

# Nollywood Movies and Cultural Preservation: A Case Study of Missing Mask

**Emmanuel Iroh (Ph.D)**  
**Department of Theatre & Film Studies**  
**Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.**  
irohemmaogbo@gmail.com

## **Abstract**

*Movies/films, as multidimensional product perform economical, socio-cultural as well as political functions in the society. Culture is the totality, a summation of a people's way of life. Movies are not produced in a vacuum as they tell stories of the people's way of life, both real and imagined. This work recognizes the relationship between movies and culture and seeks to locate how movies aid in the preservation of culture. The work examined "Missing Mask", a movie of the epic genre as a case study to see how it utilized some production indexes such as language, location, costumes, properties, dance etc to aid cultural preservation. The research adopted the qualitative research as well as content analysis approach. Through simple deductions after watching the movie, this work concludes that movies to a large extent are very capable of contributing to our cultural preservation and recommends that producers / directors should adhere strictly to the use of proper production indexes as stated above to promote our cultures. Furthermore, Government should provide an enabling environment for film production to thrive. Finally, Awards in cash and honours should be instituted by Non Governmental Organizations and various levels of Governments for producers, directors, who showcase our cultural heritage in their movies.*

## **Introduction**

Film/movie is an important medium, a tool or vehicle of communication. As one of the agents of mass media, it is used to highlight activities that take place in our society as well as for the transmission of messages. Such messages serve to educate, entertain or even stimulate the viewers. Movies are viewed through television or cinemas, other agents of the mass media. Movies and Television complement each other. Therefore, movies, television will be used interchangeably in this write up. This is because you cannot watch a movie or film without the television or cinemas.

The power of film / television is overwhelming. Okorie (2012) compares the power of television with that of a magnet. He avers that "Television is like a magnet, it glues one to it, compelling viewers to devote attention to it"(2). Also Nda (2009) is of the opinion that the mass media (film, television, video or radio) enlightens the viewers

about nationals, internationals happenings and modes of living as well as help to raise their aspirations.

Furthermore, Igwe (2008) sees movies as cultural products. According to him, movie is a multidimensional medium which captures snapshots of real life, real people, real places and even when in an imagined setting, real stories of life's experiences". What the above statement means is that movies tell the story of a people, their idiosyncrasies, set values and characteristic ways of living. Movies are therefore not produced in a vacuum. It exists because there are stories to be told about people. These stories relate to their past and a projection of their future. How well these stories are told and presented of the peoples past and proper infusion of those ingredients of cultural preservation as to create awareness and subsequent inculcation of such ideas and ingredients is the focus of this research. This work will review "Missing Mask" a Nollywood movie of catwalk pictures, written and produced by Ebere Iheanacho and directed by Ndubuisi Oko, to see how movies at large will aid in cultural preservation.

### **Culture and Cultural Preservation**

Culture is broad based and cannot be pigeon holed into a concise definition. However, for the purpose of this study, let us adopt the definition of culture as espoused in the National Cultural Policy of Nigeria. According to the document, culture is the "totality of the way of life, endowed by a people in their attempts to meet the challenge of living in their environment which gives order and meaning to the social, political, economic aesthetic and religious norms and modes of organization, thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours". The document further classifies culture into four major categories or aspects as summarized below:

1. Material aspect made up of tools, clothing, foods, medicine, utensils, housing etc.
2. Institutional deals with the political, social, legal and economic structures erected to achieve material and spiritual objectives.
3. Philosophical, made up of ideas, beliefs and values.
4. Creative concerns a people's literature and written visual and performing art monument, festivals, craft, national dresses, etc.

From the above definition, it is evident that culture is all embracing. Fully encompassing the people's way of life. This is rightly observed by Soyinka (1988), where he submits that culture is not often a sum of parts but a summation... a synthesis nothing is exempted not even the malfunctions"(2). Therefore culture contains the norms, beliefs, values, routine, recipes, customs etc of a people.

Having looked at what culture is, the question of why it is important to preserve it may arise. Again let us go to the National Cultural Policy of Nigeria. According to the document, cultural preservation is the “Promotion of cultural property whether of concrete or non concrete nature, past or present, written or oral relating to values or facts of history”. It further states that the objective of cultural preservation is not to ossify or mystify but to ensure harmony with contemporary realities” (6).

What the above definitions meant is that there is a very important need to transmit the cultures of a people from generation to generation in order to remind them of their heritage and history, It will also serve as warning to the people that changing times, globalization or industrialization should not stop the preservation of their culture, rather culture should be preserved to accommodate the future and the developments of a given society.

The above is in line with the clarion call made by Uka (2009) when he advised that “we must develop a continuing capacity to ensure future possibilities of innovation and renewed self definition within our heritage” (15). One of the many avenues or agents of cultural preservation is through the film or movie mode. Therefore, this write up explores the many ways through which the cultures of a people could be preserved through films with a case study of “Missing Mask”.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This work is based on the Social Category Perspective theory of Melvin Defleur and Sandra Ball Rokeach. It will be supported by the Cultivation theory of George Garbuaer. Social Category Perspective takes the different characteristics and categories of viewers of a programme into consideration (such as sex, age, education, income, occupation, norms, values, attitudes etc). According to Defleur and Rokeachi, “the audiences in this category are culturally linked and share a common frame of references; therefore their responses to the same message are similar given that other conditions remain the same”.(176). Concluding, they submit that as a result of being a member of an audience, an individual is changed by the media experience.

From the above statements, producers and directors should take into account the heterogeneous nature of the viewers of their products realizing that the experiences gathered from watching their movie invariably affect them. Here, the media content which is the message of the home movie as envisioned by the producer or director to the audience is of primary importance to this work. This is because what they send out and what they receive and (encode and decode) experience from the programme

will either manifest positively or negatively.

The Social Category Perspective theory will be supported with the Cultivation theory of Gerbner. This is because it will further help to establish a vantage perspective to view the subject matter. The theory focuses on the current and inescapable pattern of cultural environment that shapes public ideas, actions and policies. Therefore, the theory is of the view that viewers are influenced by the perceptions, opinion and views of such programme. Consequently, it is of the opinion that most of what we think or know were never personally experienced but learnt through observation, interactions. What we watch in films is very important as it forms or moulds our opinion about other things around us. This is in line with the Igbo axiom that says:

The eye watches

The mind constructs

The legs moves

The hand brings

### **Characteristics of Audiences**

A look at what constitutes an audience as stipulated by Herbert et al (1979) will help to shade more light on the above theories.

According to them, the Motion Picture Medium (herein referred was the home video in Nigeria) exhibited five basic characteristics and is summarized as follows:

1. They are made of individual who are apt to have commonly shared experiences and are affected by similar interpersonal social relationships.
2. The audience tends to be large. Large audience according to the authors refers to "any audience exposed during a short period of time... that the communicator could not interact with its members on a face-to-face basis" (179).
3. The audience tends to be heterogeneous. Individuals in a given audience are a representative of a wide variety of social categories.
4. The audience tends to be relatively anonymous. This is because communicators do not know the individuals with whom they are communicating but may be aware of their general characteristics.
5. The audience tends to be physically separated from the communicator in both time and space.

What the above is reemphasizing is that as a medium of mass communication, films are watched by many people in different location and or different time.

## **Nollywood, Historical Perspective**

Though the origin of Nollywood is a subject of contention especially between Igbo film producers and their Yoruba counterparts, the name Nollywood has been generally agreed as the Umbrella name for practitioners in the home video movies produced in Nigeria. According to Agbasiere, "Nollywood is the Nigerian film industry which is responsible for the production of Home video films and techniques" (145).

The credit for popularizing Nollywood and consequently setting new standards for video productions should go to 'Mr. Nollywood': Okechukwu Oguejiofor, graduate of TV college Jos who produced "Living in Bondage" and Kenneth Nnebue, Chief Executive Officer, NEK Video Links, a major film marketer who funded and marketed "Living in Bondage", an Igbo film, subtitled in English. Since then, Nollywood has grown in leaps and bounds and has immensely contributed to the socio-cultural as well as economic growth of our country. Today Nollywood practitioners and its movies have done a lot to project our culture world wide

In this work, some production ingredients or indexes such as language, location, properties, costume, dance etc will be used to evaluate the production of "Missing Mask" to ascertain how far it has used these indexes in the preservation of our culture. The research methodology will be qualitative and will adopt observation through watching the movie and through a simple deduction arrive at the conclusion.

### **Language.**

Although film is a medium of high visual dissemination where the pictures are densely detailed with information that will not be required to be filled up, language which is a medium of communication of a people is important in the preservation of the people's culture as it forms part of their life. Salawu (2015) opines that "language is the most characteristic element of a people's culture. Language is the repository of culture".(50).

He further submitted that most indigenous languages recognized in most countries have historically diminished in use and status. Also, Nnyigide (2014) observes that "authors use language to communicate their ideas, feelings, message and opinions to the audience" (214) Furthermore, Ayo Bamgbose (1990) in Etim (2006) posits that "Language marks a person as belonging to a group, which may vary from a village, community or a religious sect to an ethnic group or the entire nation"(18). From the above, it is evident that language is very vital to culture and therefore will aid in its preservation.

Considering that recently, there were speculations that the Igbo language which is the

medium of communication among the South East people of Nigeria may be extinguished, a fact Salawu expressed above about the diminishing status of indigenous languages and coupled with the fact that some foreign or alien cultural hints have infiltrated into the Igbo language, then the choice of Igbo language as a medium of communication in the film under review becomes very apt. Though shot in Igbo language, it was subtitled in English to give it wider audience.

The film made extensive use of proverbs. According to Essien (1980) proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views which is handed down from generation to generation. From the above, we note that most of what constitute our culture was handed down to us by our fore fathers which must be preserved. Therefore the use of proverbs in "Missing Mask" is a bold attempt at preserving our culture. For instance, when Mbaogu (Chika Anyanwu) says "Okenye adighi ano n'ulo ewu anwu o n'ogbu" he was sampling telling the men to rise up to their responsibility. Or when Chikwe was trying to assert the ownership of his land, he simply said that "Anaghi ezu ihe onye mu anya" which literally mean that as long as he is awake and alive, nobody will deprive him of his property..

### **Location**

Location(s) in films simply means the place(s) or venue{s} where films are shot. It may be interior or exterior. Interior locations are inside the house and include rooms, palours, dinning, staircases, etc while exterior location are outside and include gardens, forests, rivers, mountains, beaches, swimming pools etc. There is usually a location manager whose duty is to arrange for these locations based on the shooting script but subject to the approval of the producer and the director.

The film opens with an establishment of a large farm as Chikwe, with a cutlass in his right hand is seen tending the crops in his farm. Other farm implements seen include hoe and a small basket containing some harvested cassava tubers. He nods in admiration signifying that his farm is doing well. He weeds for sometime before the film cuts into another sequence. This opening clearly reminds us of the Igbo proverb that says "Aka aja aja na ebute onu mmanu mmanu" which literally means that only a soiled hand will bring oil {food} to the mouth. This further relates to the culture of industriousness which the Igbos are known for.

Furthermore, Mbaogu's compound is big with an Obi at the centre, surrounded by small huts and joined together by a dwarf red earthen fence. The Obi serves as entrance to the compound as seen in traditional Igbo setting. This Obi as seen in the movie fits the description of Okonkwo's compound in "Things fall Apart" by

Chinua Achebe. According to Achebe (2008)

“He (Okonkwo) had a large compound enclosed by a thick wall of red earth. His own hut or Obi stood immediately behind the only gate in the red walls. Each of his three wives had her own hut, which together formed a half moon behind the Obi (12) (emphasizes mine).

The king's palace is also big with many attached huts surrounding the obi. The walls are painted with native white paint made from Nzu and adorned with carvings of two giant lions.

In the traditional Igbo setting, village square has always served as meeting point for the settlement of disputes, village council meetings and festivals etc. This was very prominent in the movie. When there was a quarrel between the Igwe and Mbaogu, it was at the village square and in the evening that their matter was resolved.

**Elder Nna:** ...today, the pillars of Umuorji are  
at each other's throat, if we don't  
move fast, Umuorji's fame will  
become history.

The village square in the film was also used as a rallying point for Umuorji community. On several occasions, we see them gather at the village square, as if is done in most Igbo communities when the big wooden slit gong (Ikoro) is heard or a town crier goes round the village with a smaller wooden slit gong (ekwe) to announce for such meetings (either emergency or scheduled.)

### **Costume**

The film diligently obeyed the rules of costume as posited by Russell. According to him, costume should not really be regarded as vestment for covering the body but... can and do bear a great weight of fact and suggested meaning to an audience in a production. “(13). What this means is that actors costumes in a production, (film, theatre etc) must be related to their people (customs) and should be used to edify the people, drawing them closer to their existence in life.

The above is also in line with the submission of Ezeajugh (2003), who posits that theatre productions, home video and films inclusive should build and project the value system of a society. According to her “Theatre builds on the value system of a society, for the purpose of enlightening, educating and motivating the people”. (12)

What this meant is that theatrical content is very important as it enhances societal values. It therefore becomes a clarion call on producers and directors to borrow from the theatre to build the society through their productions.

One of the ways available to a producer or director in building his society through the theatre and films is appropriate use of costumes. This is so because, according to Corrigan (1994) "the clothes you wear must express social values just as the films you watch communicate social values (87)". Regrettably, Etim (2006) observes that "people are carried away by styles in vogue thus in a way erode the cultural communicative aspect of costumes (14)".

From the above, it is clear that costume should communicate, relate, teach or serve as cultural identity. During social functions like festivals, marriages, tribal and inter tribal) burials, the function of costume for cultural identification becomes more glaring as people are adorned in different colorful attires. Similarly in films, costumes are easily used to identify the origin or setting of the film.

In 'Missing Mask', costume served as a means of identifying strangers. Ikem (Francis Duru), though a native of Umuorji but grew up in the city was saved from being killed by Umuorji warriors through the timely intervention of Adaku because Ikem was wearing a foreign cloth, alien to Umuorji. After their chance meeting by the riverside, Adaku looks at him and remarks:

**Adaku:** (Introducing herself to Ikem) I am the daughter of Ugo, come, we don't have time. Warriors of Umuorji will kill you if they see both of us here Your outfit (costume) is that of a stranger. (emphasis mine).

Again, as Adaku and Ikem enters their compound. The person they met was Adaku's mother, [Ugo] who was sweeping the compound. Her attire (costume) clearly depicts her as an Igbo mother, wearing an Akwette, hand made wrapper. But her comment on seeing Ikem and Adakau also support the argument that costume serves as a mark of identification.

**Ugo:** Who is this stranger you are bringing to this house this morning? Do you want to bring death to my door step? I ask you, Adaku?

But after introducing him to her mother and upon recognizing who he is, Ugo cautions Adaku her daughter:.



**Ugo:** Adaku, take him to your room. He must not put on any longer the dress that exposes him to danger. Dress him up as a son of the soil.

And with the borrowed dress, Ikem became “one of them” free to carry out his mission.

Further into the film we see the Igwe and his cabinet members in their full cultural attire, representation of the traditional institution in Igbo land. The warriors of Umuorji also wore their warrior costume (s) signifying their readiness to protect their community.

### **Properties**

The most prominent property used in the movie is the mask from where the title of the movie is derived. Masks play very important role in African life, theatre and performance. In fact, mask is central to African theatre, performance, traditional and religious life. It is a medium which connects us to the spiritual world. It is generally believed that some masks possess supernatural powers as diviners see and speak through them. It is the strength, power or engine house of a community.

The above comments about the mask as it relates to cultural life were positively projected in the movie under review.

Firstly, the mask is communally owned. During the visit of Mbaogu to Orji, the diviner, Mbaogu remarks:

**Mbaogu:** But the mask does not belong to him (Igwe) but Umuorji (emphasis mine).

**Orji:** Yes I know...

Secondly, when the mask was stolen by Ikem, the diviner (Orji) was able to communicate with the mask because the mask has speaking and communicative powers. After pouring water in a pot and observing some rituals, we hear him talking to the mask, demanding to know the exact place where they hid it and what they are planning to do with the mask. He then turned to Mbaogu and warned him of the dangers ahead.

**Orji:** You must move fast with your men or it will be too late.

Mbaogu's reply and subsequent question, clearly reveals the supernatural powers of the mask.

**Mbaogu:** But why can't the mask react?

Even to the point where the white man (Rev. Gibson) attempts to destroy the mask, it spit fire from the mouth. When he dropped it on the ground, we see the mask getting up on its own.

On arrival to the church where the white man was burning the mask, Mbaogu sees the mask being burnt, he exclaims!

**Mbaogu:** Umuorji, your strength has been destroyed...  
Your heroes could not save the mask. It  
will never be the same again.

Since the strength of Umuorji, their rallying point has been taken away and destroyed, Mbaogu finally laments before he stabs himself to death.

**Mbaogu:** What shall I tell (the people of Umuorji) that I saw the  
white man destroy the spirit of our ancestors?  
No, Mbaogu you ...

From the foregoing, the researcher is inclined to align with the submission of Nwosu (2014) who posits that ancestral spirit live in masks and that masks makes the ancestors spring to life. This is also in line with Okeke (2012) who rightly captured the importance of mask in the life of an African community when he copiously quoted Ossie Enekwe who opines that:

Because mask is a community symbol, mask performances are taken very seriously by Igbo. When its performance is successful, the village feels proud and fulfilled for is an index of the solidarity and moral health of its people.(123)

No wonder Mbaogu, a great warrior, took his life since the community symbol; the rallying point (cultre) of the community has been destroyed, instead of being preserved.

### **Music and Dance**

Apart from costume, location and properties, music and dance were extensively used and positively too, in the movie. The theme music, was indigenous. It was done with traditional musical instruments like "ekwe, ogene, oja and igba" but remixed in the

studio. This clearly answered the call for traditional (ancient) and contemporary (modern) to complement themselves to build a continuing capacity to accommodate future innovations and developments.

Also, in the movie, *Adaku*, in her maiden costume sang melodiously and danced in traditional Igbo styles and rhythm. Her mother, even when she was sweeping her compound, used music to tell some of her stories with attendant lessons.

### **Conclusion**

This work has surveyed the production of “Missing Mask” with a view to locating the production indexes used that will aid cultural preservation and is of the opinion that the film which was shot in Igbo language and subtitled in English is capable of preserving the Igbo language especially in view of the recent speculations that the Language may be extinguished before the end of this century.

Furthermore, locations which included the kings palace, the groove, Mbaogu's compound, the river and its bank, hills and valleys, village square, farm land and bush paths; the properties which also included the mask, canoe and paddle stick, cutlasses and hoes, traditional seats made of bamboo (achara) goatskins used in sitting down at the village square, wooden slit gongs, iron or metal gong (ogene); the costumes like the hand woven akwette wrapper, war dress, king's regalia etc; our dances and music were all positively used and are capable of reawaking the practice of culture preservation in their viewers.

### **Recommendations**

The researcher therefore recommends and calls on Nollywood screenwriters, producers and directors to properly sieve the content of what they produce through the effective use of positive indexes that will promote our cultures so as to avoid what Anunike (2009) calls projecting the Nigerian culture in the negative. According to him, “cultural content as human sacrifice, wizardly, witchcraft, violence, indecency, obscenity are most frequently portrayed by Nollywood scriptwriters and producers...” (171)

Apart from providing an enabling environment for film production to thrive, Government and Non Governmental Organizations should institute prize awards both in cash and national honours to screenwriters, producers, directors who showcase our cultural heritage in their movies.

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