

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

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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 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, interweavings. 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 worldview
- 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, film makers was brokered in 1992 between the 25-28 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 production, the location or localization of oil industries in Urhoboland. Perhaps the lack of a confrontational stance against oppression is deliberate and a means of playing the ostrich. It may also mean the fear of censorship or criminalizing the production of the films as a struggle that supports militancy or insurgency. Again the involvement of the Urhobo business class in film production is minimal. G. G. Darah declares that "Urhobo performers are among the most celebrated in Nigerian film and video"(113).

This brings into focus a discussion I had with a film producer, Alhaji Muritala Sule, based in Abeokuta, Nigeria. Both of us observed that well-known Urhobo film producers called the Urhobo Mafia by Helen Ukpabio, hardly support the Urhobo film. He mentioned some names and we noted the seeming lack of devotion to films about their natal society. Sule noted specifically, Chico Ejiro's involvement in *Aiyemale*, a Yoruba detective film which brought him much fame and popularity. Sule and this writer wagered that if the same attention is paid to the Urhobo film industry by Ejiro and others more aesthetic improvement will be seen in Urhobo films. The involvement of the different guild members of Urhobo stock in Urhobo films will definitely augur well for the film producers in particular and the Nigerian film industry as well as the audience in general.

Akpogbeku (Evil World)

The opening montage of this film is a river and lush banks with the tropical rain forest at the background. Alone-fisherman is seen in a canoe on the river. This occurrence provides for high aesthetic prospects for the film. This provision fails in the end. In Oghomore village, the king has no male heir and intimates his two brothers of the opportunity for each to ascend the throne after his demise. It would seem the king fueled the evil succession bid of Ikutegbe when he did not pick the older sibling Udumbraye. In Urhoboland, kingship is not always by the right of primogeniture. Bids or tussle for succession are often announced by interested candidates. Hence the saying: 'a suvwen Ovie', meaning 'you struggle to be king'.

Ikutegbe the evil younger brother plans to and eventually murders Udumbraye the good elder brother by poisoning his meal. He declares at a point "I will do anything to become king in this Oghomore ...". The wife Evuarere is implicated in this struggle between evil and good and

the triumph of the latter over the former. She is accused of killing her husband. At the end there is poetic justice after the child conceived by Evuarere before Udumebaye's death is born and delivers the land from oppression. It should be stated here that characterization in the film is flat and often exaggerated. The style in *Akpogbeku* elicits a narrative that is modestly detached from the Urhobo aesthetics of performance, style and communication. A look at some factors concerning value for beauty in the Urhobo contemporary zeitgeist refers here. To start the analysis of aesthetic issues, the film is undated. The king's palace is not designed to suit what an ambitious individual would commit murder to occupy. The palace has no ceiling and should have been painted in local murals. It is worrisome that the costumes are dull and the blue striped loin cloth is the same for the two brothers, and the two maidens on the way to the stream. When the women storm the palace, the costumes they adorn are also of dull stripes. Obviously the cloth is commonly used as window blinds in several homes. Costume should differentiate characters, depict diversity, in terms of age, thought, role, but this is not the case in *Akpogbeku*. In another village, Ochuko ties the same loin cloth. Too much time is spent to discuss the theft of cassava by Odjegba's wife, who is fined for theft. This focus on the morality of the people depicts non-tolerance of theft. This norm is not shifted to the contemporary sphere which unfortunately tolerates social deviance in the form of official corruption. The prime of place kola acuminata or the kolanut occupies in Urhobo hospitality is shown. Udumebaye offers Ikutegbe kolanut and enters his room to get this basic requirement to welcome a guest when his food is poisoned.

Furthermore, the facial marks of the characters are designed amateurishly and not appealing. By the middle of the film, the designs and tattoos on the actors bodies start to fade. This is fallout from the poor design of the film, as evident in the staff of office of the king that is obviously wooden and improvised. In terms of sound however, there is much to delight the ears in terms of the rhythm, tone and voice quality in the songs and music in the film. One can wager that sound is a challenge in early Urhobo films. A case in point is the scene at the shrine when Ikutegbe precedes the villagers to unsuccessfully beg the priest to poison the water of the gods Evuarere must drink to prove her innocence. Here, it is obvious the microphone is either distant from the location or is inadequate to record sound at the scene. When it is a long shot, sound is muffled, but if close up or medium shots are executed, sound becomes more audible. Camera movement is minimal in the film as we see very few side to side camera movement or pan.

There is much conflict at the interpersonal, inter-communal and group levels in *Akpogbeku*. This dissension is evident in many Urhobo films and is evident in the titles of the films, like *Oshenye*, (Oppression) *Ogbiru*, (Evil Deeds) *Avwoboso*, all connoting oppression. These titles also reveal the harsh environment in which the people live as they are not at one with one another.

Narrative and Filmic Style in *Akpogbeku*

The opening sequence of the film shows the physical environment of the people and how it flows away. I have discussed some aspect of the camera language, in terms of the pan and use of montage shots to tell the *Akpogbeku* story. It is obvious that the environmental discourse should meet with the history of the people to forge a potent discourse on how they want to live their lives. The film producer should pay much attention to camera techniques or style in newer films, like editing, camera movement, duration, speed and intensity of shots.

Filmic diegesis of the producer in *Akpogbeku* reveals his point of view that enables the individual or his idea to be emphasized rather than the communal general. It is the absence of much of this communal general that weakens the film. In it, is revealed a people oppressed, without a sense of direction evident in the use of shots. The film is weak in technical expertise/strength, evident in FRAME CLUTTERING, at the palace. In the frame, actors are compressed within the frame, with inadequate head room or space to engage in business. At other times, actors unnecessarily fill the frame as seen in the ululation scene when Udumebaye dies.

I wager here that the consumption of Urhobo home video films as they are presently produced may only last for a while for as the audience taste improves, the viewership of these home videos will decline, they may start to compare the local films with the ones produced elsewhere, say Lagos, Benin, Onitsha, Idah, and other film production centres. For now, to judge the Urhobo home video from the perspective of older ethnic home video traditions may be unjust. Nevertheless the cost may outweigh the benefits if at the same price the Urhobo home video is purchased, other well-produced films can be obtained in the same market. So the context within which to look at the Urhobo film is that in which it finds itself, within the

framework of Urhobo aesthetics. Shutting these films in from contrastive connections may not also augur well for their producers or consumers.

Conclusion

The culture, environment, history and contemporary realities of the Urhobo people continually provide us the context from which to view the Urhobo film in its gaze backward and forward towards coming to terms with the world in it, and in the context of the films. The time has come for the audience to determine the films that do well artistically and financially, and the ones that show the producers do not only think of money or profit. Urhobo films make a weak entrance into the space of films in Nigeria. Perhaps lack of know-how or expertise on the part of the producers affected the films. If the choice of location is adequate, the design of sets and the consideration of viewers' appeal should matter to the producer as they contribute in no small measure to a film's aesthetics.

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