

THE HEALING WORD: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ORALITY IN NIGERIAN HOME VIDEOS¹

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Abstract

In remembrance of Nigeria's 50th anniversary, this study explores the healing of the African word. The history of the African word has been greatly affected by the history of the colonisation of Africa, for the implementation of the Latin alphabet in many parts of Africa dramatically changed communications. Thus the colonial impact on the evolution of the African word is relevant in modern age; there is clearly a correlation between the so-called crisis of the Nigerian word and the collective trauma experienced by West Africans. The nature of the Nigerian word is therefore explained using the example of Nollywood. The recovery of a pan-African experience is the subject of discussion in interviews conducted in Nigeria and the African Diaspora with some forty experts including Nigerian film-makers, producers, actors and viewers. Nigerian home videos effectively support not only the de-colonisation of Africans everywhere but are also instrumental in healing collective trauma. Thus this study links post-colonial theories with the history of the Nigerian word. This is a story of healing.

Introduction

Nollywood today is of great importance in Nigeria as well as the African Diaspora. This is not only because of its impact on media structures but especially also because of its socio-cultural implications. "The rise of video culture is [...] part of a new era in Nigerian media production" (Larkin 238). By exploring the Nigerian home video industry, the history of the Nigerian word becomes evident. Nigerian home videos therefore reflect a collective trauma which is significant for African peoples all over the world. At the same time these stories effectively support the healing-process of a pan-African experience. Hence Nigerian home video productions represent one of the most successful stories modern Nigeria is telling.

Regarding its terminology Nollywood faces major challenges. The term invented by the U.S. press in order to represent the Nigerian video film phenomenon first was used in 2002²; meanwhile Nigerian film-makers and producers have fully adopted the term initiated by the Western world. However – *Nollywood* clearly does not represent the video film industry from the North, also known as Kannywood³. The term designed in order to address the Nigerian home video industry in total actually refers to the Southern video film industry without even acknowledging the Northern equivalent. In an attempt to describe the underlying principles of an overall Nigerian film phenomenon, I name the Nigerian video film industry, Nigerian home videos or simply Nigerian video films. Nevertheless, most works related to in my analysis essentially celebrate Nollywood.

Therefore it is important to note that the approach of my work is formalistic. Instead of analysing single productions I examine the structure behind Nollywood following Marshall McLuhan's approach of a medium as the extension of man. The use of any kind of medium alters the patterns of interdependence among people, "as it alters the ratios among our senses" (McLuhan, *Understanding* 80). An exploration of the Nigerian home video industry therefore illuminates (not only) continental conditions. Interviews with some forty experts including Nigerian film-makers, producers, actors and viewers conducted in Nigeria and the African Diaspora moreover nurture a discussion on the recovery of a pan-African existence.

On Orality

Regarding all this as background information, the core of this paper is on the history of the Nigerian word; rather: the aspect of orality. Translating the term "orality" e.g. into Colonial German, it merely means "Mündlichkeit" – a term linked to a notion of culture and tradition. But basically orality is a mnemonics. Its simple function is storage. Therefore orality is a storage system of knowledge. It is a system whereby wisdom is preserved over generations.

Within time this storage system has altered. The "cultural 'book'" (Havelock, Preface vii), which contains all information of one peoples, today is stored not only orally. According to Walter J. Ong, who depicts orality as the source of modern communication, the word has transformed. Initially the word was spoken, later it was written and today the word is technologized. So, we actually find ourselves within the age of new or secondary orality.⁴

Naturally all three stages bring along different implications. The stage of the spoken word refers to a notion of the word as sound, momentary, and fading.

“The unrecorded speech act is always in a context and therefore surrounded by a time, a place, an event and an audience. No sooner is the unrecorded speech act articulated than it is embedded in a history, a real social and communicative context from which it cannot be extracted. It can be remembered and it can be reconstructed by those who were there using the fiction that the reconstruction matches the original, but it can never be reconstituted in its original context” (Furniss 72).

This concept of primary orality however does not imply that literacy had not existed. Referring to this stage as the era of the spoken word symbolizes that existent writings primary functioned as aide-mémoires. They rather activated wisdom than stored it. The actual storage of knowledge prevailed oral-aurally.

Within the second stage all wisdom was stored through script. Visuality then became the centre of culture. The denatured word gave man “an eye for an ear” (McLuhan, *The Gutenberg* 27). What happened with the emergence of alphabetic typography was not “that man discovered the use of his eyes but that he began to link visual perception to verbalization to a degree previously unknown” (Ong, *The Presence* 50). The so-called warehouse of storage, no longer acoustic but visibly material, was now extendible. A collective archive of wisdom therefore became obsolete. The solipsistic act of reading and thinking eventually transformed the consciousness of human societies. The word became fixed, and all spontaneity, mobility and improvisation of the spoken word vanished (Havelock, *The Muse* 70).

Today the word is technologized. This stage is characterized by the use of electronics for verbal communication (Ong, *The Presence* 87). Therefore secondary orality generates a sense for groups immeasurably larger than those of primary oral cultures. The „tribal village“ (Ong, *The Presence* 88) became a „global village“ (McLuhan, *The Gutenberg* 31). But most remarkably: The transition of the word transformed the consciousness of peoples.

Regarding the Nigerian context the transformation of the word has been shaped by colonialism.

A system operating on oral mnemonics, pictographics and syllographics was painfully interrupted. A smooth transition of the word therefore was discouraged. The introduction of the Latin alphabet literally replaced the fundamental oral encyclopaedia and twisted the consciousness of peoples by making them use a previously unknown storage system of knowledge. I refer to this as the *Crisis of the Word*. Thus, what does all this have to do with the Nigerian video film industry? The answer is simple. The *Crisis of the Word* reflects in its evolution as well as its productions. This paper nevertheless focuses on the actual structure of the films.

Methodology and Findings

In order to qualitatively evaluate the nature of Nigerian home videos I interviewed some forty experts of the Nigerian home video industry between April 2007 and March 2008. Interviewees were scholars, journalists, film-makers and producers, actors and actresses and the audience in Nigeria, Germany, Ghana and Zanzibar. These interviews were conducted in Colonial English and Colonial German. The average interview took 60 minutes. It was recorded on mp3 and later got transcribed and analysed.

Study Unit		Numbers
1	Scholars and Journalists	10 (9 male/ 1 female)
2	Film-makers and producers	8 (male)
3	Actors and actresses	8 (4 female/ 4 male)
4	Audience	9 (8 male/ 6 female)
5	Group interview	1 (4 female and 1 male student)
TOTAL		36

Nollywood's Social Encyclopaedia

According to Eric A. Havelock the social encyclopaedia stores the wisdom a culture of primary orality collected. It is “a sort of encyclopedia of ethics, politics, history and technology which the effective citizen was required to learn as the core of his educational equipment” (Havelock, Preface 27). Nollywood successfully re-enacts this principle. Thus, Nigerian home videos effectively store wisdom as well as they educate on traditional values.

This very principle was crucial to people interviewed. By watching Nigerian video films the viewers e.g. either learn about their own culture or other Nigerian communities. Film-makers and producers today become modern-day-poets, they become the voice of the voiceless. Emmanuel U. C. Ezejideaku links the function of the playwright to serve the society as the “watch-dog, visionary, teacher, chronicler and moral custodian” to the modern video artist (1-2). The film-maker, who her- or himself is part of the audience, very rooted in the audience's cultural and social behaviour, is also part of the making of

a new urban culture. Therefore this film-making practise narrates a vibrant part of a new social meaning (Okome, Cinema 108). Film-makers therefore imbibe the function of fulfilling a didactic axiom.

Mr. Don Pedro Obaseki, Ph.D: I recognise my role as a culture-connoisseur, as an opinion-moulder.

Mr. Bond Eyinnaya Emeruwa: I seek to educate. I seek to inform.

Prof. Aderemi Raji-Oyelade: There is a tradition among the local industry which imagines that the scriptwriters or the film-producers are also like poets. Traditional poets imaging themselves as the conscience of the people of the society who have to tell the stories, who have to tell the truth. That is saying that nobody would like to talk about it in society, so they use the medium as a means of educating, of not-advertising, as a pedagogical means of teaching, moralizing.

Prof. Durotoye Adeolu Adeleke: Using Aristotle's poetics as our basis, you must have a message to pass. Whatever you are saying must be of benefit to humanity. So, most of the Yoruba films, I can say, are didactic. They have a message to say. And they are daring, most of the time. The axiom 'A sinner will not go unpunished' is there. 'Law of karma' or 'retributive law', 'Whatever you sow you'll reap.' So, the corrupt officers are caught, the armed-robbers are killed and so on. All these things you find in Yoruba films.

Mr. Victor Okhai: The African film-maker is probably the modern storyteller in the African society. So, after watching my films I'd like the audience to be able to go home with something. A lesson of sorts, something to take away, to make you think, to ponder.

Mr. Jeta Amata: There's always that message at the end of it. This is the reason why the leopard has spots, or this is the reason why the tortoise has that big black stone on top of it. There's always that thing that you must learn from any of my films. At the end of the film there is always that last line, I can't do without it.

Moreover Nollywood works as an electronic archive of values and traditions. Nigerian home videos serve as a living archive which adopted functions collectives of primary oral-aural cultures had generated. Thereby e.g. children living in the metropolis get accustomed with the village-life resp. former times. Mr. Zack Orji refers to Nollywood as a means of "modern world preservation".

Re-Enactment Of Principles Of Primary Orality

There are seven different principles of oral-aural cultures Nollywood re-enacts successfully: Recycling, Spirituality, Stories of Every-Day-Life, Conservatism, Variability, the Spoken Word and Tempo.

Recycling

Nigerian home videos re-enact diverse principles of primary orality. These principles represent a vital part of oral-aural cultures in order to store knowledge. Nollywood recycles themes, motives, titles as well as costumes.

Mr. Alex Usifo: They're recycling the stories. Also they recycle costumes a lot. So in different movies you see the same costumes. Especially if you're able to take note of the costumier, you find out the costumier parades the same costumes almost in all the movies.

Mr. Osa George Ehiorobo: It is always the same story. Unfortunately. There have been so many films whereby before a guy meets a girl her car has a flat tire. So, this girl's vehicle has a flat tire and a guy passes by in his car. He stops. They start talking, and so on.

Mr. Ekpenyong Bassey-Inyang: If you close your eyes and watch some films and see those actors in ten movies, they're the same. They sound the same, they act the same.

Mr. Akinola Famson: If you are a producer producing let's say three films in a year and you are using more or less the same location, you're using more or less the same titles in your production, you're using the same actors and actresses. It's like you're just working in one circle. I mean, Nigeria is a vast country; there are lots of areas one can go and shoot films. But it's maybe because they are lazy, maybe because they don't really care.

Although most experts refer to this principle as the laziness of producers respectively the ignorance of film-makers, they actually ignore a vital feature of the re-enactment of orality in Nollywood. Repetition is a significant mnemonic of primary-oral cultures. This principle enables the survival of oral-aural thought. The retelling e.g. of the same story makes it possible to remember it, "and so be able to retell it in whole or part and so relish it. The repetition is linked with a feeling of pleasure, a factor of primary importance in understanding the spell of oral poetry" (Havelock, *The Muse* 71).

Spirituality

Spirituality in Nigerian video films is omnipresent, most times antagonistic: the good versus the evil.

Prof. Remi Raji-Oyelade: Most of these film-makers have a mission. They have a message. Especially those who have a religious mission usually teach towards the christianisation of the populis, the christianisation of the typical viewer or the audience of the Nigerian home video industry. There are so many films I have watched that you can always predict the end. I mean it goes back to all these morality tales, you know: Good versus evil, the satanic versus the one who is godly, the born-again who always has to triumph at the end of a struggle.

This antagonistic principle is a fundamental mnemonics of oral-aural cultures in order to secure the recollection of knowledge. "Praise goes with the highly polarized, agonistic, oral world of good and evil, virtue and vice, villains and heroes" (Ong, Orality 45).

Stories of Every-Day-Life

Nigerian video films generally base on every-day-life experiences. This phenomenon enables the audience to identify with what is shown on screen. The success of the Nigerian video industry was a result of the fact that Nigerians could identify with it (Ogunsuyi 60). Regarding the history of the Nigerian film Nollywood therefore is of great significance. "Video culture has thoroughly altered the landscape of Nigerian media" (Larkin 209).

Prof. (Mrs.) Akachi T. Ezeigbo: They take their themes from things happening in the society. I noticed that a lot. That what drives these home videos is what they see and hear around them. Most of these home videos are based on every-day-experience, ordinary experience. So, the oral culture is very healthy and strong here. Sometimes based on experiences of people. There's so much of these rituals, and kidnapping, and going to native doctors and babalawos in our films, issues of child birth, not having children, mother-in-law. So, orality is very much alive in our home video.

Mr. Ibiajulu Onyemaechi Amuro: Die [Filmemacher] haben jetzt nicht unbedingt das Bedürfnis einen richtig tollen Film zu machen, sondern einfach einen Film aus ihrem Leben. Und das finde ich einfach einzigartig. *[Those film-makers don't really feel like making a great film. They just make a film inspired by life. And that to me is unique.]*

Mr. Bond Eyinnaya Emeruwa: Now the thing is that the Nigerian movie industry was born out of oral tradition. Oral tradition is our history; it's all about telling stories. So, if you notice most of our movies are actually story-movies. So, we are not into all of this Hi-fi, that's science fiction and all that. It's mostly story-movies. And there's this emphasis on detailing the stories. So, that's actually because of our background, which comes from oral tradition.

Mr. Ekpenyong Bassey-Inyang: Sometimes most of the Nigerian stories borrow heavily from true-life happenstances. So, most of all the stories are narratives of the events that have happened in the past, and people can easily identify with that.

This characteristic moreover is a crucial factor for oral-aural communities, since "oral cultures must conceptualize and verbalize all their knowledge with more or less close reference to the human lifeworld, assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings" (Ong, Orality 42). Through this means knowledge is preserved.

Conservatism

Furthermore Nigerian video films express a conservative mind-set. While Mr. Kepy Bassy-Inyang believes this aspect to represent predominant characteristics in Nigeria, Prof. (Mrs.) Akachi T. Ezeigbo considers those images transmitted not to match the present status quo. "The woman's role in various situations as the wicked stepmother, the envious or jealous co-wife, the betrayer of family or village secret to an enemy, and the eternal gossip whose evil pastime is to sow seeds of discord" (Ezeigbo 116) to her is outdated. The re-enactment of clichés in Nigerian films however is a precious mnemonics of primary oral thought. Since in a primary oral culture conceptualized knowledge that is not repeated aloud soon vanishes, oral societies "must invest great energy in saying over and over again what has been learned arduously over the ages. This need establishes a highly traditionalist or conservative set of mind" (Ong, *Orality* 41).

Principle of Variability

Experts interviewed link aspects of spontaneity and flexibility in Nigerian home videos to a lack of creativity, complexity and continuity. Hyginus Ozo Ekwuazi asserts that "from production through distribution to exhibition, nothing is properly structured: virtually everything is on an ad hoc basis" (131). Don Pedro Obaseki even refers to Nollywood as "accidental". Jonathan Haynes notes that "many of the films [...] being made now are shot [...] as rapidly as possible, with minimal rehearsals or attention to script" (10). Once more, principles of oral-aural cultures have not been recognized. Instead of Nollywood being accidental, it rather re-enacts formulaic modes of expression. Generally, the spoken word represents itself by redundancy, simplicity and situativity. Oral cultures tend to use concepts in situational, operational frames of reference. "[They] live very much in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium or homeostasis by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance" (Ong, *Orality* 46). The following characteristics which are relevant for Nigerian home videos at the same time are crucial principles of the spoken word:

- loop holes;
- lack of continuity;
- lack of proficiency;
- improvisation resp. ingenuity;
- mistakes;
- informality.

The Spoken Word

Nigerian home videos are very oral. "Even at the electronic level, it is still a talk show" (Havelock, *The Muse* 63). Don Pedro Obaseki refers to them as "talkie". Events taking place within the totality of the film often are reported orally instead of being depicted visually. Dialogs are more crucial than action, they often are redundant. "Dialogue in these films is often tedious, lacking the crisp realistic pattern in most advanced film

cultures. Movement is sluggish, winding and monotonous, leading to overstatements and many repetitions. It is reasonable to trace this character to the oral nature of the theatre, with its emphasis on spontaneous improvisation. It is not uncommon to find lengthy dialogue scenes in these films. The audience tolerates this because it is used to this speech pattern in its everyday existence" (Okome, Cinema 97).

Mr. Cornelius Eze Onyekaba: Nigerian films remain the one that we can still describe as heavily wordy, in terms of use of words. There are some American movies, when you score the words said in the movie you'll discover that they've not used up to 2,000 words in the whole film. And when you average that against a Nigerian film of the same direction of one hour for example, you'll be shocked that the Nigerian film of one hour used 50,000 words.

Mr. Don Pedro Obaseki: When you watch a basic Nigerian movie, the first thing you will find is the preponderance of words. So, it's not really a movie, it's more like a talkie. But I don't blame the average Nigerian moviemaker because the background that he is coming from is very wordy. We are a talking people. And the country that gave us birth celebrates so much of speech. And then we have a huge story-telling culture that has been grafted onto the movies. They will keep talking about the obvious, talking and talking and talking about the obvious, talking, talking, talking about the obvious. So, they want you to tell the story rather than watch the story.

Mr. Zack Orji: I could tell you something that happened to me in a flashback, or I could tell it to you by reporting an event that had already happened. Sometimes you find in our films, instead of depicting an event that actually took place, we prefer to report that event, we prefer to it orally, have a third party telling the story of what happened, without the audience having been given the benefit of seeing it really depicted.

However, redundancy has a clear purpose: The public speaker's need "to keep going while he is running through his mind what to say next [...] encourages redundancy. In oral delivery, though a pause may be effective, hesitation is always disabling" (Ong, Orality 40). Hence, it is better to repeat something in an artful way rather than to pause while fishing for the next idea.

Tempo

Durotoye A. Adeleke states that the tempo of Nigerian films is "slow and dragged". Film-edits are usually long. "Emphasis is retained on specific actions and sequences, and shots are delayed for far greater time than it happens in the fast cutting of conventional cinema. This shows a deviation from the standard Western format of editing. This slow paced technique can not be divorced from the dialogue pattern which indigenous film has come to adopt. Because dialogue is slow and elaborate, actions tend to take longer on screen. To behold the full significance of the *word*, it is necessary to keep editing at a slower pace" (Okome, Cinema 96). Words in an oral-aural culture are

inseparable from action for they are always sounds (Ong, *The Presence* 112-113). The spoken word therefore determines the dynamics of the film. Speech itself as sound is irrevocably committed to time.

The African Diaspora

Although most experts I spoke to question the simplicity of the films, the re-enactment of principles of the spoken word is one of the major reason why Nigerian home videos are so successful. They are the refraction of its peoples. Especially this aspect reconnects Nigeria with the African Diaspora. Hence, Nollywood becomes a connector of African peoples. It allows peoples in the African Diaspora to stay in contact with home. Nigerian home videos join "Nigeria's transnational community" and its "homeland" (Okome, *Women* 5). Nollywood therefore creates a pan-African unity. It unifies Africans worldwide.

Mr. Bond Eyinnaya Emeruwa: For Nigerians, there's something that happens on their streets everyday. It's something that happened that their forefathers experienced and told them about. They heard about the story and passed it on. So, they now take it, add here a little bit and turn it into a movie. So, they can relate with it. And the same thing with every other African country, not just Nigeria. Witchcraft for example is an African fear. Go to the West Indies, there is witchcraft. Because it's from Africa. Then go to South-America. Some people say the Black man everywhere in the world has his roots in anything from the same place. So, when you tell an African story you're appealing to every Black man anywhere in the world. They are still Africans, they are Nigerians, they're Ethiopians, they're South Africans, even when they've changed their citizenship. Let me tell you something. Actually it's a population of 900 Million people living in Africa. Now, let's go to the Caribbeans, let's go to South-America, let's go to Africans in the Diaspora. So, Nollywood is definitely worth a production of well over one Billion. That is the market. These are the people that each story you will tell touches their lives. And that is the basis for the success. Because there was a market and all we did was to try to meet the need of this market. A market searching for their roots. A market that people have begun to forget their history. A market that was going to forget their background. So, the hunger was always there.

The Healing Word

So far we have explored the mechanisms of the spoken word. We have looked into various principles of oral-aural thought within Nigerian home video productions. So far we have learned that Nollywood successfully re-enacts principles of the spoken word. We are yet to investigate its function.

The re-enactment of oral principles in Nigerian home videos actually expresses the *Crisis of the Nigerian Word* we have spoken about earlier. The evolution of the Nigerian

word hence is represented within the totality of home videos. Why is that? In psychological sciences re-enactment is an essential metaphor to describe a trauma. The technique of re-enactment is used to overcome former helplessness in order to finally make a better experience (Kühner 49). A notion of glorification supports this aspect. Especially epic movies are considered authentic. The notion of an authentic culture therefore marks the past as the optimum, although the return to an “oral state of mind” (Havelock, Preface 41) has already become impossible.

Principles of re-enactment and authenticity support the individual by (re-)compensating existing disproportions. They individually assist the recovery from a collective crisis. An oral-aural mind-set therefore is recurrent in order to embed the missing into the existing. A pre-colonial past thereby becomes idealized. Orality here becomes the metonymy for African (Papaioannou 147). These principles actually support the healing of the word.

Nollywood therefore represents and enables the recovery of (post-)colonial thought and act. According to Stuart Hall the so-called African Cinema generates an imaginary completion of events (136). This makes Nollywood a powerful means of decolonization of Africans all over the world. The word is healing. And new orality encompasses modernity and tradition at the same time in order to create a new future.

Interviewees

Ms. Zuwera Abidullahi	Ms. Johni Esther Echa	Mr. Olufemi Odukoya
Mr. Ahmed Muhd. Aboud	Mrs. Mary Ehiorobo	Mr. Kingsley Ogoro
Prof. Durotoye Adeolu	Mr. Osa George Ehiorobo	Mr. Zik Zulu Okafor
Adeleke	Mr. Zeb Ejiro	Mr. Victor Okhai
Ms. Bimbo Akintola	Mr. Bond Eyinnaya	Ms. Mabel Okosuns
Prof. Maffam Al-Bishak	Emeruwa	Mrs. Ahuruchi Okwulehie
Mr. Mahmood Ali-Balogun	Mr. Justus Esiri	Ms. Folayemi Blessing Olafusi
Mr. Jeta Amata	Prof. (Mrs.) Akachi T. Ezeigbo	Mr. George Oluwole
Mr. Ibiajulu Onyemaechi Amuro	Mr. Akinola Famson	Mr. Cornelius Eze Onyekaba
Mr. Israel Opeyemi Ayansola	Muma Gee	Mr. Ikechukwu Orji
Mr. Sola Balogun	Ms. Ogechi Mbakwe	Mr. Zack Orji
Mr. Ekpenyong Basseyy-Inyang	Mr. Ulonna Mbakwe	Ms. Joy Okuchi Osuagwu
Mr. Madu C. Chikwendu	Ms. Envorh Mayo Mercy	Prof. Aderemi Raji-Oyelade
Ms. Happy Dablu	Mr. Don Pedro Obaseki, Ph.D.	Mr. Alex Usifo
Prof. Ademola O. Dasyilva	Mrs. Kassandra Odita	Ms. Tari West
Mr. Patrick Doyle	Mr. Abiodun Odukoya	Mr. Muhd. Bashir Yusuf, Ph.D.
	Mr. Doyin Odukoya	

Notes

¹ This paper is an English summary of my Ph.D. dissertation titled “Die Heilung des Wortes: Zur Bedeutung der Oralität in nigerianischen Homevideos” [*translated: The Healing Word: The Significance of Orality in Nigerian Home videos*].

² Since Kenneth Nnebue's *Living in Bondage* (1992), Nollywood's first major commercial success, this movie industry has advanced to one of the major film industries worldwide exclusively shooting *direct-to-video*.

³ Whereas Nollywood grew out of Lagos, Kannywood grew out of Kano.

⁴ Walter J. Ong's concept of orality, clearly discussed controversially, marks a significant stage in the conceptual study of orality. His pathos apparently is drawn from a white-hegemonic, Jesuitical school of thought.

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