

Assessing Cultural Worldviews in Nollywood Historical Films: A Critique of Imasuen's *Invasion 1897* and Bandele's *Elesin Oba...*

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Abstract

The study delved into the evaluation of cultural worldviews in Nollywood historical films. The primary aim was to study the construction of cultural worldviews and their role in shaping historical narratives within the films. Drawing upon Gregory Bateson and Erving Goffman frame theory, the analysis critically examined Lancelot Imasuen's *Invasion 1897* and Biyi Bandele's *Elesin Oba: the King's Horseman*. These historical films were selected using a typical case sampling technique and subjected to thorough Content Analysis. The findings of the study highlighted the significant influence of cultural worldviews on indigenous peoples' perceptions, behaviours, reactions, and problem-solving approaches. Also, these worldviews are encapsulated in the traditional beliefs, laws, symbols and, religious practices of indigenous Nigerian cultures, which encountered challenges during the colonial era. Based on these observations, the study recommended the importance of thorough research in film production to ensure the accurate representation of cultural worldviews in order to promote positive cultural and social values in Nigeria.

Keywords: cultural worldview, Nollywood, historical films, *Invasion 1897*, *Elesin Oba*

1. Introduction

Nollywood films promote different cultures in Nigeria. But, while most Nollywood productions talk about domestic and contemporary everyday issues (Imiti, 2022, p.103), some films explore deep cultural and historical narratives that provide insight to the respective cultural worldviews and political realities of different ethnic societies across different historical moments in Nigeria.

Essentially, historical films reflect past narratives of a people by primarily representing historical data (Stubbs, 2013, p.18). The historical data often encapsulate the social, cultural and ideological concerns of an era (Symmons, 2013, p. 2). Historical films thus embody significant codes that examine the ideas of cultural and social evolution, progression, discontinuity, and continuity in cultural societies. However, while the term 'historical film' has been widely used in critical and commercial contexts (Stubbs, 2013, p.34) across the global film industry, in Nigerian film scholarship, "less attention is paid to the study of historical and other critical films" (Imiti 2022:103). The lack of scholarly research on Nollywood historical films exposes a gap in literature in the historical film genre.

Historical films are significant in shaping discourses on culture and ideology of the past as well as the present. Like other global film industries in the world, Nollywood practitioners invest in historical film productions to contribute to the documentation and promotion of historical events that have shaped Nigeria's existence. Some Nollywood productions with historic contexts include *Amazing Grace* (2006), *Adesuwa* (2012), *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2013), *Invasion 1897* (2014), *October 1* (2014), *Iyore* (2014), *'76* (2016), *Oloibiri* (2016), *93 Days* (2016), *Idia: The Idah War* (2017), *4th Republic* (2019), *The Herbert Macaulay Affair* (2019), *1929: Women War* (2019), *The Legend of Inikpi* (2020), *Amina* (2021), *Elesin Oba*, *The King's Horseman* (2022), *Badamasi* (2022), and *Funmilayo Ransom Kuti* (2024).

Through these historical films, Nollywood producers contribute to the visual discussions on the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial historical landscape of Nigeria. Some of the films also present a context in which cultural worldviews can be critically examined and appreciated, especially in an era where significant ethnic and national values are fast eroding.

Consequently, this study focuses on evaluating the representation of cultural worldviews in two historical films; Lancelot Imasuen's *Invasion 1897* (2014) and Biyi Bandele's *Elesin Oba, the King's Horseman* (2022). The

objectives are to look at how cultural worldviews are framed and their impact on shaping the historical narratives depicted in the films.

1.1 Literature Review: Worldview, Culture and Nollywood

A worldview is a system of value that shapes the conduct of human activity in a cultural environment. It is ingrained in the beliefs, practices, and organisation of people in every society. Onwuegbuchunam (2022) defines worldview as “the sum of our total beliefs” and the “fundamental ideas and assumptions that we have, which are both conscious and unconscious, [which] informing and influencing the lenses through which we view reality” (p.1). The formation of a worldview “begins as a cosmic picture and mutates through a complex interrelation between human consciousness and the external world” (Sire, 2015, p.25). To this end, a worldview is “a mental construct or set of postulated coherent basic beliefs” (Fisher, 2012, p.50) that an individual or society holds to be true.

Every worldview is human-oriented. Fisher (2012) states that worldviews are “generally developed as individuals engage in cultural experiences, family interactions, religious experiences, education, challenging personal experiences, social interactions, and the expectations of society” (p.52). As such, worldviews could be religious, cultural, political, social and economic.

Functionally, worldviews provide the template for measuring human cooperation with nature, origin, and history. They also serve as an interpretative framework by which order and disorder in society are judged and the standard by which reality is managed and pursued. In addition, Nwoye (2011) states that worldview provides explanations for the ways things are in cultural societies, including the theories of illness, death, and misfortunes, and how human afflictions and problems can be resolved (p.306). The validity of any worldview varies from one individual, community, or culture to another.

Different cultural groups in Nigeria operate in line with worldviews peculiar to them. An evaluation of some cultural worldviews among the Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa ethnic groups in Nigeria shows a common thread of duality predicated on the inseparability of the physical and the transcendental worlds. For example, Nwoye (2011) notes that the Igbo people see their world as made up to two planes: the physical and the spiritual” (p.307). Similarly, the Yoruba worldview holds that “creation exists as binary complementarity” between “the visible world, called *Aiye*, the physical universe that we inhabit, and the invisible world called *Orun*, inhabited by the supernatural beings and the doubles” (*Africa Executive*, 2023, para. 1).

Relatively, the Hausa worldview is centred on peaceful living as the basis for understanding the intricate nature of the two planes of existence (Bambale, 2022, p.77). The inseparability of the two planes of existence in constructing worldviews in most Nigerian cultures make it a serious aspect of culture that is grounded in spiritual and secular expressions.

In Nollywood, cultural worldview provides the muse for filmmakers to create films that celebrate the different perspectives of belief in most cultural societies in Nigeria. Most times, some filmmakers, in an attempt to project certain cultures in films end up misrepresenting the worldviews that drive that culture. This unfortunately presents negative stereotypes that misrepresent the true identity of most cultural societies. Eze-Orji (2016) notes, for example, that “the Igbo film culture has more often than not presented the Igbo as a nation of voodoo, occultists, dupes, witches, sorcerers, ritualists, and prostitutes thereby undermining their cultural diplomacy and importance” (p.1). The consequence of such negative portrayal is that: “Igbo image in the Nigerian movie industry is replete with misrepresentations and casts doubts about the sincerity of their business successes and general lifestyle, and this is invariably as a result of misconceptions from Nigerians about Igbo cultural matrix and mores” (Eze-orji, 2016, p.1).

In the view of Asogwa et al (2015), the continuous negative portrayal of images contributes to the erosion of indigenous cultures. Nwosu and Agoha (2019) identify occupational rather than professional attitude by most practitioners in the industry as part of the reasons why there is so much misrepresentation of the people’s cultural worldviews in Nollywood films (p. 345-6). Agreeing with Nwosu and Agoha (2019), Og (2018) blames lack of research as a factor undermining the quality of filmic representation of culture in Nollywood. According to Og, Nollywood “screenwriters are so reckless with collecting facts that it really kills our rich cultural stories” (para 3). Nowadays, producers and directors, driven by profit, often hire individuals who lack the necessary expertise to develop compelling scripts

Research is a necessary aspect of film production that is often disregarded. In historical film productions, it is an important factor that should not be overlooked. This is because historical films aim not only to depict past events but also to explore cultural contexts in films as well as the discourses they generate (Greiner, 2021, p.19).

Consequently, adequate research is needed in the production of historical films to achieve accuracy and authenticity.

1.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is hinged on frame theory. Popularised in the 70s by communication theorists like Gregory Bateson and Erving Goffman, the theory explains the impact of media on the assimilation of cultural narratives. According to Chong and Druckman (2007), “the major premise of framing theory is that an issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and be construed as having implications for multiple values or considerations” (p.104). As such, frame theory “aims to identify schemes in which individuals perceive their world” because the “meaning of the world is perceived by individuals based on their life world beliefs, experiences and knowledge” (Volkmer, 2009, p.2).

How people process the information they receive differs from one context, narrative, and situation to another. Therefore, “framing theory suggests that how something is presented to the audience (called “the frame”) influences the choices people make about how to process that information” (Arowolo, 2023, p.1). The basis of framing is to focus attention on certain events, or narratives and then place them within a field of meaning (Arowolo, 2023, p.1).

Frame theory is important to this study because film narratives are shortcuts that link stories to the bigger picture about people or events, and also enhance understanding of culture and practices in society. In adopting frame theory for the analysis of the selected films, the study looks at how the filmmakers frame the cultural worldviews of the different cultures they represent in the films.

2. Method

The focus of this study is to look at how cultural worldviews are treated in Nollywood historical films. Using a typical case sampling technique, Lancelot Imasuen’s *Invasion 1897* (2014) and Biyi Bandele’s *Elesin Oba the King’s Horseman* (2022) are purposively selected as case studies. The selection of these films was informed by the strong depiction of indigenous worldviews intertwined in historical moments in the cultures represented.

Content Analysis was used to interrogate how cultural worldviews were framed in the films. Cultural manifestations such as proverbs, indigenous languages, religious beliefs, institutional structure of leadership, and symbols were explored by the filmmakers in shaping the narratives. These manifestations thus form the basis for analysing cultural worldviews in the two films.

3. Results

Imasuen’s *Invasion 1897* explores the historical fall of the Benin Empire during the British invasion of some parts of Africa in the 19th century. The film recounts the tragic expulsion of Oba Ovonranwen from Benin by the British authority as narrated by Igie Ehanire (Charles Venn), an African art researcher, arrested and charged for attempting to steal Benin artefacts in a British museum. His revelation in court takes viewers to the Benin Empire in the 19th century, its worldviews, customs, and traditions before its invasion by the British.

The Benin people are known for their skill in artworks. Benin bronze and ivory artworks are symbols of identity, history, and worldview of the people to which they identify and relate to anywhere in the world. It is this sense of connection with history that motivates Igie to attempt to steal some of the artefacts from the British museum. Beyond the physical structures of Benin artwork, Igie’s professor reveals that they were “the library of its time, the means by which knowledge was passed on to the next generation”. A specific mention is the telegraphic stool that was used to send messages to Oba Ovonranwen from Benin when he was banished to Calabar.

Benin people believe in the efficacy of their artworks as symbols of communication and specifically as part of the ethic of social interaction. Therefore, when Igie is arrested and charged to court on the ground of theft, he is unfazed by the accusations against him. Instead, he uses the opportunity to explain how the Benin artefacts address his sense of angst against an erosive British culture that undermines core African values and systems.

The film also looks at the religious aspect of the Benin worldview. The Benin people like most cultural groups in Nigeria believe in the interconnected relationship between the metaphysical and mundane worlds as the foundation of their religious belief. Both worlds are so interlinked that what affects the physical impacts the metaphysical, and vice versa. Imasuen accurately represents this worldview by showing the people’s dependence on their deity for direction. The imminent incursion of the British into the territory of Benin was first felt in the metaphysical realm and communicated to the physical world through unprecedented strange occurrences in the land, which the people accurately believed were brought upon them by the deity, Ogiuwu. However, the Benin people also believe that the only way any calamity can be overturned is by reconnecting to the metaphysical for direction and solution.

Hence, when the Oba felt that his initial supplication to “the gods to change the evil cause against the land” was not answered he maintained that “when the earth, wind, fire, rain conspire to undo the peace that my ancestors promised me, then it is time to extract a solution from the bosom of Oguiwu.”

The unequivocal belief in the power of the gods to bring relief to the people despite the awareness that the deities are behind the people’s affliction affirms the religious worldview of the Benin people that is hinged on inextricable relationship between the physical and the metaphysical worlds.

Worldview can also be perceived from the system and structure of governance in a cultural environment. Benin Empire had a long history of existence with an organised system of government and a viable economy due to early contacts with the Portuguese, French, and Dutch before the British invasion in 1897. Much like the British Empire, the Benin people also practiced a monarchical system of governance. However in Benin worldview, the fate of the Oba of Benin has direct consequence on the collective existence of the people. Imasuen highlights this aspect of the Benin worldview through the interaction between Obo-iro, an apparition of the gods, and the Oba.

Obo-iro: the destiny of the king is intertwined with that of his people. The reason you are king is because there is a people

Oba: Let the gods handle me as Idugbowa

Obo-iro: the gods are with you. The enemy is at the door. You are about to pay the price of the fame you seek. You are by your fall going to be known in all the worlds created by Osaloduwa (God). Your kingdom will survive but not before the rain of fire...

The inextricable link between the Oba and his subjects adumbrates the early conception of tragedy in African scholarship. Oba’s inability to overturn his destiny as well as make an exceptional case for his subjects underpins the role of fate and destiny in a man’s life in the Benin worldview. While this belief may have been downplayed in contemporary scholarship, both fate and destiny remain important determinants in traditional African societies.

Moreover, Imasuen draws a contrast between the British and Benin systems of governance to show the ideological differences in leadership between these two cultural societies. African culture favours a patriarchal system of leadership that allows only men to be decision-makers while women are passive members of society. However, British culture accommodates both men and women in the decision-making process. Oba is enthused by the knowledge that the British culture gives women an advantage in leadership positions, especially the position of a monarch. Hence, he is worried as to the role of a man in a culture where the woman is the head in the excerpt below.

Oba: What does her husband do when she is ruler over your people?

Galway: Unfortunately your majesty the husband is dead

Oba: I am curious. Is it that there is no man in the whole of Britain to seat on the throne of his fathers’ that his wife has to be your ruler

Galway’s explanation of the cultural differences that exist between the British and Benin cultures exacerbates Oba’s distrust of the offer of protection made by the British government, which he perceives undermines the power and sovereignty of the Benin traditional stool. However, Imasuen uses situational irony to affirm that worldviews vary from one cultural environment to another irrespective of perceptions.

Cultural expressions also contribute to the construction of cultural worldviews. Festivals, particularly, hold significant importance in African cosmology, especially when they are sacred. Such is the Igue festival of Benin which Imasuen explores to show the importance of sacred festival in the cultural and religious consciousness of the Benin people. The Benin people believe that the Igue festival, as represented in the film is a moment of renewal and communal reaffirmation to the immaterial world of the ancestors. On such an occasion, tradition demands that visitors are kept in abeyance until the conclusion of the purification process. The conflict in the film revolves around the inability of the Oba to keep the British off the Benin territory within the period of the festival, leading tragically to the reprisals and collapse of the Benin Empire. Through cultural symbols, institution and expressions that are symbolic to the Benin culture, Imasuen explores significant Benin worldviews and how they shaped the people’s revolutionary stride during colonialism.

On the other hand, *Elesin Oba, the King’s Horseman* is an adaptation of Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*. Directed by Biyi Bandele, the film examines the Yoruba worldview on existence and rite of passage on the back of a historical tragedy in Oyo during colonial administration. In the wake of Alaafin’s final interment to ensure his transition to the other plane of existence, his horseman Elesin Oba (Ogunlade Adekola) delays to join him as custom demands because of his libidinal excesses. Eventually, when he decides to fulfil the rite of passage,

he is intercepted and arrested by the British police for attempting to commit suicide, and further incarcerated. Elesin's inability to fulfil his destiny leads to the wilful death of his Son, Olunde (Deyemi Okanlawon), to placate the failed destiny of his father.

Like the Benin religious worldview, the Yoruba people recognise the coeternity that exists between the two dominant planes of existence, the world of the dead and the living. It also acknowledges the role of certain individuals in ensuring harmony between these worlds. As explained earlier, these worlds are interconnected, and what happens in one plane has a direct impact on the other. The Oyo tradition identifies the Elesin Oba as an important figure whose loyalty and service to the Alaafin transcends the world of the living to include the world of the dead. Such an important responsibility makes him a carrier of the people's collective destiny. At the demise of the Alaafin the Elesin Oba is expected to commit ritual suicide to ensure the complete passage of the Alaafin from the physical world to the metaphysical. Failure to embark on such a ritual exercise leads to tragedy in the community because the community and indeed the people are the major beneficiaries of a failed destiny in African cosmology. Bandele builds the plot of this film around this worldview.

Elesin Oba understands his role in the matrix of the people's existence and destiny. However, his lust for women, especially on the eve of an important communal ritual, clouds his sense of purpose even when Iyaloja warns him about the consequences of his delay in fulfilling purpose. Like the proverbial fly that follows the corpse to the grave, Elesin Oba's arrest and imprisonment by the police truncates his fate, leading to a consequent suicide that bears no significance for the people. Earlier praised by the people for his resolve to ensure the continuation of an age-old tradition, he is later cursed by them for destroying the tradition.

Fundamentally, time is important and plays a significant role in the fulfilment of destiny in the Yoruba worldview. Alaafin's message to Elesin Oba before and after his destiny was truncated by his arrest speaks of the urgency of the time. Through Elesin Oba's praise singer, the Alaafin complains that he "cannot wait too long at the gate" we see the implication of jeopardising time when the Alaafin again bemoans his horseman's levity towards his destiny.

Praise Singer: Just tell my horse that I dare not wait too long. Here lies the swiftest messenger of the king. My companion, if you had followed when you should have we would not say that the dog has preceded its owner... if you had left at the appropriate time, we wouldn't now say that the horse has preceded its rider. Had you lifted your spirit, and raised the will to cut the thread when the drums summoned, we would not say now that it is your shadow that fell to take its owner's place at the banquet.

However, time can also be redeemed in Yoruba worldview through self-immolation. The redemption of time affords the carriers of communal destiny the opportunity to restore cosmic balance. Elesin Oba's son, Olunde, takes it upon himself to redeem the time already wasted by his father by sacrificing his life for the welfare of the community.

Another aspect of the worldview that Bandele represents is the authority vested in sacred symbols. Sacred symbols are physical representations of spiritual presence. Two sacred symbols are given exposition in the film: the Egungun masquerade costume and the drum. The Egungun costume is an important mystical symbol that is revered by the Yoruba people. It is perceived by the people to symbolise death and as a consequence must be treated with respect, not abused, touched, or worn by non-initiates of the masquerade cult.

When Sergeant Amusu walks in on Simon Pilkings and Jane in an amorous situation with the Egungun costume, he is petrified by the couple's disregard for the people's belief. Through Amusu's engagement with Pilkings, Bamidele outlines the significance and implication of desecrating the Egungun costume in Yoruba land.

Amusa: What do you do with that dress...it belongs to a dead cult, not for human beings
Pilkings: what a letdown you are... Musa does not believe in Mumbo Jumbo
Amusa: Take it off, it's not good for a man like you to touch that cloth... it's a matter of death o... How can man talk against death to a person in uniform of death?
Jane: Amusa, what is there to be scared of in a costume?

Colonial intrusion in Africa negatively affected so many aspects of the people's culture and almost stripped them of their value and potency. Pilkings does not believe Amusa's fears; neither does Jane see why she should be afraid of an ordinary costume. Therefore, the inability of the costume to harm them as they prepare to wear it for their ball dance competition invalidates Amusa's claims, thus affirming Olunde's observation to Jane that "you (Westerners) do not have respect for what you do not understand."

On the other hand, the drum is a communication symbol between the two planes of existence and its rhythm offers a passage through which the living have access to the dead in real-time. This liturgical function of the drum is seen when Elesin Oba communicates with the late Alafin in the wake of his ritual suicide through the transmission of chthonic codes from the physical world to the spirit realm. The Yoruba people have a high regard for drums and drumming and can identify the meaning of each rhythm.

Through the exploration of the indigenous practices and beliefs, both Imsuen and Bamidele frame their representations of cultural worldview of the Benin and Yoruba ethnic groups around defining moments of history. The attempt by these filmmakers shows how historical films offer insight not only into the events that shape the narratives but also how the worldviews of the two cultures served as a measure of resistance against colonial ideologies.

4. Discussion

Worldviews generally offer the means through which cultures can be better understood. Analyses of the selected films reveal that worldviews play an important role in how ethnic cultures in Nigeria perceive things, act, react, and approach challenges around them. During colonialism, worldviews functioned significantly as an initial resistance tool against British imperialism. More importantly, worldviews in indigenous Nigerian cultures impact the collective destiny of the people, especially when certain actions undertaken by the leaders contravene cosmic laws and ethics of living, as represented in the historical films.

African worldviews are mostly represented through cultural beliefs, symbols, religious and social activities. People's interactions with these symbols inform their belief and trust in the efficacy of the symbols in meeting specific existential needs. The historical films also show that cultural societies in Nigeria have similar worldviews. However, the validity of any particular worldview is culture-dependent, and affected by geographical factors, as seen in the colonial approaches and perceptions of communal activities in *Invasion...* and *Elesin Oba*.

Ultimately, historical events provide filmmakers with the basic materials for the exploration of cultural worldviews that are relevant to the people. The selected films encapsulate significant historical junctures in Nigeria's pre-colonial and colonial past. Through these cinematic portrayals, Imasuen and Bandele contribute to ongoing debates on the significance of history and indigenous traditions as tools of resistance against colonial and post-colonial influences that continue to erode essential cultural norms and values in Nigeria.

However, ensuring a realistic cultural renaissance in Nigeria is the responsibility of government, policymakers, and stakeholders in the film industry. There is a need to accurately explore positive cultural practices that celebrate both ethnic and national worldviews in films. For this to happen, research as an aspect of film production should be given adequate attention by filmmakers to ensure that Nollywood films embody and promote the positive values intrinsic to Nigerian heritage.

Consequently, the Nigerian Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) must ensure compliance on the policy that governs the production and exhibition of Nigerian films. Given the intricate nature of historical films, it is recommended that a specialised department dedicated to research and documentation be established to assist filmmakers in conducting thorough pre-production research. This would ensure the authenticity and accuracy of film narratives that delve into the nation's historical and cultural past.

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