and future. By this, one means the lack of an audacious or daring attempt to query the factors of the peoples’ underdevelopment or backwardness in the face of the economic

