

Influence of Nollywood Movies Representation of the Elderly on Attitudes to the Aged in Western Nigeria

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Abstract:

The portrayal of elderly characters in Nollywood movies can significantly shape public attitudes toward the aged in Western Nigeria, given the prominent role of Nollywood in Nigerian culture. Nollywood has a powerful influence on shaping societal views on aging in Western Nigeria. Portrayals that emphasize respect, wisdom, and positive aging can help foster supportive and respectful attitudes toward the elderly, while negative stereotypes can perpetuate ageism. The objectives of the paper are to examine the representation of the elderly in films and the common themes in Nollywood movies. This paper adopted the Representation Theory. The theory explains how stereotypical representations of the elderly in films are done. Certain ideologies or viewpoints which may be considered ageist against the elderly are sometimes portrayed in movies. Since media contributes to the creation and reinforcement of stereotypes, an application of this theory informs the intention to use in-depth interview to interact with film makers of the need to make movies which are anti-stereotypical representations of ageing process and the aged. The paper is a conceptual paper, which utilises secondary data based on the existing literature like journal articles, textbooks and online materials. The paper argues that in the traditional African societies the elderly are also revered. Aged members of a community are seen as culture-bearers, philosophers, professors and visionaries. The traditional Nigerian society is not left in this regard. The African world view regards old age as, reward to those who are just, chaste, kind, charitable, and upright in their doing with others. No wonder, the old people were usually regarded as living ancestors.

Keywords:

Attitudes; Elderly; Influence; Nollywood and Representation.

I. Introduction

Omotola still remembers with dread how two Yoruba movies (Koto Aye, 2011 and EranIya Osogbo, 1999, both by YekiniAyileye) she watched in her late childhood days affected her attitude to the great-grand mother and other aged members of the society. The negative portrayal of old people as witches and wizards, as blood thirsty demons eager to inflict harm on others regardless of existing relationships made her avoid contact with elderly relatives who had visited her family in Lagos for medical treatment. Her fears were made worse when a friend, who had also watched similar Nigerian movies confided in Omotola about a lady who was childless and jobless, and whose condition was alluded to the sick grandmother, according to the revelation from a spiritual mentor. Consequently, the sick old woman was abandoned by the childless and jobless daughter and her other children for fear she might cause more harm to them. With no one to care for her, the fragile old woman had passed on sorrowfully.

The above incidents appear to be a common but disturbing cultural ideology that exists in many sub-Saharan African societies (Ani & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2017; Msughter et al., 2023). Iyare, Imafidon and Abudu (2021) argued that in Nigeria, the disturbing belief in

witchcraft among the aged is wide spread and has become a source of stigma, discrimination and harm against the frail and elderly, especially in situations where younger persons in a community, kin or family die before the aged member. This thought re-echoes those of Ani and Isiugo-Abanihe (2017) who revealed that there is declining traditional support system for the elderly in Nigeria the family. This could be traced the trend of modernisation and the incidence of rural-urban migration (Vitalis et al., 2023). It is compounded by an alarming rate of youth unemployment that makes children dependent on their elderly parents at a time the parents should rely on the children for care (Adedeji et al., 2022; Msughter et al. 2023). It can be argued that when the declining traditional support system for the elderly is negatively portrayed in the media (either as feelings or opinions), it could influence attitude of the uninformed individuals to the elderly negatively.

Such representations in the media are neither out of place nor are the tendency to form stereotypes after exposure to some media contents. Studies (Jeong et al., 2022; Aondover et al., 2022; Wangler and Jansky, 2023) have shown that people can be influenced by the kind of media content they are exposed to in life. For instance, in his social cognitive theory, Bandura (2001), argued that exposure to the media played significant role in the way individuals understand their social environment. Going further, he disclosed that the mechanism by which people learn from media exposure is the same with the process by which they learn from the real world. This implies that individuals can formulate rules to guide their thoughts, beliefs and behavior after exposure to media contents. No wonder, Wangler and Jansky (2023) disclosed that the media has the capacity to shape public perception and worldview.

In film studies, a number of studies (Msughter et al. 2022) have also found relationship between what is displayed on the screen and the beliefs internalized by the audience. For instance, Dey and Tripathi (2022) disclose that the ability of filmic texts to capture various shades of reality in life, thus making them valuable in shaping mass ideologies and nurturing social possibilities. Similarly, Kumar (2022) observes that film can influence the perception of the audience about the elderly because like other mass media, its content covers religious, cultural and social values. It follows that filmic portrayal of the elderly can shape how the society treats and relates with them (Obasi & Msughter, 2023). Film is a unique means of mass communication, its audiovisual effect makes it highly impactful.

Globally, as at 2019, 703 million people were estimated to be over 65 years and the number is projected to swell to 1.5 billion by 2050. This suggests that by 2030, one out of six people will be 60 years or older, while by 2050, the population of this group will have doubled compared to 2015 (Obasi & Aondover, 2023). No country seems to be left out in this regard. National Council on Aging reveals that 56 million Americans are 65 years and older and that the population of older adults will grow to 94.7 million in 2060. The fact that there were millions care home beds in operation now in most African countries further gives credence to this phenomenon.

As in other parts of the world, the population of elderly in Africa also increased numerically. 2017 UN report on population ageing disclosed that Africa's elderly population is expected to grow faster than in any other region in the world as persons aged 60 years and over will increase more than triple fold between 2017 and 2050, from 69 to 225 million"

respectively. Additionally, for some countries with high life expectancy rate (including Malawi, Rwanda, Uganda, and Zimbabwe), the increase in its older populations will more than fourfold between 2017 and 2050.

In the same vein, Nigeria, once widely known for her youthful population now has numerical increase of the elderly. Studies (Akintayo-Usman and Usman, 2021; Msughter et al., 2020) have shown that in 1963, the total number of the elderly (i.e.65years+) was 1,178,111 (i.e. 2.1% of 55.6million of the total population); 2,907,740 (i.e. 3.1% of 88.9 million of the total population)in 1991 and 4,536,761 (i.e. 3.2% of the 140,431,790 million of the total population) in 2006. Furthermore, UN (2019) has projected that the figure will be as high as 10% of the total population by 2050. This implies that by 2050, one in every ten Nigerians will be over the age of 65years and above.

This trend is seen by many as a good trend especially in Africa, a continent also known for its lowest life expectancy rate worldwide (UNFPA, 2012; OECD, 2017). For one, it is a clear indication that the many extraordinary advances in medicine and technology and other fields all in the bid to boost is not in vain (Zaidi, 2014; Mojaye & Aondover, 2022). Moreover, older persons are known to be very productive because unlike some young people who may be easily distracted, they can work more efficiently and equally make their own contribution to national development. This could explain why most European countries have introduced some active ageing policies like increase in retirement age, flexible or optional retirement and reduced working hours for the elderly to mention but a few.

As good as the news of the increasing aging population may seem, studies (Nega, 2020) have shown such increase comes with specific numbers of social and economic and other challenges, including more health care delivery, more robust pensions scheme, improved welfare packages, education. Considering the huge advancements in medicine, communication, technology and other fields of human endeavour, it can be argued that the challenges associated with the increase in the aging population is because human understanding of the capacities and vulnerabilities of old people has been tied to pre-industrial preconceptions of ageing until recently. This fact finds bearing in a report by World Bank in Leavy (2017) that the current state of care policies and programmes in most countries of the world is ill-equipped for the increase in life expectancy and the global ageing population.

II. Research Methods

This study is therefore driven by the desire to bridge the gaps in the conceptual, theoretical and methodological progression of previous works on influence of Nollywood movies representation of the elderly on attitudes to the aged in Nigeria. The research which is located in the field of pragmatic philosophical paradigm seeks to use different research tools to unravel the research problem in order to address it accordingly (Msguhter, 2020; Leavy, 2017). Since the Nigerian film industry has been ranked as a formidable economic force in Nigeria and in the world, the study argues that film makers should be mindful of the kind of messages about ageing and the aged they project to the society in their movies as this could impact negatively on the elderly and lead them to an early grave. It is on this note that the study set out to examine how the elderly are represented in Nollywood films and to assess how filmic representations of the elderly influence audience attitude to older members of their family and the society. Within this context, this paper examines the representation of the elderly in films and the common themes in Nollywood movies.

III. Result and Discussion

3.1 The Representation of the Elderly in Films

Although studies that analysed the representation of older adults in movies are currently few and far between, the following studies widely acknowledged that older people are severely underrepresented in cinematic storytelling. A study by Centre for Ageing Better (2023) examined the inclusion of older characters in British films over the decades, how often they're included and how they're portrayed. Findings revealed that older characters are underrepresented in British films, with only one in ten older characters involved in major plotline. It also revealed that the language and imagery used across society related to ageing and older people is overwhelmingly negative. Ageing is associated with decline and ill-health, and older people are commonly portrayed as frail, vulnerable and dependent (Maikaba & Aondover, 2019).

A study by Smith et al., (2021) explored the way aging was portrayed in the top-grossing films at the United States box office in 2015. The study discovered that only 11% of speaking characters were above 60 years old. As against the paltry representation of the aged in films, the United States population has 18.5% of older people. A study by Atkinson and Plew (2017) found that besides being underrepresented, older adults are frequently relegated to peripheral roles. The above finding corroborated that of a study by Gatling in Kurfi et al., (2021) which found that the aged were often assigned roles in films that caricatured them as senile and decrepit for comic effect.

A study titled, *Over 50: The right to be seen on screen* was done by the Geene Davis Institute (2021) in partnership with Next50. The study which did a comprehensive analysis of how women aged 50 and older are depicted in leading films and scripted television series, as per Nielsen ratings, spanning a decade from 2010 to 2020 found that characters aged 50+ constitute less than a quarter of all personas in blockbuster movies and top-rated TV shows from the last decade. On-screen disparity is evident, with male characters significantly outnumbering females within the 50+ age bracket - 80% in films, 75% in broadcast TV, and 66% in streaming platforms. The study also found that characters aged 50+ are often boxed into extremes - portrayed either as frail and out of touch or as overly capable heroes and villains. For the latter case, the narrative around 50+ characters leaned more towards villainy than heroism, with 59% of films and 43.2% of TV shows featuring older villains compared to 30% and 22.1% showcasing heroes, respectively. It also showed that romantic storylines are disproportionately lower for characters 50+, with younger characters two to three times more likely to experience romance.

3.2 Common themes in Nollywood Movies

Theme is central message, idea or lesson a particular movie set out to communicate to the audience. It is the reason the film maker set out to produce the movie. The following studies speak of the dominant themes of most Nigerian movies. Speaking of common themes in films during colonial era, Merengwa (2023) posits that majority of the early films seen in West Africa skewed towards either documentary and informational content, or European propaganda. This is because films were used then by the colonial masters to justify their colonial mission in Africa by reinforcing colonialist stereotypes and the notion of European superiority. In the words of Esan (2023, p. 589), "Films continued to be political yet informative and sympathetic to the causes of governance".

This view echoes with that of Obiaya (2015) who states that film is a means of propaganda because it sells the government to the people and helps in projecting government policies; thus it plays a very important role in social mobilization and information dissemination. This explains why documentary films were the order of the day. In other words, during the colonial era, film was a tool for popularization of government policies. This trend can be seen in most of the documentaries including, *Daybreak in Udi* (1949) and even *Palaver* (1926), the first feature narrative film to be produced and screened in the country.

This view confirmed assertion by Obiaya (2015) that the interests of the British were for propaganda and educational purposes. Film was more of a medium of instruction and erudition than for entertainment. No wonder, Hyginus Ekwuazi cited in Hile et al., (2022) reiterated that colonialism produced the documentary film, but the films were made for the colonial hegemony where Nigerians functioned as minors. Hence, most of these documentaries for Nigeria were from the Central Office of Information in London for distribution by the British Council and Church Missionary Society, the British religious arm of the Empire.

During independence and the post-independence era, although, Nigeria had gained her independence from Britain, it took ten years for narrative feature film productions to be done. Merengwa (2023) attributes this to lack of training of Nigerians in narrative and feature filmmaking training. Although Federal Film Unit took the place of the Colonial Film Unit, there was no significant change in the content of films produced as the new indigenous government continued to use documentary film as propaganda tool (Idris & Msughter, 2022).

Due to the impact of theatre on the Nigerian film industry, the trend of using films as propaganda changed from 1970s to 1980s. The 1970s saw the rise of what would lead to the modern understanding of Nigerian filmmaking. For instance, Adedeji cited in Merengwa (2023) states that, typical Yoruba theatre performances had three types of characters— firstly, the mythological characters, or *orisas* (i.e. deities, conceptualized in human form); secondly, the totemistic characters (i.e. personified slogans depicting social vices); and lastly, the human characters (i.e. stranger and non-stranger elements in Yoruba society). In essence, it was common in the 1970s for playwrights and script writers to weave their stories around issues on religion, politics, and medicine (for both physical and mental health) as well as interactions between humans and spirits. Due to works of many Nigeria's early filmmakers that hit the screen then, Esan (2023, p. 593) rightly calls the 70s, "the decade for filmmaking".

After the civil war and years of military regime, due to the challenges of inadequate funds, theater became less profitable. As a result, independent filmmakers left documentary and began to explore narrative filmmaking. Hence, Nigerian films began to revolve around traditional beliefs, superstitions, spiritualism, ownership tussles, and political and social economic challenges facing individuals and/or communities. Given the hundreds of different cultural groups and religious beliefs in the nation, many of these films drew from diverse tribal stories and equally introduced indigenous language to the films. A typical example is Ola Balogun's *Amadi* (1975), the first Igbo language feature in Nigeria (Merengwa, 2023).

Following the emergence of video camera in movie production, the newfound ease of filmmaking led to an explosion in the number of films made in the 1990s. Despite their popularity locally and internationally, Nollywood movies have held a stigma of obsessive and repetitive thematic themes. Haynes cited in Ogbe et al (2020) and Merengwa (2023) disclose

that the story lines of most Nigerian movies revolved around infertility or childlessness, the problems of polygamy, inheritance issues, prostitution, sibling rivalry.

Describing Nollywood as the “most accessible form of exhibiting Nigeria’s cultural indigenous heritage”, Ogbe et al (2020, p. 119) posit that Nollywood, as the household name for the movie industry in Nigeria can be described as a potential tool for the promotion of cultural identity and national development. In other words, Nollywood explored diverse cultures and helped in exporting Nigerian’s music, comedy, fashion, religion, lifestyle and other cultures across the globe.

Talking of the recurrent negative themes in Nollywood, Udomisor and Sonuga (2012), Merengwa (2023) decry the obsession of the Nigerian film industry with the occult world (i.e. juju, black magic, sorcery, ritual murder, witchcraft), obscenity, gore, infidelity, treachery, lust, hypocrisy, armed robbery, marital problems, prostitution, kidnapping and money worship. Nigerian video films, along with their Ghana counterparts, have been described by Larkin in Taiwo et al., (2024) as a mixture of “horror, magic and melodrama”.

Due to the over emphasis of the movie industry on negative themes, the National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB), the industry regulatory body, in its guidelines for motion picture producers called for productions to be above board in portrayal of violence, crimes, sex and pornography, vulgarity, obscenity, religion and other sensitive subjects. In addition, the board, in a warning notice titled “The Need for a New Direction in Nigerian Film Content”, decried the emphasis on negative themes. This led to the ban on I hate my village for promoting cannibalism and failing to uphold Nigeria’s cultural values and seven other films including Shattered Home, Outcast 1 & 2, Night Out (Girls for Sale), Omo Empire, Issakaba 4, Terrorist Attack and Unseen Forces (Owens-Ibie & Aondover, 2024).

3.3 Theoretical Framework

This paper adopted the Representation Theory, which a Jamaican-born British Marxist sociologist, cultural theorist, and political activist propounded the representation theory in 1997. Representation theory is a communication and media studies theory that focuses on how media constructs representations and on how stereotypes are formed and used in the media. In other words, the theory is concerned with how media including film, television, and books, construct and disseminate contents that portray certain types of people, communities, places, issues or events from a specific point of view (Taiwo et al., 2024). According to Hall (2005), representation is the ability to describe or imagine. Representation is important because culture is always formed through meaning and language. This implies that the meaning of culture itself is always mediated by language to be shared with each member of culture. Hence, language is a symbolic form or a form of representation.

Hall (1997) gave the three approaches to understanding the representation process as, - reflective, intentional and constructionist views. Reflective representation is language or various symbols that reflect meaning. Such meaning is produced by a people through their ideology and culture and their experience of reality. Hence, the signs a people use to communicate with themselves reflect their true meaning because language acts like a mirror to the world. In that sense, a picture of a rose is not the same as the real plant with thorns and blooms growing in the garden.

In the same vein, media like societal mirror can only re-present real life. But unlike a mirror, the imitation of reality by the media is with an agenda. In other words, all media texts

including NEWS or documentary films, often seen as objective or realistic event are representations. It shows that even reality shows, a form of documentary cannot show reality, but rather the producer's interpretation or chosen opinion on reality (Nugroho, 2020; Onyejelem & Aondover, 2024a).

Since representations often reflect the ideology or opinions of the producers of media texts or/and other powerful forces in a society, the media messages are not neutral but are tinted with cultural, political, religious, psychological biases and much more. Hence, various shades of improper representations of reality including under-representation or misrepresentation of a group or ideology can occur. Unfortunately in media studies, older people are among the groups of people that are often under-represented or misrepresented. The other groups include women, people of colour, people with a range of body shapes and types, people of non-Christian religions, and differently-abled people (Onyejelem & Aondover, 2024b).

Tokenism is a typical example of improper representation of certain groups of people in the media. It is a form of misrepresentation where a minority or other underrepresented groups are included in a film or other media contents out a symbolic effort to make a story or environment seem equal or diverse. In other words, out of pity or fear of failing the ageless test can make a film producer feature an elderly person in a movie. In such cases, such character usually plays insignificant role. Another form of misrepresentation of certain groups of people in the media is through stereotyping. A stereotype can be described as a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of groups of people or things. Usually, such portrayals are constructed using a very narrow set of codes which are repeated often in order to make them recognisable to an audience.

Moreover, stereotype help reinforce hegemonic hierarchy. It also reduces the misrepresented groups of people down to a few simple characteristics or traits. This implies that stereotype can fix the underrepresented group of people into certain positions in which they find themselves playing the same roles again and again. This happens often in most narratives around the elderly. In most films, typical stereotypical codes for the elderly including weak, frail, grumpy, wrinkled, conservative, traditional. Unfortunately, this has resulted in the formation of a stereotype that communicates negative myths on the aged on the screen (Media-studies.com, 2024).

Intentional representation is the second approach to understanding the representation process in the media. It means how language or symbols embody the personal purpose of the producer. In other words, it is the meaning created based on the world-view of the producers of media texts (Bicesterschool.org, 2024). According to Nugroho (2020), this approach states that meaning is imposed on the world through the signs used to describe it by the producer of the signs. It follows that media representations can influence and shape peoples' opinions about real life. In other words, no media texts is neutral, the personal or subjective views of the producer is always represented. Stuart Hall's theory of representation is always very important when it comes to studying cultural texts. As a cultural text, film is not neutral. Films do not just entertain, educate or inform the audience but also try to influence the audience into having a particular opinion usually the same as those of the producers. The choice of filmic elements used or not used are all meant to achieve the agenda, reasons of the producers. If the representation is biased, people might accept the bias as truth (Gauntlett, 2019).

The theory is relevant to this study because it explain how stereotypical representations of the elderly in films are done. Certain ideologies or viewpoints which may be considered ageist against the elderly are sometimes portrayed in movies. Since media contributes to the creation and reinforcement of stereotypes, an application of this theory informs the intention to use in-depth interview to interact with film makers of the need to make movies which are anti-stereotypical representations of ageing process and the aged (Appelo, 2020). Hall (1997) calls this process 'Trans-coding'. In essence, countertypes on the elderly if frequently seen by audiences in movies can be progressive in changing negative stereotypes of the aged over time.

Constructionist representation is the third approach to understanding the representation process in the media. This is how meaning is reconstructed 'in' and 'through' language by either the producer of media texts or the audience. Hall argued that there is natural relationship between the sign and its meaning or concept. Although a producer can construct meanings by organising certain signs into media texts, the meaning constructed must tally with the conceptual maps of reality of the audience for the media text to fulfill the preset purpose. It follows that although the elements used to encode media texts could mean exactly what the producer intended them to mean, their meanings could be limited by the scope of knowledge of the audience and their locality and culture. This explains why the audience could have a negotiated or even an oppositional interpretation of the media text and not the original meaning as intended by the producers of the text (Nugroho, 2020).

Since every media representation is constructed via certain media language or codes, the presence or absence of certain language or codes can alter the intended meaning. For instance in film studies, the film makers chooses certain filmic elements including mise-en-scence, mise-en-shot, sound and dialogue and much more and edits them in certain ways to help sell the narratives they want. In this sense, there can be no one 'true' representation of reality, meaning can be contested or negotiated depending on the filmic elements used in producing the movie. Although power – through ideology or by stereotyping tries to represent a 'preferred meaning' to the audience, such meaning can be contested because the audience is active and can create different meaning from aspects of realities that is represented or not represented or that is represented in a different way.

Media representation has aided in creating a toxic manifestation of what it means to be aged in a youth-dominated society. More specifically, the exploration of aged characters in movies has opened many doors to hidden discrimination against the aged in the society (Hooks, 2019). Against this backdrop, the theory is also relevant because it shows that representation is a symbolic practice and process. Media representation may not reflect or distort reality in the real sense if the audience is well informed. This will also inform the use of social survey in the study in order to educate the audience more about media representation of the aged.

Criticists of Hall's theory suggest it overstates the role of the audience in creating meaning and underrated the power of influential media in that regard. For instance, Hooks (2019) and Nugroho, (2020) argue that often times, people with social power and privilege attempt to spread ideology within media text, pushing their preferred messaging or interpretation on the audience. The researcher agrees with this view because if audience can create meaning only if they have media illiteracy skills to understand the philosophy behind the production of some media texts. In other words, if the conceptual map of the world the

audience have is distorted and their grasp of language for the construction of meaning limited, the preferred meaning represented by the film makers will be accepted as true for them.

On the other hand, representation theory is a critical concept in media studies which explores how media texts present reality (Gauntlett, 2019). Hall (1997) suggests that identities of any group of people are not fixed but are constructed and represented through media. The theory throws more light on how media use images, language, and symbols to represent identities and ideas overtime.

As stated above, the study adopts the theory because concept of representation is key to understanding how film makers create certain perceptions and identities of the aged into their movies. Movies often use stereotypes, codes, and conventions as shortcuts to convey particular meanings on the aged to the audience. Media representation has aided in creating a toxic manifestation of what it means to be aged in a youth-dominated society. The theory therefore underlines the importance of considering different possible positive positions on ageing process in creating effective movies on the aged (Hooks, 2019).

IV. Conclusion

This paper examines the influence of Nollywood movies representation of the elderly on attitudes to the aged in Western Nigeria. The paper argued that aging is a natural process. During the ageing process, the body system wears out, becomes frail and is prone to a number of health-related challenges such as, cardiovascular diseases, deformed body physique and structure as well as partial loss of memory, and poor vision and other health challenges that could easily lead to death. Thus, the elderly naturally need more care. This duty tends to fall on the younger, more energetic members of their family as well as other social institutions. No wonder, many world religions and cultures, teach that the elders should be respected and cared for because they are embodiment of wisdom. In the traditional African societies the elderly are also revered. Aged members of a community are seen as culture-bearers, philosophers, professors and visionaries. The traditional Nigerian society is not left in this regard. The African world view regards old age as, reward to those who are just, chaste, kind, charitable, and upright in their doing with others. No wonder, the old people were usually regarded as living ancestors.

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