The Pragmatics of Film Language and Sentence in the Creation of African Myths in Nigerian Movies: An Evaluation of Obi Emelonye’s The Mirror Boy

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INTRODUCTION

African myths evidently form the spine or serve as a major source of raw materials for the Nigerian filmmaker in telling a story through motion pictures. African myths are stories of African origins, usually concerning some beings, heroes or events without a determinable basis of fact or a natural explanation, especially one that is concerned with deities or demigods and explains some practice, rite, or phenomenon of nature. These stories apparently are inherent in the African cosmology. African myths form the basis for the explanation of some situations that surpass human comprehension. William Bascom explains that:
Myths are prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past. They are accepted on faith; they are taught to be believed; and they can be cited as authority in answer to ignorance, doubt, or disbelief. Myths are the embodiment of dogma; they are usually sacred; and they are often associated with theology and ritual.

The characters in myths, most often, are not human beings but they do have the attributes of human characters. Myths within the African context appear to deal more with the gods, the re-incarnation of the dead, the origin of the worlds and mankind, the appearing of the dead to the living as seen in Emelonye’s film, *The Mirror Boy* (2011). Myths apparently are contained within the belief systems of Africans. The social function of myths according to Ben Halpern, “is to bind together social groups as wholes or, in other words, to establish a social consensus” (137). Myths are, therefore, sacred parts of African culture and the need to preserve and sustain them appears to be underscored by their burgeoning deployment in Nigerian films otherwise referred to as Nollywood.

Myths seem to be a part of African oral literature and therefore are passed down from one generation to the other via oral traditions. The oral nature of myth makes its preservation and sustenance endangered. Evidently, African myths have time and again been represented in Nollywood as Jeremy Nathan observes that “there are four main genres in the Nigerian video film: The voodoo or ghost stories, love stories (romance), historical epics and gangster stories” (109). It appears that most of the Nigerian films that deal with supernatural issues such as witchcraft, religious beliefs, and reincarnation are influenced by well known mythological stories within the African environment. The representation of mythological reality in Nollywood film is a laudable achievement by the Nigerian filmmakers in preserving and sustaining African myths which is an important part of the Nigerian belief system and values. However, the representation of mythological reality of Nigerian and African extractions as seen in Nollywood films is not without blemish. The inability of the filmmakers sometimes, to represent through motion pictures mythological characters that can conform to the superstition and potency ascribed to these characters in the popular mythological stories appears to water down the touted efficacy and sacredness of the myth and thus create room for doubts in the mind of the viewing audience(s).

The authenticity and sacredness of some aspects of the African belief system appears questionable because of the poor representation of mythological characters in some Nollywood films. The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to examine the craftsmanship in *The Mirror Boy* (2011) as regards the use of mythological reality with a view to properly guide intending filmmakers who may be conceiving the thought of integrating mythological characters in the telling African stories through motion pictures. In view of the foregoing, we are confronted with finding solutions to factors that militate against the actualisation of mythological characters such as gods and the reincarnation of the dead in motion pictures. These characters should be represented in a manner that the viewing audience should willingly suspend disbelief according Schaper, Eva and become submerged in the world of these mythological characters. What are the viable technologies and technique a film director can use for the realisation of true-to-type mythological characters? More so, the representation of actual reality or the everyday occurrences in society appears to be more easily identified by the viewing
audience. The depiction of mythological reality apparently requires more critical articulation otherwise the creation of the intended illusion of reality will not be able to achieve the intended make-believe effect. It is in this regard that this chapter, through an evaluation of Obi Emelonye’s *The Mirror Boy* will attempt to point out the poor depiction of African myths and proffer solutions towards the realisation of mythological characters in Nollywood films which are capable of eliciting the required make-believe from the viewing audiences(s).

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

According to Rollo May, “the nature of myth is different from the story we read today. More than just storytelling, some scholars consider myth as a way of making sense to the physical world...” (178). Rather than merely being an imaginative story, myth is a narrative resurrection of primeval reality. “It is a reality believed to have once happened during the primitive times and continuing ever since to influence the world and human destinies” (Malinowski 101). Even though the content of myths appear unrealistic and irrational, they are widely accepted to be true in primitive African society and such beliefs still obtain even in contemporary African society. The contemporary Nigerian playwright, novelist, poet and moviemaker do rely on the myths as sources of raw material for the creation of art. Faber and Mayer observe that “nowadays we can still see many traces of myths not just in book but also in mass media such as artworks, music and movies” (310). Myths therefore could be said to be still influencing the contemporary society, including Nollywood content creators.

The characters in mythological stories seem to be archetypal characters. It is in view of this that this chapter adopts the theory of archetypal symbolism as postulated by Haung-Ming Chang et al as theoretical framework. Haung-Ming Chang et al based their postulation on Carl Jung who in 1981 proposed the theory of archetypes claiming that there exists an inherent tendency in the way human beings unconsciously experience the world. The theory of archetypes explains how the symbolic meaning of myths in our unconscious minds form psychological point of view. (100). Haung-Ming Chang et al are of the opinion that “archetypal symbolism makes human beings to experience the world in a symbolic manner. Like myths, movies are visual-auditory symbolic narratives that manifest the living reality of people” (100). The archetypal nature of mythological characters makes the characters easily identifiable. In the representation of these characters that appear to be recognisable symbols, the moviemakers should have an in-depth knowledge of these characters as archetypal symbols and thus gravitate towards a realistic depiction. Such archetypal characters like the appearance of the dead (ghost), the gods, etc., should be able to authenticate the myth that is depicted through motion pictures.

**Synopsis of Obi Emelonye’s *The Mirror Boy***

The story of Emelonye’s *The Mirror Boy* centres on the relationship that exists between the living and the dead. The story also depicts the myths of monarchical system of governance; a system that bestows authority on people alongside genealogy and heritage. Set in London and later shifted to Gambia where Tijan is continually been drawn home through mystical powers of the departed spirit of his father and forefathers, to take over the mantle of leadership at the demise of his father Nyanko. The journey of Tijan back home to the Gambia started from his reaction to racial abuse and bullying in London where he lives with his mother.
His mother who never wanted any further association with the boy’s father after he abandoned them suddenly decide to return home to the Gambia with Tijan for reasons she could not fathom herself. The mythological practice of burying a male child’s umbilical cord at his paternal home is a believed to be a driving force that will always bring the child home to his original root. On arrival in the Gambia the spirit of Tijan’s late father appears first to him in a mirror. The dead man established communication with Tijan, thus distracting him from his mother and subsequently embarked on a journey with him to his ancestral root where suddenly he avenge the death of his father and becomes the crown prince while his uncle becomes the regent who will hold the throne for him until he comes of age.

The integration of Film Language and Sentence in the Depiction of African Mythic Characters in Emelonye’s The Mirror Boy

Nicolas Proferes asserts that “once a film became a series of connected shots, a language is born. Every shot became a complete sentence with at least one subject and one verb” (3). Drawing on this we focus on how the director of The Mirror Boy integrates the language and sentence of film in the depiction of mythological characters that are archetypes in their true nature. Obi Emelonye in directing The Mirror Boy appears to have a full knowledge of African myths, the archetypal nature of mythological characters and its efficacy and therefore to a great extent has been able to promote, and sustain African culture through cinematography or through the medium of motion pictures. Apparently, the director has a full grasp of the spine of the story and also seems to understand how mythological characters function and thus was able to integrate properly the visual and acoustic elements in the depiction of mythological reality capable of eliciting the appropriate make belief effect.

In the film, the ghost appears severally and also had a relationship with Tijan. The appearance of the ghost to the boy, Tijan validates the African’s myth and cosmic belief that there exist a relationship amongst the living, the dead and the unborn. There is a chain of relationship between these three and the need for the living to fulfil its obligations to the dead and unborn seems to be one of those mysterious situations within the African community. The understanding of such situations apparently is tied to the myth. Wole Soyinka opines that “man re-affirms his indebtedness to earth dedicates himself anew to the demands of continuity and evokes the energies of productivity. Re-absorbed within the communal psyche he provokes the resources of Nature; he is in turn replenished for the cyclic drain in his fragile individual potency.” (171) Having established African myth as the major source of raw material for the story of Emelonye's The Mirror Boy, our business then is to analysis how apt the representation of these archetypal mythological characters are in the film. The first appearance of the ghost is enhanced and more properly adapted in motion picture by introducing the ghost through its appearance on a mirror. The ghost we understand is Tijan’s father, a father he never met in his entirely life. He had always asked his mother to know where he is so he can unite with him but because his mother is deeply hurt by his father’s denial of her pregnancy, she wants to get back to him by not allowing him access to the boy, Tijan. The ghost is on a mission to bring the boy back home where his umbilical cord was buried at birth, to avenge his father’s death and to ascend the throne of his father which is on the verge of shifting into the wrong hands. The utilisation of the film language by the director the very first time the ghost appeared goes a long way in establishing
the archetypal nature of the ghost and facilitates the unfolding action and also helps in the creation of illusion of reality. Through the integration of special techniques like the avoidance of lock shots where the ghost would have just appeared through the use of post production effects, a mirror was used during the shooting to stimulate the appearance and disappearance the ghost. This is because the director already creates a viable dramatic situation that makes the final creation of effects during post production more apt and seems to have understood the mythical archetypal nature of mythic characters and thus through the integration of film language and sentence sought to distinguish these mythological characters from cartoons. A film sentence or shot can be simple and at the same time heavy with meaning.

The sentence Emelonye makes through a simple film language or shot in the introduction of the ghost, in the opinion of this chapter, does create the believability of the African myth. According to Nicolas Proferes “the kind of sentence/shot we use will first depend on the essence of the movement we wish to convey to the audience” (4). The director of The Mirror Boy seems to understand the archetypal nature of mythological character and thus situated the first appearance of the ghost at night and also enhance it through it appearance in a mirror. The mystery of Tijan looking at the mirror to see the ghost and when he turns his back to the direction of the ghost that the mirror reflects and see nothing establishes the mystical nature of mythological characters as contained within the African myth. One of the archetypal natures of mythic characters of African extraction is their ability to appear and disappear mysteriously. It is important for a filmmaker who is telling his or her story based on African myths to understand the archetypal nature of mythological reality and then set the general idea of what he or she wants the characters to look like. It appears that Emelonye has a complete grasp of the spine of his story and therefore his production design seems to be well articulated to depict the mythological characters inherent in the film.

The camera technique as used in this very scene is apparently a sentence or shot that first in its simplest form creates a spatial relationship between the dead and living (the ghost and Tijan). In this scene the pragmatics of film grammar is utilised. The 180 grammar rule is the angle on which the camera is positioned and thus we have the vision moving from right to left and from left to right in a kind of straight line movement. This is because of the need to maintain a consistent relationship between the ghost and the boy. Proffers in explaining the 180 grammar rule states that “180-degree rule deals with a spatial relationship between a character or another character or an object.” (5). As the scene cuts from the image on the mirror to the boy, there is an imaginary line that exists between the image on the mirror and Tijan. In making the appearance and disappearance of the ghost mystical and thus conform to the archetypal nature of mythological characters, Emelonye (in an interview with the researcher in 2014) explained that all frames of the shot were locked so that all the cinematic sentence or shots will be the same. This way, both characters on the scene are contained in the frame. The shot was taken twice, one containing the ghost and one without the ghost. When it was time for the ghost to disappear, the character playing the ghost simply walked out of frame of the shot containing him. Then during post production, the two sentence or shots were cross faded to stimulate the disappearance of the ghost.

The idea of relying solely on post production effect in the creation of mythological characters like ghost seems to be so much animated and thus appears
not to be always apt in the creation the illusion of make-believe and does not aptly portray the mystical nature of these mythic characters of African sensibilities. Creating the effects through the film sentence and language seems to be more apt for the representation of mythological characters in motion pictures. Also, the acoustic element that accompanied the presence of the ghost is punctuated with pauses and sounds capable of setting the mood of an imminent danger or the arrival of a mystical being. Due to the archetypal nature of characters in African myths, there are conscious or unconscious attributes oftentimes associated with these characters. Peculiar sound effect is one of those archetypal characteristics of mythological characters as found within the African context. The filmmaker in choosing the accompanying sound that help to create the mood and set the tempo ought to be more critical in integrating sounds that will not whittle down the mystical nature of mythological characters. Emelonye’s choice of second effect to mark the very first appearance of the ghost evidently did help to facilitate the unfolding action, set the mood, create the tempo and also authenticate the cosmic and mythological belief of the African person about the very existence of the dead and the communion between the dead and the living. The absolute silence, followed by a horrifying sound effect then a pause afterwards creates a rhythmic pattern that generates the atmosphere of an imminent danger.

The second appearance of the ghost also depicts the archetypal nature of African mythic characters. The ability of the ghost of a dead person to be visible to only the person the ghost wants to reveal his presence to, is a fact and widely accepted belief which many Africans can attest to. The representation of such quality through motions pictures appears to be a challenge. How does a director convince the viewers that the character of the ghost is only visible to one or two persons alone and every other person who might be in the scene cannot visualise the ghost. The viewer should be able to see the ghost on the screen themselves. The second time we encounter the ghost was inside the market, with many people moving about their normal business. The only person who could see the ghost at this point is the boy, Tijan. The ghost did not appear in some scary and horrifying looks rather the image of a boy we apparently could perceive to be mysterious is presented. The camera angle on which the shots at the very scene are framed contributes a lot in the pragmatic representation of the archetypal nature of the ghost. Simple sentence/shot does the magic here also. Both characters are on a straight line to each, this gives us 180 degrees rule at the appearance of the ghost. They stood looking at each other and the camera is cutting from right to left to establish each character and at the same time crowd of people moving in between the space separating the boy and the ghost. The crowd of people moving in between the space of the boy and the ghost apparently are not aware of the presence of a dead man around them. The only person who could see the ghost is the boy, Tijan. Through an over the shoulder shot (OS) the location where the object, Tijan is looking at is established and the characters who swipe the shot in between the distance separating Tijan and the ghost creates the illusion that the only person the ghost is visible to is Tijan. The camera angles shifts to about 30 degrees as the ghost beckons on Tijan to follow him and they start to move. This conforms to Proferes statement that “ if we are moving from one shot of character or an object to another of the same character or object without intervening shot, the camera should change by at least 30 degrees" (8).

There is absolutely no need for post production effects to enhance the presence of the ghost. Everything about the ghost in this second encounter is established solely
through the film language and shots save for the final cutting of the shots for the purpose of logical understanding. This does not prevent the proper depiction of the ghost as a mythic character. The implication of this technique by the director is that there are viable alternatives to the depiction of mythic characters besides the excessive use of post production effect and green screen technique. Sometimes, these effects created at post production stage might not depict exactly the true nature of mythological characters of African sensibilities. Emelonye in this master piece has been able to tell a story based on the African myth, and also depicted to a great extent the true nature of African mythological character, without excessive use or complete reliance on post production animated effects.

The third encounter with the ghost presents the ability of the ghost to communicate verbally with the boy, Tijan. In many Nigerian movies, the mythic characters or ghosts speak in a sing song cadence. That is their language is declamatory. So, the usual but boring tradition of conventional speech pattern of ghost in the Nigeria movies was expected. The idea of always making ghosts speak in declamatory tone seems to have somehow devalued the mysterious nature of African mythic characters. The departure of the director from the prevalent convention of getting the mythic character densely made up with white or black costumes creates a new paradigm to the archetypal nature of mythic character. It is in agreement with the conventional appearance of the ghost that Bordwell and Thompson suggest that “heavy make-up is usually prominent in the iconography of horror” (121). Kumwenda thinks that “this is true of Nigerian horror video films. Ghosts, witches, gods and witch doctors use heavy make-up to dehumanise themselves. Other codes that are highly employed in Nigerian horror films include red costumes for gods and witch doctors, use of drumming when a ghost, god or witch or a wizard is about to appear, and rapid dissolves for transitions to indicate transformations in shape or movement.”(19). Emelonye thinks differently in the depiction of the mythic character in his film. Here, the ghost communicates in an everyday language with the living. The boy had to find out that he is the only one who sees the ghost even as passers-by look at him in amazement.

The make-up given to the ghost in Emelonye film does not conform to the conventional use of exaggerated and lavishly use of make-up conventional used in the depiction of ghost in Nollywood or does the costume follow the tradition of white, red or black dresses. The simple make of the normal casual red t-shirt and a black trouser with the only visible make-up being the changing of the colour of one of the tooth of the ghost are codes, metaphor and signs the director uses in authenticating the archetypal nature of the ghost and thus the creation of illusion of reality capable of eliciting the right make believe effect. During this third encounter with the ghost, the director needed to make the ghost visibly disappear from the shot in full view of the audience. The scene logically builds up to a point where the disappearance is necessary. In an interview with the researcher in 2014, Emelonye explained that in achieving this disappearance, the camera was set up on a tripod and locked. A shot containing the actor playing the ghost was taken and another shot without the actor playing the ghost was also taken. He noted that all shots were set up to be identical. The background was also made to be still. During editing, both shots were imported into the editing programme, cross faded and the disappearance was well stimulated.
CONCLUSION

This chapter has demonstrated that African myths are viable sources for raw material for Nollywood films and indeed African films. The representation of African myths in motion pictures helps in the preservation of African culture. The mythic characters are archetypal and can be easily identified in various cultures within Nigeria and Africa. The representation of these mythic characters therefore becomes a challenge for the filmmaker since the consciousness of what the characters look like resides in the minds of many people among the audience(s). In view of this, the chapter observed that the representation of mythic characters in many Nollywood movies appears to be with much blame. Hence, it recommended a workable model that could be used for a more apt representation of mythic characters. In so doing, an analysis of the pragmatics of film sentence and language use by Emelonye in the depiction of African mythic characters in the film *The Mirror Boy* helped to concretise the idea of an ideal representation and creation of mythic characters in motion pictures, especially in Nollywood movies.

WORKS CITED


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