

Chapter 7

Tackling Nigeria's Image Crisis With the Aid of Popular Cinema: A Study of Nollywood Filmmakers and the Nigeria's Nation-Branding Efforts

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ABSTRACT

Knowing whether Nollywood filmmakers are conscious of their double role as Nigeria's image makers and cultural ambassadors has always been an interesting question to ask. However, only very few empirical studies have provided a forum for answering such a question. Most of the authors who have focused on Nollywood's contribution to the Nigerian image crisis have tended to dominantly relegate Nollywood filmmakers to capitalist "videastes" who are more driven by financial gains than by the desire to build or launder the image of Nigeria. This chapter censures this myopic tendency arguing that inasmuch as Nollywood filmmakers have been contributing to the Nigerian image crisis, a good number of Nigerian film directors and producers have, in their modus operandi sought to deconstruct the negative stereotypes of Nigeria in the international scene, thereby contributing to the rebranding of Nigeria. The chapter highlights a number of ways in which Nollywood filmmakers and the Nigerian government use cinema to deconstruct the negative image of Nigeria in the international scene.

INTRODUCTION

Cinema has in recent times constituted a working instrument for nation branding. Countries such as the United States of America and India have, for some decades now, immensely exploited the nation branding potential of their respective film industries to ameliorate their image in the global scene. Indeed, the Hollywood film industry in particular has subtly contributed in spreading America's soft power in the world. This has been through the production and global distribution of films, sit-coms, pop videos

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and soap operas such as *Titanic*, *Avatar*, *Rambo*, *Terminator 1&2* and *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Santa Barbara*, *Beverly Hills* and *Cosby Show* among others which portray the U.S. as a dreamland, a paradise, an unbeatable giant in international politics and a super power “dreaded” by the most sophisticated armies on the globe. Similarly, Bollywood has contributed significantly to the deconstruction of many of old-age negative stereotypes of India. Bollywood has for instance challenged the hitherto popular idea that India is all about snake and talisman culture, poverty, high infant mortality and backwardness. It is not a surprise that, thanks partly to Bollywood and all-film cable TV stations such as *Zee World*, India is today viewed by many foreign audiences across the world as a modernizing society, a fast-developing country and a very attractive culture.

While Hollywood and Bollywood seem to have “worked innumerable miracles” respectively for the U.S. and Indian nations (as far as cultural diplomacy and the global spread of U.S and India’s soft power are concerned), Nigeria’s Nollywood seems to have dominantly done the reverse for Nigeria. Indeed, a plethora of critics have taxed Nollywood films with misrepresenting Nigeria and aggravating the country’s image crisis in the international scene (Omojuwa 2013; Ndukwu 2013; Sydelle 2016). Critics who share this position mainly consider the fact that most Nollywood filmmakers’ apparent capitalistic inclination has made them to major in the production of films that seek primordially – if not exclusively – to satisfy the interests of the Nigerian market; and which appear less interested in projecting the beautiful facets of Nigerian cultures and of life in Nigeria. These critics specifically anchor their positions in the fact that most Nollywood films tend to focus on negative themes such as voodoo, witchcraft and ritual killing, moral decadence, doctrinaire or misguided religion and poverty among others. A dominant theory endorsed by many Nigerian film critics even states that Nollywood filmmakers are less concerned with (re)-branding Nigeria and deconstructing the negative stereotypes of Nigeria (Akpabio, 2011).

Although justified by the fact that most Nollywood films focus dominantly on the negative facets of life in Nigerian communities, this theory mainly overlooks Nollywood filmmakers’ individual perceptions of their role as nation building and nation branding agents. In effect, it is rare to find empirical research works focusing directly on Nollywood film directors’ attitudes towards the concept of Nigeria’s nation branding/building. A related overlooked question has had to do with how the Nigerian government has, over these last decades, sought to tailor Nollywood film production in a way as to deconstruct some of the negative stereotypes of Nigeria and Nigerian peoples in the international scene. This chapter seeks to address these two overlooked – or rarely addressed – questions through an exploration of Nollywood filmmakers and specific government programs/institutions’ perceptions of their role as Nigeria’s image makers. Using online interviews, secondary sources and personal observations, the chapter seeks specifically to answer the following research questions: How do Nollywood filmmakers and specific government programs perceive cinema-assisted approaches to nation branding? How concretely do they participate in deconstructing the negative image of Nigeria in the international scene? And what are some of the challenges they encounter in their cinema-assisted efforts towards nation branding?

BACKGROUND

Before delving into the role of Nollywood filmmakers in the deconstruction of the negative stereotypes of Nigeria, it will be expedient to do a brief incursion into the Nigerian image crisis. This section thus focuses on a brief exploration of the Nigerian image crisis as well as a review of literature on Nollywood films’ presumed contribution to this image problem.

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