

# Audience Reception of Benin Cinema in Nigeria



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*Empirical Findings and  
Implications for Nollywood*

By

Osakue Stevenson Omoera

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For Victoria Isaigbonbuomwan Obazee with fond memories



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## PREFACE

The reception of Nollywood films has been phenomenal, cutting across geographical, linguistic, and cultural audiences. Studies on it have been concerned, for the most part, with themes, styles, and genres. Only a few of them have been on audience's reception, a vital component that is, arguably, responsible for Nollywood's unprecedented success; most have dwelt on Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa films. Scholars have paid little or given no attention to the audience's reception of films of other cultures, such as Benin, Efik, Nupe, and many others. This book, therefore, inquired into the Benin audience's reception of Benin cinema to determine its status as an ethnonational film culture within Nollywood.

Deploying the reception theory developed by Hans-Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, applied to theatre/performance studies by Susan Bennett, this book used both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. A 35-item questionnaire was designed and randomly administered to respondents in Beninland. From 630 copies of the questionnaire administered, 597 (94.76%) returned. From this number, 556 (93.13%) respondents indicated they watched Benin video films. Based on the above, the study analysed the views of 556 respondents. The sample size of 556 consisted of 288 (51.79%) males and 268 (48.20%) females of age brackets 21-30 (48.92%) and 50-above (3.59%), constituting the highest and lowest categories of respondents, respectively. The results were collated and presented, using simple percentages and frequency tables. The questionnaire was complemented with structured interviews of filmmakers, film teachers, and cultural historians of Benin.

The majority of the sampled audience (476; 85.61%) enjoyed watching Benin films because they portrayed their culture. The sampled audience (396; 71.22%) welcomed these films' use of common iconic cultural materials, such as artefacts, festivals, and folklore, to propagate Benin culture. Two hundred and seventy-two (272; 48.92%) respondents opined that the activities of the various theatre/cultural groups produced Benin cinema. A significant number of the audience (472; 84.89%) held that the industry could use film to revive interest in the dying Benin language. Again, 452 (81.29 %) of the respondents indicated that the industry should produce animated Benin films. Many respondents (464; 83.45%) believed

the industry required more investments for better-quality Benin films. These observations were consistent with the views of those interviewed.

Furthermore, the researcher gathered from the interviews that Benin film audiences tended to adopt the interpretations of cultural avatars such as chiefs in the film ecosystem. He also observed from the sampled audience that both genders between 21-30 years almost equally patronised Benin video films. This young population (48.92% of the audience) had significant implications for the sustainability of patronage for Benin films, and future actors, directors, cinematographers, producers, marketers, and other workers in the filmic enterprise can emerge from this group.

Benin film has emerged as a viable variant of Nollywood owing to a vast Benin-speaking audience. Thus, it deserves scholarly attention in Nigeria and beyond. This book suggests that stakeholders should use Benin film to promote the socio-cultural practices of the Benin people; Benin filmmakers should take advantage of the current development in film production to widen the audience of their films. This work has advanced film scholarship in Nigeria by paying critical attention to a neglected constituent of Nollywood – Benin film. It is unique and relevant for being among the pioneering studies in media production of African indigenous popular culture. In a very concrete sense, therefore, Benin film is a contemporary visual encyclopaedia of the Benin people and culture that could systematically consolidate the relevance of indigenous language or ethnic films in Nigeria as a potential tool for national integration and international diplomacy.

**Osakue Stevenson Omoera**

## FOREWORD

This book consolidates Osakue Omoera's position as the leading scholar of the Benin film industry. There has not been much competition for this honour; he notes that very little work has been done on this branch of Nigerian filmmaking, even though it ranks next in size to English, Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo films. Perhaps Nollywood's greatest gift to Nigeria and Africa has been creating the assumption, through its example, that the means of making films is potentially within everyone's reach and the capacities of every ethnic group. Producing and sustaining a stream of productions, on the other hand, is no simple matter in minor Nigerian languages; the ones in the Benin language have created the most substantial industrial structures. Throughout his academic career, Omoera has provided reliable and empirical descriptions of Benin filmmaking – a significant service for everyone seeking a comprehensive view of Nigeria's film production.

The title points to the audience's reception of Benin films as his subject, even though his study is diffused over a much wider field, providing accounts of various aspects of the industry, from its history to filmography. Because the audience's reactions spring from a hermeneutical relationship between the film and the worldview of the responding viewers, Omoera also provides an account of the central elements of the Benin worldview. A former student of Professor Hyginus Ekwuazi, Omoera comes out of the core lineage of Nigerian media scholarship and continues its forms and methods. It is not surprising to find a comprehensive survey questionnaire at the centre of the project.

The intellectual traditions underlying this media scholarship are an integral part of the great work of decolonization carried out in Nigerian universities. Motivated by variously-inflected cultural nationalism, the underlying questions were always: what are the productive energies of the nation, and how can they be understood, strengthened, and mobilized? I believe this orientation explains why the Nigerian academic community has responded better to the video revolution than their colleagues elsewhere in Africa, that often remain hung up on sterile questions about what is really "cinema" and what is not. I'm speaking of the community of Nigerian academic intellectuals, not of their institutions, where film studies remain largely blocked by theatre studies, and, of course, the conditions of service

in Nigerian universities are such that few academics have the energy left to carry out ambitious empirical research projects. Because of the egregious failures of governmental and industrial organizations to gather and disseminate basic facts about Nigerian film production, such as the annual number and type of productions, ungrounded and wild claims go unchallenged. It wouldn't be hard for academics to organize a standing system for gathering such information by coordinating the work of scholars like Omoera, who keep track of specific sectors.

These are challenging times for media scholars. There is always a blizzard of productions to keep track of and a constant evolution of theoretical and methodological tools, with Nigerians and other Africans in the diaspora playing critical roles, even as the world continues to overlook the African continent in many or most discussions of "the global." Not least significant are the profound structural changes in the Nigerian media environment. The original structures of the video revolution are still working: parallel grassroots industries making films in various languages, all tightly keyed to the economics of distribution on video discs through informal markets. But now, this world dominated by the "marketers" is only part of a larger picture that includes multiplex cinemas, greatly expanded broadcasting (both satellite and now through digital terrestrial stations), and internet streaming. Large-scale transnational corporations are making significant investments in these new sectors. It was hard to keep up with the linguistically-fragmented Nigerian film industries; the terrain is now much more complex.

The marketers built the industry on their legendary intuitive understanding of the audience's reception of films. But it is always difficult getting marketers to talk about what they know. Companies like MultiChoice and iROKO have the technologies to gather unprecedented amounts of information about their audience's viewership; they can keep track of what every one of us has watched, at what time of day, and at what point in the film we stopped watching. But this information is valuable proprietary data the corporations do not share – a different kind of secrecy from the marketers, but equally hard to work around. It's tempting to mine social media for information about audience responses, but this method privileges the opinions of certain kinds of viewers. So, the venerable questionnaire still has a role to play. Internet streaming and digital broadcasting can carry infinite amounts of content, and their economic logic is to aggregate audiences rather than impose a single type of content on everyone. *Africa Magic* keeps proliferating channels, not to mention *YouTube*. In this world, Benin films have created a niche, but what part will it play?



Omoera's study reminds us of the enormously powerful adhesion between a great and ancient culture and its population, manifested through films, among other media. Benin City is the epicentre of a new culture not linked to the preservation and transmission of an indigenous language or a traditional worldview – the culture of standup comedy and of Pidgin, whose place in the Nigerian culture has transformed rapidly and to an astonishing degree. The old Bendel State broke up into Edo and Delta at the moment Nollywood was born; both new states contributed immensely to what Nollywood became, but films in other languages tended to have overshadowed their contributions, at least as far as I'm aware, no one had ever adequately explored their complicated cultural geography about the film industry. But that, of course, is the subject of another book.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## BACKGROUND TO NOLLYWOOD AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

### 1.0 Introduction

This chapter discusses the general background of the book. In doing so, it highlights the need for the study, the research objectives, the research questions, and the significance of the study. It also X-rays the scope and the theoretical standpoints that provide the critical basis for the book.

Studies have shown that the imaginative arts, particularly films, can provide edutainment and employment when the elastic socio-economic and socio-cultural possibilities they engender are explored and harnessed for the benefit of human society (Omoera, 2014; 2013; 2021; United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, UNCTAD, 2010; 2019). That, in a way, explains why the art, science, and business of filmmaking that bring about the image, as seen on the screen or cinema, rest on the shared creative efforts of several professionals, such as the screenwriters, directors, actors, editors, critics and reviewers, producers, distributors, advertisers, location managers, and camera persons, among others. Balewa (2001, 112) asserts that filmmaking is a multidisciplinary craft that requires many social skills, creative talent, intelligence, and willpower. The creative individuals working in specific areas of the filmmaking process must understand the director's vision and the creative demands of this vision and work within a collective discipline for a common purpose.

Leke Alder of Alder Consulting has estimated that the total market potential of Nollywood is about N522 billion or \$3 billion (Odugbemi, 2010, 46). The International Trade Administration [ITA] (2020) affirms the business opportunities in the Nollywood industry. They include opening cinemas in underserved cities and using technological platforms to enhance distribution – e.g., IrokoTV, igodo.tv, and Netflix, training and capacity building for cinematography, scriptwriting, directing, and film production equipment, among others. It further claims that the local industry employs about a million people and generates over US\$ 7 billion for the economy. It

accounts for 1.4% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). According to IMF reports, the industry produces about 25000 films yearly, a projection of US\$ 22 million by 2021 as total cinema revenue (ITA, 2020).

Corroborating the above, Broadcast Media Africa (2023), citing Young-Tobi Ekechi, claims that Nigeria's film industry is taking the world by storm, with over US \$6.4 billion in revenue and more than 2,500 movies per year. The foregoing reveals the 'economic goldmine status of the 'ribs' of Nollywood if an enduring socio-economic and socio-cultural framework is in place.

The common purpose is to create edutainment products for audiences (viewers) through a creative collaboration of many hands, using the available technology and talent in a creative business triangle that contributes to local and national economies. In Nigeria, Adeoti (2009, 41) asserts that Nollywood, the umbrella name for Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Benin, and other films, circulates in Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. *Africa Magic*, a satellite television channel, is currently devoted to African films, showing, most of the time, titles from Nigeria. Radio and television transmissions are incomplete without the advertisement of new titles.

That suggests that filmmaking, together with the various activities ancillary to it, is a sure pathway for providing opportunities for the development of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), which can industrially accommodate the teeming unemployed youths in Nigeria, thereby expanding the national economy in dire need of higher-end goods and services. In other words, the stakeholders, such as government agencies, Nollywood industry players, and the academy, among other agents of development within the cultural and creative industries (CCIs), could collaborate to exploit the huge potential of an entirely home-grown creative culture to address the challenges of poverty, youth unemployment, and crime that currently beset Nigeria (Omoera, 2013; 2021). At another level, the output of the various strata of Nollywood could contribute to transforming the Nigerian economy from a primary commodity exporter to one of higher values, of the kind in greater demand today in the global economy.

Benin film is any film produced from the Benin people's perspective. It derives from the Benin worldview and the experiences of contemporary Benin-speaking people. Benin films can also refer to films produced within or outside Beninland or precincts by Nigerians or foreigners who may choose to use the Benin language or register the films as Benin films. This study affirms that Benin video film enjoys an enviable status among indigenous Nigerian film cultures because of its cultural value to the Benins and its wide acceptance by Benin-speaking audiences. It is the reason it

asserts that it should be accorded due recognition and attention, as an aspect of the Nigerian film, in the academic arena and other learned fora.

The book examines the Benin film segment of Nollywood and how the Benin-speaking audience perceives it. The audience's reception of Nollywood films has been phenomenal. However, the studies conducted on Nollywood films have, for the most part, been on themes, styles, and genres. The audience's reception, the single-most-important factor responsible for its outstanding success, has received the attention of a few researchers; even these have concentrated their efforts on films based on the cultures of the three main ethnic groups of Nigeria – Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa. The audience's reception of other emerging film cultures from minor ethnicities, such as Benin, Efik, and Nupe, among others, has not been investigated. This study, therefore, examines the audience's reception of Benin's video film in terms of cultural identity and propagation, language promotion, and negotiation of history.

Without a doubt, video film has become a newfound attraction for Nigerians and Africans due to its accessibility to audiences across generations. Its popularity also stems from its low cost of production compared with celluloid and has led to a redefinition of both formats in the contemporary Nigerian context. Ekwuazi (2003, 49) notes that film is neither exclusively celluloid nor video; it is either a motion picture or a picture projected on a small or large screen. Perhaps, this is why Larkin (2002, par 2) asserts that the origin of African video films is traceable to the rise of Nigerian and Ghanaian films shot straight on video but locally referred to as 'films.'

Uwah and Bature-Uzor (2023, 33) affirm that no matter how people look at African cinema space, therefore, it is right to state that the video film model is all about the uniqueness of its consumers whose stories the films reconstruct and the narratives have taken the centre-stage. Thus, the digital video film as a significant aspect of the cinema-making culture of Africans currently does not only imply the availability of film technology to local people but also a remark on the fluidity of representations in present-day circumstances.

These films are not the cinema art often seen in African film festivals but a popular medium; meaning, not only do they command a wide African audience, but their production and financing are also entirely dependent on how well they perform in the marketplace. Against all odds, Nollywood has risen to become the second-largest film industry in the world (Uchenunu, 2008a, 26; Nwachukwu 2008a, 162; UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2010, par 2; Adedun, 2010, 114; Dovey, 2011, par 1; Acland, 2012; Tsaaior, 2018). While some other scholars, including Aft (2011, par 4), consider

Nollywood's rating mythical, the sheer vibrancy and output of the industry underscore its rising status.

Arguably, the digital revolution that hit the filmmaking process since the 1990s can be said to have democratized everything about film and empowered many nations to experiment with new technologies. This is how it feels across Africa, unlike the way it was in the 1970s and 1980s. From production to distribution, and from exhibition to consumption, African cinemas, at present, can no longer be said to follow a common thread or fight for a united course, such as the decolonization project of the post-independence epoch (Uwah and Bature-Uzor, 2023, 33). The days of mockery of African films, specifically video films, are over as Nollywood has gained ascendancy in global cinema ethos.

Nollywood, the colloquial name for which the Nigerian video film industry is now renowned, is of uncertain date and origin but was, just like Bollywood, derived from Hollywood. The film culture is an offshoot of soap operas, which began in the early 1980s in Nigeria. During this period, soap operas such as *Behind the Cloud* and *Checkmate* by Amaka Igwe, and *Ripples* by Zeb Ejiro, among others, were produced. A significant change came in 1992 when Chris Obi-Rapu directed a film titled *Living in Bondage* (Haynes, 2000). The film was in the Igbo language and subtitled in English. That paved the way for more Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, and English video films. According to Haynes (2000, xv), these films contain a staggering number of narrations. Only the daily press and weekly news magazines rival video films as media for telling the story of Nigeria today.

As the video industry finds its feet and spreads across the country, diverse and powerful cultural energies are increasingly flowing into it. That is probably because, in many ways, the video film itself is an example of technology governments can use for cultural explorations and representations by individuals or groups that cannot afford celluloid (Onuzulike, 2007, 233; Uwah and Bature-Uzor, 2023). In fact, for over three decades now, Nollywood has experienced tremendous mutation and growth in both the professional and academic arenas. That is likely to continue for some reasons. Firstly, other ethnic groups, besides the Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba, are beginning to enter the industry, with many indigenous language production sites across the country. Secondly, many academic journals, books, conferences, professorial chairs, and centres are dedicated to Nollywood studies in and outside Nigeria. However, amidst this massive production of cultural and entertainment products and knowledge construction in Nollywood (Haynes, 2010, 105; Ekwuazi, 2012, 6; 2014, 27), scholarship on film audience's reception, at present, is low in the larger Nollywood, needless to mention Benin video subsection.

## 1.1 Before our Very Eyes: Nollywood Phenomenon in Perspective

“Before our very eyes: Nollywood phenomenon in perspective” is the compelling phrase that Biodun Jeyifo (2014, 589) used to underscore the fact that Nollywood is one of the outstanding national, continental, and global cultural phenomena emanating from Nigeria. As in every Nigerian indigenous language film culture, producers are making video films in the Benin language. Despite this, there is virtually no scholarly attention on audiences’ reception of Benin video film. Most documented indigenous Nigerian language video films that have received academic attention are in Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba (Ekwuazi, 2001, 4; Ogunsuyi, 2007, 25; Zajc, 2009, 65) – and these are hardly in the area of the audience’s reception/perception.

To achieve the objective, this study traces the beginning of Benin video film and attempts bibliographical documentation of the video films done in the Benin language. Besides, it examines how the video films portray the cultural heritage of the Benin people. In the end, the study hopes to situate or establish how Benin-speaking audience perceives Benin video film. This effort would help to project Benin video film as a popular art to the centre stage (in the policies and programmes) of development agencies, cultural administrators, filmmakers and critics, concerned government agencies, community-based organisations, media, and culture experts.

Video film is now a vital performance art media in Nigeria. Akinosho (2002, 39) says it is “the contemporary equivalence of the Onitsha market literature (OML).” This comparison is due to three similarities between the Nigerian video film and the OML at its peak. The first is the popular reception of both; the other is the mass marketing of both literary products. Lastly is the sensational titling of the Nigerian video films, akin to OML’s. It is the reason this study agrees with Haynes (2007a, 8) that “video films offer the strongest, most accessible expression of contemporary Nigeria popular culture.” Ekwuazi (2012, 7) argues that existing works on the Nigerian film audience neatly fall into three groups:

- (1) Conceptual/quasi-empirical works: Works in this category are heavily conceptual. In the final proportioning, their empirical component is slim. Major examples: Okome (2007), Emasealu (2008), and Uchenunu (2008).
- (2) Empirical works based on perception theories: These works are on how Nollywood’s audiences consciously/selectively choose, perceive, and retain the information in its films. Major examples here include: Agina (2009), Ekwuazi (2010), and Animasaun (2011).

- (3) Empirical works based on theories other than perception/reception: The most recurrent here are the agenda setting, the cultural norms theory, and the mainstreaming/synchronization theory. Major examples of such studies include Okonofua (1999), Akpabio (2007), and Ekwuazi (2008).

None of these identified audience researches are on Benin video films. It becomes evident because film scholars and critics have made copious inquiries into other aspects of video films made in other Nigerian languages/cultures, aside from the predominant English language and its pidgin variant. One may ask: How did Benin video film evolve? Why do people watch Benin films? How does it portray the cultural heritage of the Benin people? How have development agencies, including the government, supported Benin video film? What platforms have Benin video film practitioners created for sustainable growth?

Given the foregoing, the objectives of this study include an inquiry into the audience's reception of Benin video films in terms of cultural identity and propagation, language promotion, and negotiation of history in Nollywood. In doing this, it will examine the historical evolution of Benin video films and attempt a comprehensive bibliographical/filmographical documentation of video films produced in the Benin language to ascertain how they portray the cultural heritage of the Benin people. In addition, the book will attempt to probe development agencies' support for the industry and suggest ways for the sustainable growth of Benin video film.

Aside from the scanty academic work on Benin film, there is also virtually no record of Benin language films despite the copious documented evidence on video films in some other Nigerian languages/cultures. For instance, the National Film and Video Censors Board, NFVCB (2000, 2006) have documented evidence on Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo films but none on Benin video films. This book intends to fill this gap. For over three decades, hardly a day passed without the industry releasing new video films into the Nigerian film market. Thousands of video club owners and numerous customers eagerly await new titles or releases. During 2003 alone, over 2000 films were shot in various locations across Nigeria, creating jobs and talents (Mba, 2006, 31). Producers make most home video films in Nigerian English, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. These indigenous film cultures have attracted considerable academic attention both nationally and internationally. However, regarding audience reception studies, the output of Nollywood scholars on Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo/English films has been low and virtually absent in the Benin film subsection.

The book is significant for many reasons. First, it will provide scholarly documented evidence on the audience's reception of Benin video film. Second, it will hopefully begin and stimulate the interest of film scholars,



critics, and theorists within and outside Nollywood in Benin video film. It is also because film scholars and critics have hitherto made profuse inquiries into other aspects of video films in other Nigerian languages/cultures, aside from the predominant English language and its pidgin variant. Some of the inquirers of the Hausa video film include Mohammed Bala (1992), Brian Larkin (1997), Dul Johnson (2000), Yusuf Adamu (2004), Mathias Krings (2004), Hyginus Ekwuazi (2007), and Abdalla Adamu (2004; 2007; 2009; 2010; 2011).

For the Igbo video film, some of those who make inquiries into its nature include Chukwuma Anyanwu (1995), Hyginus Ekwuazi (1997), Nwachukwu-Agada (1997), Paul Ugor (2004), Chukwuma Okoye (2007a), Benjamin Enem (2008), Nnamdi Malife (2008) and Stefan Sereda (2010). Furthermore, Onokoome Okome (1991; 1993), Hyginus Ekwuazi (1994), Durotoye Adeleke (1995; 2005; 2007; 2009), Wole Ogundele (1997), Afolabi Adesanya (1997), Obododimma Oha (2002), Asobele-Timothy (2003), Daniel Seiffert (2004), Olufadekemi Adagbada (2005; 2008), Adewale Rafiu (2007), Hope Eghagha (2007), and Saheed Aderinto (2012) are some of the Nigerian film scholars and critics who have done incisive scholarly studies on Yoruba video film.

According to Ekwuazi (2001, 4), Ogunsuyi (2007, 25), Ugochukwu (2009, 3), and Zajc (2009, 65), Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba are the film cultures mainly documented in academic scholarship in Nigeria and beyond. However, Benin film, according to Ibagere (2011), ranks fourth in the corpus of indigenous film production, but its output in scholarship is not commensurate. Hence, the worth of a study of this nature seeks to authenticate and give visibility to Benin film in the Nigerian/African film culture. Besides, the findings of this work are significant in that scholarly documentation of Benin films will extend the socio-cultural and socio-economic horizons of the Benin people. Over time, it could transform into social and economic empowerment of the teeming Benin youths seeking the Golden Fleece abroad. The book will also open new vistas and provide opportunities for further studies in the emerging Benin film, as we anticipate a more robust role for cable, Netflix, and other over-the-top (OTT) platforms in determining the next phase of Nollywood.

## 1.2 Scope and Clarification of Terms

Within the general framework of theatre/media studies, there is a large canvas on which to paint vases of the video film industry. But this book has recognised and isolated Benin video film as an aspect of Nollywood. It is the focus of the study to examine the Benin-speaking audience's reception

of Benin video film through the eyes of the Benin-speaking people. This group is primarily the first audience of Benin films. The reason for limiting the investigation to this group is that this study attempts to formulate the poetics of Benin video films using the Benin audience's reception and perception. However, where necessary, it has borrowed materials from global media culture to anchor its claims. This work also investigated the potential impact of this aspect of the industry's sustainable development and policy formulation on Benin culture and language.

As part of its delimitations, the work did not embark on an in-depth analysis per se; instead, it used some of the video films to portray Benin cultural heritage, classification, and appeal to the Benin mind for analysis. Besides, sourcing published materials on the subject was almost impossible due to a lack of critical publications. Hence, this research is, more or less, a pioneering effort at paying scholarly attention to Benin video film. This book revolves around certain planes of film/video and audience discourse whose use of grammar may differ from the conventional everyday language. That is probably because of its technical nature. It follows, then, that there are a few strange terms or jargon in this work. But where they arise, attempts are made to explain them unambiguously to elicit the intended meaning. For instance, films/videos/home videos/video films/Nollywood films/video dramas and film producers/videographers/filmmakers are synonymous throughout the book. Contextually, we hope there will be clarity of meaning at every point in the work.

### 1.3 Theoretical Fortification

The book is at the crossroads of many theoretical constructs. First is the 'emic' point of view as propounded by Anderson (1990). As a theoretical framework, 'emic' refers to the indigenous or local perception without regard to outside observation, perspective, or interpretation. 'Emic' is simply an insider's perception of the inside. The deployment of 'emic' in this book stemmed from the fact that the researcher is of Edo (Benin) extraction and hopes to bring to scholarly notice the Benin-speaking audience's reception of the Benin video film.

Furthermore, the 'emic' point of view justifies the belief that contemplation of an African cultural situation or phenomenon should be from an African perspective and understanding of the mores and inner workings of African traditional and modern societies. Coupled with the above is the reception theory, which theorists such as Hans-Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, Stuart Hall, and Susan Bennett developed in the twentieth century. Ekwuazi (2011, 21) observes that the above names are recurrent in the abundant literature

on reception theory: both Wolfgang Iser (1974, 1980) and Hans-Robert Jauss (1982a; b) developed it for the interrogation of the literary text; Stuart Hall (1982) applied it to media and communication studies, and Susan Bennett (2005) carried the discourse into theatre/performance/media arts. Indeed, Bennett insists that meaning(s) result(s) from the interplay of author-text-context-audience interface(s).

The term ‘reception’ concerns what sense people make of media content – the process by which the individual makes any sense of any experience (Folarin 1998, 68). As a branch of modern literary studies, reception theory concerns how readers perceive and receive literary works (Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker, 2016). The concept sometimes refers to reader-response criticism in general, but it is associated more particularly with ‘reception-aesthetics’ (German, *Rezeptionsaesthetik*), outlined in the 1970s by the German literary historian Hans-Robert Jauss. Drawing on philosophical hermeneutics, Jauss argues that the audience receives literary works (including visual literature such as video films) against an existing horizon of expectations consisting of readers’ (viewers’) current knowledge and presuppositions about literature and that the meanings of works change and, as such, horizons shift. Jauss (1982a, 15) expatiates that:

The relationship of work to work must now be brought into this interaction between work and mankind, and the historical coherence of works among themselves must be seen in the interrelations of production and reception. Put another way: literature and art only obtain a history that has the character of a process when the succession of works is mediated not only through the producing subject but also through the consuming subject – through the interaction of the author and public.

In other words, Jauss’s theory views literature from the perspective of the reader or consumer and treats literature as a dialectical process of production and reception. Holub (1984, xii) agrees when he characterises the reception theory as “a general shift in concern from the author and the work to the text and the reader.” Corroborating Jauss, Wolfgang Iser (1980) contends that contemporary or modern hermeneutics (the study of interpretation theory) encompasses everything in the interpretative process. That includes verbal and nonverbal forms of communication and prior aspects that impact communication, such as presuppositions, pre-understandings, the meaning and philosophy of language, and semiotics. In the words of Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker (1997, 55), “Iser takes a phenomenological approach to reception theory and “de-contextualises and de-historicises the text and the reader.” Indeed, Iser (1974, xi) argues that the reader’s involvement coincides with the production of meaning in literature. He further asserts that:

...The literary work cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text [by the reader], but in fact must lie halfway between the two. The work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized, and the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader...The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader. (1974, 274-275)

It implies that when people go out to watch films – visual literature, for instance – they do so with a background of knowledge and experience, which come into play while interpreting it. From a related perspective, cultural theorist Stuart Hall developed Hall's theory of encoding and decoding – how readers make meaning from texts. Hall's position compares to the reading/viewing of video films and the meaning assigned to them by readers or viewers. In other words, reception theorists focus on the roles that audiences – readers of media productions (films, radio, or television programmes) play in the scheme of things and not only on the texts (contents) themselves. Unlike most varieties of reader-response theory, reception theory is more concerned with the historical changes affecting the viewing public.

This approach to media analysis focuses on the scope for 'negotiation' and 'opposition' on the part of the audience. It means that cultural and entertainment products, such as books and films, among other creative works, are not simply passively accepted by the audience; the readers/viewers interpret the meanings of the texts based on their cultural backgrounds and life experiences. The meaning of a text is not inherent in the text but in the relationship of the text with the reader/viewer. Therefore, a basic acceptance of the meaning of a specific media product tends to occur when a group of listeners, viewers, or readers has a shared cultural background and interprets a radio/television programme or film in similar ways. The less shared heritage a reader/viewer has with the artist (media content creator/author), the less likely s/he can recognise the artist's/author's intended meaning.

It follows that if two viewers/readers vastly have different cultural and personal experiences, their reading of a media product (say, a film) would widely vary. Perhaps, it is in this respect that Bennett (2005, 34) argues that reception theory interfaces the text/performance with the reader/audience and meaning. Again, the active audience theory, also known as the new audience theory espoused in the 1980s by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), now renamed Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Culture (CSEC), a research division of the Department of Sociology, University of Birmingham, also finds relevance in the text/performance,

author/context, and reader/audience interface(s). The theory provides insight into how audiences interpret and interact with the mass media.

Researchers have done a considerable number of studies on the way people receive and interpret texts - novels, poems, dramas, films, television programmes, radio programmes, etc.; and how their circumstances as individuals – age, gender, religious orientation, ethnic background, class, etc. – affect their reading of texts (Morley, 1980, 1986, 1991:16; 1994; Fish, 1980; De Certeau, 1984: xii; Martinez, 1990, 1992; Staiger, 1992; 2002:46; Gillespie, 1995, 2005, 2006; Ibagere, 1996a:137; Ruby, 1995; Jenkins, 1999; Aliu, 2000; Hayward, 2000; Moran, 2003; Kaur, 2005; Felner, 2006; Okome, 2007; Animasaun, 2011; Ekwuazi, 2011, 2012; Michelle, Davis, and Vladica, 2012; Ibbi, 2013, 2017; Onuzulike, 2016; Endong, 2017).

However, only a few of these studies have empirically or conceptually focused on film audience scholarship in Nigeria (Haynes, 2010, 105; Ekwuazi, 2014, 27). It is worth restating that audiences are sensitive to the quality of media content (the film, for instance) to which they expose themselves. They often judge such content on the grounds of reliability. In this regard, McQuail asserts that people have expectations of media and very often regard them as meeting those expectations or failing to meet them. People voice complaints and appreciation of the media (2005, 441). It implies that viewers are not passive observers or consumers of media content – especially concerning this study or the films they see or watch. Instead, they judge the images they see according to existing beliefs, worldviews, and norms of society. A closer look at the foregoing postulates shows they are all tied to a critical nexus. This nexus, to a large extent, has to do with how audiences see/appreciate art forms and the meaning they make of them.

Therefore, an interrogation of how an audience perceives any form of art could be very profitable. That is because, apart from helping to refine and redefine art forms, reckoning with the views and perceptions of a steadfast audience could lead to the all-around development of any art form. The opposite of the foregoing could spell doom for any art form, no matter its promises. Against the backdrop of reception theory, this book empirically interrogates the audience's reception of Benin video films as a neglected segment of Nollywood, with the hope of contributing to bridging the noticeable gap in film audience scholarship on Nollywood. It is also the hope that the work will stimulate further empirical studies into audiences' reception of cultural products in other film ecologies whose audiences may require different 'lenses' or produce diverse perspectives on language, mores, artefacts, and so on, of the peoples and cultural settings.

## CHAPTER TWO

# GLOBAL DISCOURSE ON RECEPTION STUDIES AND THE EVOLUTION OF NIGERIAN FILM

### 2.0 Introduction

The study has carried out a critical and empirical review of materials in this literature review for focus and clearness of discussion. Audience, communication, message, the effect of the film on human behaviour, the evolution of the film in Nigeria, and the Benin worldview in Benin video film constitute the pylons of the critical review while global as well as the Nigerian perspectives on film audience's reception form the basis of the empirical review.

### 2.1 Critical Review of Literature

Here, attention is on critical literature on the audience, the communication, the message, and the effect of film on human behaviour. It also attempts an epistemic consideration of works on its evolution in the Nigerian and Benin worldview about the ones from the Benin society.

#### 2.1.1 Audience, Communication, and the Message

The film is not just words alone but sights and sounds, stillness and motion, noise and silence, relationships and responses. Aside from being a mass medium of popular entertainment and an art form, Cook (1981, 36) contends that film is a medium that bypasses language to communicate directly with the human senses through moving photographic images that seem real. In other words, through film, the most complete and utter fantasy assumes the shape and emotional impact of the starkest reality (Petrie and Boggs, 2022). Indeed, scholars believe the film is an emotional experience that provides entertainment, relationships, and responses (Buñuel, 1969; Uwah, 2013; Ayakoroma, 2014).