

The Emergence of a Committed Nigerian Documentary Filmmaker: Femi Odugbemi

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Abstract

This is an appraisal of the works of a committed Nigerian documentary filmmaker. It is motivated by the discovery that there is paucity of materials in the area of documentary film and Femi Odugbemi, a contemporary Nigerian filmmaker has been doing so much using the documentary format as a tool for the promotion of the nation's cultural heritage. The corpus of this study is his domestication of the film format in addressing several issues relating to the political, economic and social matters of Nigeria. His training and style of filmic narration are also considered in locating his driving principles and subsequent concentration on subjects that are basically Nigerian and Nigeria alone. The use of both historical/analytical methodology and empirical field study to look at his works show that Femi Odugbemi is convinced of the power of documentary film to investigate, expose and persuade the viewers in a particular manner and he has continued to exploit it in his attempt at playing a part in the development of his country, Nigeria. This study clearly exposes the contributions of Femi Odugbemi in the political, social and economic development of Nigeria using the tool of documentary film production. It also brings to the fore the uses to which the documentary film can play in the day to day activity of man in his quest for documentation. He also provides an alternative profession for the teeming youths of Nigeria in the face of employment challenges.

Introduction

According to Ekwuazi, "the documentary attained its highest significance in Nigeria in the days of the Colonial Film Unit" (1987, p. viii). Films like *Daybreak in Udi* and *Community Development* are among the documentary films made in the period, he explained. Shaka (2002, p. 12) explains that the first generation filmmakers were student of the Accra Film Training School, where they trained essentially as documentarians. In this respect, they were protégés of the John Grierson School of Documentary of the Old Empire

Marketing Board's Film Unit. These documentarians include Adamu Halilu, A. Fajemisin, J.A. Otigba and Mallam Yakubu Aina. He argues that after the re-christening of the C.F.U to FFU, documentary films like *Empire Day Celebration in Nigeria* (1948), *Small Pox* (1950), *Leprosy* (1950) *Port Harcourt Municipal Council Election* (1950), *Queen Elizabeth II Visit to Nigeria* (1956) were produced under the supervision of N.F. Spurr (Shaka, 2002, P. 12).

Films in Nigeria during the post-independence era were classified into four major groups. Ekwuazi (1987, P. 11) documents the foreign documentary, indigenous documentary, foreign feature film and the indigenous feature film as the four major groups of film during the post-independence era. He lists out documentary films by the government up till 1985. Majority of their films deal with festivals, visits, tours, festac, fire hazard, chieftaincy installations, trade fairs, drug abuse, military transition to civilian, etc.

The practice of documentary in Nigeria as already established in the study has been on, without a conscious delineation of the generic classification due to lack of public interest and existence of critical standards for its practice. Documentary has continued to be produced mainly by Nigerian filmmakers commissioned by institutions or individuals for personal or institutional gains. Before 1960, the film industry in Nigeria could be defined in terms of distribution and exhibition. According to Shaka, "The introduction of instructional cinema in colonial Africa was born out of the desire to use the medium as a vehicle for instructions, mobilization, and community development." (1999, P. 27).

Ekwuazi (1987, p. 123) corroborates Shaka's claim by listing some of the main type of films in distribution circuit between 1941 and 1950. They include:

- A. Films to show the military might of the British
- B. Films to stimulate interest in the Empire
- C. Films to stimulate interest in food and cash crops (Agriculture)
- D. Films to depict government activities
- E. Health propaganda films
- F. Films showing development in education.

He goes on to state that "the documentary attained its highest significance in Nigeria in the days of the Colonial Film Unit (1987, p. viii). Although Ekwuazi notes that the list is by no means exhaustive, giving that the Federal Film Unit's productions could not be accessed due to their non

interest in documentation. He posits that even the best known documentary, *The Award Winning Nigeria* is excluded from this catalogue. He also argues that being the oldest film unit attracting higher budget, it must have produced more than all the states put together. The Nigeria Television Authority was and is still a fertile ground for the practice of the documentary film productions. The establishment has recorded the highest number of documentary films in Nigeria. He explains that the list is incomplete because those of the Federal Film Unit were not included; that the unit does not seem to have taken much interest in documentation. It was impossible for instance to obtain any catalogue from it.

The post-civil war years of phenomenal rise in urban crime and the devaluation of the Nigerian currency as a result of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), affected cinema generally and this motivated the return to television by independent producers. When it became difficult for the independent producers to sustain their programmes on air due to high air-time, they withdrew and this ushered in foreign soaps and documentary films. The success of Nek Video's *Living in Bondage* in 1992 opened yet another door for the independence producers who faced feature films that are celebrated today generally.

The glamour of the film industry has continued without any record of remarkable development in the area of documentary. In 2006, Sandy Cioffi produced a documentary titled *Sweet Crude* (2006) and Jamie Meltzer produced *Welcome to Nollywood* (2006); an overview of the rapidity, unusual and enterprising manner in which films are made in Nigeria. It placed emphasis on the works of Izu Ojukwu and Chico Ejiro. The same year also recorded the production of *This is Nollywood* (2007) by Franco Sacchi which x-rayed happenings in the thriving industry. *Check Out* (2007) by Bond Emeruwa documented interviews of actors and filmmakers who defended their acts. The documentary film *Good Copy and Bad Copy* released in 2007 by a Danish documentary film company, recounted how Nollywood films are poorly churned out. The trend continued in 2008 with the production of *Nollywood Babylon*, co-directed by Ben Addelman and Samir Mallil for a Canadian film company and the Documentary Channels. In 2010, *The Nigerian Scam (419)* and *50 Faces of Nigeria Documentary* was released respectively.

This paper is aimed at exposing one of Nigeria's committed documentarians, Femi Odugbemi. He has used the format extensively that he is worthy of appraisal.

A Biography of Femi Odugbemi



Femi Odugbemi

Femi Odugbemi was born on the 24th of May, 1963. He trained in Film and TV Productions at Montana State University, Bozeman, United States. He worked for a couple of years as a producer at KUSM Channel 9 TV station in Bozeman, Montana. Upon his return to Nigeria, he worked as a film and radio producer at Lintas Advertising and later Associate Creative Director at TTB-McCann, Lagos. In these places, he wrote, directed and produced several notable documentary films, dramas and commercials. Since 1999, he has worked as an independent producer and director. His films have been selected for screening at different forum. They include: *Ibadan, Cradle of Literati* and *Bar Beach Blues* officially selected at Memphis festival 2009, *Maroko* screened at Lagos International Film forum 2006, *Ibadan, Cradle of Literati* selected at Lagos Int'l Film forum, *Bariga Boy* selected at the 3rd Black Heritage Festival 2010, *Mama Put* selected at the 3rd Black Heritage Festival 2010, *Oriki* selected at the 3rd Black Heritage Film festival 2010, *Ibadan, Cradle of Literati* selected at the 3rd Black Heritage Film festival

2010, *Mama Put* officially selected at the African Film Festival 2010. His works include the following:

Life in Lagos (2003)

Oui Voodoo (2005)

Metamorphosis (2006)

Bar Beach Blues (2004)

Ibadan-Cradle of Literati (2008)

Bariga Boy (2009)

Oriki (2010)

Change Today (2010)

Nigeria Good People, Great Nation (2011)

A Beautiful Life: Tribute to Tayo Aderinokun (2011)

Keeping Hope Alive (2010)

And the Chain was not: The Story of Freedom Park Lagos

The Orange Chronicle (2010)

Between 2002 and 2006, Odugbemi was president of the Independent Television Producers Association of Nigeria (ITPAN). In that capacity, he also chaired the Lagos International Forum on Cinema, motion Pictures and Video in Africa, an international film festival that attracted participants and professionals from across the world. He served as well on the Steering Committee of the Motion Picture Council of Nigeria (MOPICON), appointed by the Honourable Minister of Information and Communication. He is a member of the Adversary Board of the School of Media and Communications (SMC), Pan African University, Lagos, Nigeria. He is on the Board of Lufodo Academy of Performing Arts (LAPA) and he is the International Advisor and Consultant of the Orange Academy, Lagos.

In November 2010, he won the award of Entrepreneur of the Year, by the alumni of FATE Foundation Nigeria, a business institute in Lagos. He is currently the CEO, of Dvworx Productions, Lagos, Nigeria.

A Panoramic Survey of Femi Odugbemi's Documentary Films

Bariga Boy, is a documentary recounting the antecedents in the traditions of Nigerian theatre pioneers like Hubert Ogunde and Wole Soyinka. In that tradition, art speaks not only of society but harshly to society. It is theatre for social re-engineering. Multi-talented artiste, Segun Adefila, leads the most active and sought-after dance-theatre group in Nigeria. They are called the Crown Troupe. With average age under 20, they are a mix of young and

energetic street artistes, creating performances that have stirred local and international attention.

Using a unique blend of music, dance and drama, Segun Adefila, founder and artistic director of the Crown Troupe has carved a niche for himself and his army of young devotees, with works that expose in biting satire, the contradictions of the Nigerian society and the failure of leadership in government. For one so young and so talented, it is a choice fraught with risks.

But the motivation of the artiste and inspiration for his works come from his experience and his environment. Bariga is his home, where he was born and bred. Bariga is also one of the enduring slums in Lagos mega city, known for its extreme poverty and deprivation. No light, no roads, no water. Out of the hardship of this experience springs the music and drama of the Crown Troupe. Their works are more than art for art sake, but it is really a cry for attention. It is a memo from the powerless to the powerful by Femi Odugbemi.

Another of his work is *Ibadan- Cradle of Nigeria Literati*: Ibadan once considered largest city in West Africa, which brims with the sort of effortless history and enchanting persona that have caused a great many memoirs and reminiscences. Who can resist the shifting spaces of this enigmatic city, profiled severally and metaphorically in both rust and gold? Of the greatest interest to many in the world of art and culture, is the city's reputation as the sprouting patch of Nigeria's noble literati and creative elite. Ibadan fathers a clan of the greatest of Nigeria's literary and creative giants – Amos Tutuola, Fagunwa, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, J.P. Clark, Mabel Segun, Ambassador Segun Olusola, Femi Osofisan, Niyi Osundare, Akin Mabogunje, Kole Omotosho, Dapo Adelugba and a host of others.

By historical accident or design, Nigeria's first University is located in Ibadan. How much did that encourage the premier publishing houses to locate in the city as well? And could a combination of these realities have influenced the explosion of literary and artistic activities and productions in Ibadan in the first few decades of Nigeria's independence? Or is it in the character of the city itself? Could anything in its war-mongering beginnings or its history of political turbulence suggest that it will in future metamorphose into its ironic reputation as a creative enclave with a laid-back pulse? The answer can be pictured in this documentary film by Femi Odugbemi. In the documentary film "*Ibadan –Cradle of Nigerian Literati*," the historical, cultural, social and political convergences that have bestowed

it, deservedly, with prominence as the cradle of the creative arts in Nigeria, is documented by Femi Odegbami.

The next documentary is *Metamorphosis*. It is the musical journey of Steve Rhodes, tracking the evolution of culturally significant musical journey in the voice of Steve Rhodes himself, and that of the unlikely array of young and old Nigerian artistes with whom he collaborated. With the death of Rhodes in 2008, this piece by Femi Odugbemi would become the only documentary ever produced on the life and times of this great Nigerian music maestro.

The documentary chronicles Steve Rhode's musical journey in terms of training in the best music conservatories in Europe and in terms of how he is firmly rooted in the fundamentals of classical orchestral. His consciousness and focus on the appreciation of the music form as a platform for African cultural renaissance is exposed. The structuring of African traditional and urban music in classical and jazz Orchestra forms by the maestro who adapts and creates native compositions and arrangements that form the basis of his life-long agitation for research, preservation and promotion of African music can be seen in the documentary.

Femi Odugbemi also has in his stable *Oriki*. For the Yoruba people of southwest Nigeria and a lot of cultures across Africa, a name is more than a means of differentiating one person from another. It is a serious and time-honoured means of giving a newborn child an identity. Amongst Yoruba families, a name communicates the rich, colorful and vibrant heritage and history of families. It also informs their hopes and aspirations for the newborn. "Oriki" is the oral Yoruba poetry chanted in salute of history and heritage, often reaching back hundreds of years.

Globalization trends have led to the blurring of borderlines, geographically and culturally. Indigenous cultures are dissolving, clearing the way for one unified global phenomenon. Increasing urban shifts and a strong emphasis on global compliance have left important aspects of cultural identities under attack. And as more people adopt western ways of thinking and understanding, the threat of extinction becomes more glaring, more imminent, and more inevitable. Questions arise: Are we losing our sense of self? Is there a chance for us to recover this heritage? Is progress in the age of globalization and the preservation of our cultures and historical heritage incompatible aspirations? *Oriki is* Femi Odugbemi's journey through time to uncover the mystery and implications of "Oriki" as a lost art.

Oui Voodoo is a fact-based documentary that celebrates the richness of African culture and the conflict of spirituality of the African man.

Theophane is an African man living in Port Novo, Benin Republic. A journalist by profession, he believes he is not spiritual in the African sense until he is confronted by a dilemma. An unsolicited message from a seer commends him to appease the gods of his ancestors or face an uncertain future. Theophane Patinvoh's dilemma is a metaphor for the spiritual conflict of the modern African man. Today, the modern African man must resolve his spirituality, essentially "choosing" between two cultures - that of his ancestors and that of the colonialists that introduced other religions like Islam and Christianity. This scenario is what many now recognize as perhaps the lasting legacy of colonialism - the loss of "spiritual identity" of the African man. This confusion is perhaps most pronounced in the religious practices of our people. In Benin Republic, the people have artfully managed to combine their indigenous religion with what was left behind by the colonialist. Perhaps it's the urban educated elites, who must resolve and reconcile themselves to the reality of their cultural heritage.

Change Today, is a documentary on the gains of the leadership of Rotimi Chibuike Amaechi in Rivers State, Nigeria, as a governor. From its beginning as the resource rich delta to the bustling state it is today, Port Harcourt, the Rivers State capital has always been the unexpected: a bridge between the west and the east. For centuries, Port Harcourt, Rivers State Nigeria, more affectionately known as "pitakwa," is today a vibrant melting pot of ideas, cultures and people. *Change Today* captures the human and infrastructural developmental strides of the Amaechi led administration by showing completed and on-going projects in the state. It also accommodates the reaction of the residents of the city as they express their feelings as it concerns the present administrations performance. The documentary shows that although the state is local in its perspective, but global in its outlook, Port Harcourt has evolved uniquely, where age-old traditions and cutting edge innovations are celebrated, a place brimming with unbridled energy and bursting with potential.

Bar Beach Blues is a metaphor for the "scratch-card" personality of many people in Nigerian politics, business and religions - you always need to look beyond the surface to see the truth of the characters you are dealing with. With biting humor, *Bar Beach Blues* exposes a Nigerian society bedeviled by corruption, fraud and hypocrisy. It exposes a typical busy day on the Lagos Beach. Highlife musicians serenade the environment, a group of young friends play beach volley ball and card games; a blind old beggar sits on a tree trunk; a beer seller is busy under her raffia shade. "Area boys" puff away on marijuana, down the stretch of sand, a Prophet prays fervently

for a woman; a young man emerges at the heart of this story. He suffers rejection from women...even in his fantasies he sulks in despair. Like bees to honey, various characters show up offering him help for his “woman problem”. A loudly offensive charm seller offers spiritual help, a prostitute offers her body...he resists until he wanders into a “Man of God“. Passionate prayers follow and the Prophet assures the revelation of a solution - a necklace which costs N500.

Bar Beach Blues is an x-ray of an urban yuppie that enjoys a fun day at the beach. He enjoys the attention of a beach belle until he falls asleep in stupor. When he wakes, the girl is gone, so is his expensive mobile phone. He has been pick-pocketed while asleep. He searches for the phone to no avail. He suspects everyone and searches everywhere: the blind man, the kids playing nearby, Area Boys, he finds no help. At last, the kindly beer-seller woman organizes help for a fee.

Nigeria, Good people, Great Nation is a short documentary on Nigeria as a country of great potentials and promises. This presentation promotes Nigeria as a destination of great opportunities. It explores Nigeria as a business hub, with hospitable people that are full of life. It speaks broadly to the rebranding efforts geared at positioning the country amongst the world’s best economies in the future.

A Beautiful Life is a tribute to Tayo Aderinokun, co-founder of Guaranty Trust Bank, one of Nigeria’s top financial institutions. A man that simply gave to everyone he came across that had compelling need, a man that invested his wealth in building one of Nigeria’s best educational institutions – Day Waterman College, where he provided scholarship for indigent students. About 30% of the school enrolments are on scholarship; a great lover of the arts that invested in the arts hugely.

Keeping Hope Alive is a documentary on sickle-cell anemia. It is an attempt by the documentarian to correct the age-long impression that it is a death sentence. It is directed on the rural communities where the belief is born out of ignorance and misinformation. It is a documentary optimistic and hopeful with a simple message. Sickle-cell is explained to be a genetic condition that is serious and more common than we think; but with proper awareness and right medical management, anyone can live a full and productive life. It is also an appeal for all of us to support the Sickle-cell Foundation in Nigeria in the fight to keep hope alive.

And the Chain was Not, focuses on the Broad street prison which was built 50years ago as a place of restraint and suppression. Today, that same space is known as Freedom Park – a place of creativity and

imagination. Self expression has overtaken the history of suppression and oppression. It is a performance to salute the existential space where human spirit is relentless in the pursuit of liberation.

Odugbemi, an acclaimed documentarian is in love with the format generally. This can be deduced from his consciousness of the uses of the documentary film format as a tool for creating a correspondence with his art and context, celebrating his country, and as such he addresses the culture, politics, and economy respectively. The ardent documentarian is dedicated to his art and purposefully too as expressed by him below:

I believe I am a documentary filmmaker. I am a filmmaker of conscience. Whether documentary or drama, I am not into entertainment for entertainment sake. My creativity is my power to expose issues that enrich the people of our culture (Odugbemi, 2012).

Odugbemi's documentary films are deliberately rooted in Nigeria. According to him:

My interest is basically, culture, politics and democracy; creating correspondence between the art and development. A filmmaker in Africa must not think of himself as a mere filmmaker but think himself in the context of the developmental challenges of the country in which he lives. Art comes from the context and we get our content from our context. For me documentary allows me to use the power of filmmaking to create correspondence between my art and my context. I think a lot of the films I make are celebrations of my country. I also challenge us to look at the developmental issues. That is basically my philosophy. Capturing the essence of our art and delivering it globally (Odugbemi, 2012).

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FILMOGRAPHY

Title *A Beautiful Life* (2011)

Duration (15min)

Genre: Documentary

Producer/Director: Femi Odugbemi

Production Company: Dvworks

Title: *Nigeria, Good People, Great Nation* (2011)

Duration (8mins)

Genre: Documentary

Producer/Director: Femi Odugbemi

Production Company: Dvworks

Title: *Change Today* (2010)

Duration: (20mins)

Genre: Documentary

Production/Director: Femi Odugbemi

Production Company: Dvworks

Title: *Keeping Hope Alive* (2010)

Duration: (15mins)

Genre: Documentary

Producer/Director: Femi Odugbemi

Production Company: Dvworks

Title: *The Orange Chronicle* (2010)

Duration: (20mins)

Genre: Documentary

Producer/Director: Femi Odugbemi

Production Company: Dvworks

Title: *Oriki* (2010)

Duration: (28mins)

Genre: Documentary

Producer/Director: Femi Odugbemi
Production Company: Dvworks

Title: *Bariga Boy* (2009)
Duration: (30mins)
Genre: Documentary
Producer/Director: Femi Odugbemi
Production Company: Dvworks

Title: *Ibadan - Cradle of Nigerian Literati* (2008)
Duration: (50mins)
Genre: Documentary
Producer/Director: Femi Odugbemi
Production Company: Dvworks

Title: *Metamorphosis* (2006)
Duration: (50mins)
Genre: Documentary
Producer/Director: Femi Odugbemi
Production Company: Dvworks

Title: *Oui Voodoo* (2005)
Duration: (25mins)
Genre: Documentary
Producer/Director: Femi Odugbemi
Production Company: Dvworks

Title: *A'bobaku* (2008)
Duration: (30mins)
Genre: Short Film Drama
Producer/Director: Femi Odugbemi
Production Company: Dvworks

Title: *Bar Beach Blues* (2004)
Duration: (30mins)
Genre: Feature Film
Producer/Director: Femi Odugbemi
Production Company: Dvworks

Title: *Life in Lagos*
Duration: (45mins)
Genre: Documentary
Producer/Director: Femi Odugbemi
Production Company: Dvworks