

Ballots or Bullets: Filmographic Perspectives on the Pervasive Incidents of Electoral Violence and Malpractices in Nigeria



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*Mitochondrial Eve Journal
of Post Graduate Studies
Vol.1 No. 2 (2024); June,
2024*

Abstract

Nigerian elections are rapidly descending to an all-out war, where the ordinary people, who are supposed to be the voters are pummeled, maimed and killed, while billions of Naira worth of public properties are destroyed in a bid by desperate politicians to manipulate election figures and impose themselves on the people as their leaders. Scholars and researchers, especially, those from the social sciences backgrounds have been churning out theories and investigations on why electoral violence persist, even with the enormous investments by government and even international donor agencies to eradicate this social epidemic. Different strategies have been adopted in a bid to eradicate, or at least, reduce incidents of violence in our elections, but it is either these strategies are not properly implemented or they are not the right strategies. There is however, an almost unanimous convergence by scholars and researchers alike that mass education, attitudinal reorientation and culture are critical to solving this menace. This paper therefore rides on the logic that the mass reach and influence of films can be harnessed in the campaign against electoral violence. The paper advances arguments for government agencies concerned with the responsibility of conducting elections, international donor agencies and the private sector may optimize the power of theatre and films towards a drastic reduction in incidents of electoral violence and other electoral malfeasance.

Keywords: Ballots, Bullets, Filmographic perspectives, Pervasive Incidents, Electoral violence and Malpractices, Nigeria.

Introduction

Elections are supposed to provide opportunities for the electorate to freely and peacefully elect those who would take charge of governance at various levels or arms of government, for, in the case of Nigeria, a period of four years. However, this concept of elections has been dangerously

vitiated by violence, which is mostly blamed on the desperation of politicians to win elections by all means. By “hook or crook” is a phrase that defines the orientation of Nigerian politicians in recent times.

In his work; **Electoral Violence and the Challenge of Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria**, Kelvin Ashindorbe quoted Albert I, in defining electoral violence as; “all forms of organized act or threats- physical, psychological and structural- aimed at intimidating, harming, blackmailing a political stakeholder, before, during and after an election, with a view to determining, delaying or otherwise influencing an electoral process.” (Albert, 2007: 136). The foregoing supports the notion that electoral violence takes different shades and approaches and can happen at any time during, before and after elections.

The paper does not make pretensions at being a social science research, as the authors are artiste and theatre educators and filmmakers, rather than social scientists or political theorists or researchers. However, the inspiration to undertake this research comes from the conviction that an artist is not an alien to the society where he lives, but an active participant and stakeholder, hence, must continuously weigh in on issues that affect the society and as well as offer artistic, and in this sense, theatrical and cinematic solutions to such problems. Electoral violence is no doubt, a present and embarrassing dent and danger to our democratization ambitions as a nation in Nigeria, and it would amount to some form of irresponsibility, if artists, especially, theatre scholars fail to intervene.

Violence during elections has had far-reaching consequences in Nigeria in the past, but, it appears, unfortunately that politicians and other operators of the Nigerian system are either short in their memories or do not care about this reality. For instance, while some writers may choose to propagate the narrative that the 1967-1970 Nigerian civil war was all a fallout of the January 15th coup led by Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu and the counter coup of July 28th, 1966 led by Lt-Colonel Murtala Mohammed and the genocidal massacres of both civilian and military Igbos in the Northern part of Nigeria, it can be convincingly argued that these crises were primarily instigated by perceived electoral corruption. Of course, the most compelling precursor to the January 15th coup d'état- which is blamed for all the other unfortunate incidents that eventually led to the civil war- was the electoral crisis that trailed the October 1965 elections and the concomitant “internal strife and corruption”.

Thousands of lives have been lost to electoral violence in the country and billions of Dollars worth of properties destroyed over the years and there are no signs yet to indicate that violence will cease to be a constant feature of our elections, as long as politicians continue to be desperate, unimaginative and unpatriotic. It may be argued that a key reason our polling booths have turned to abattoirs and our collation centers to centers of chaos and barbarism is that politicians do not really have any passion for service, but see political power as a means for personal aggrandizement and ego puffing.

Many efforts have been made in the past and are still being made currently to document and expose electoral violence in Nigeria, and it is to the credit of some individuals and organizations that one can lay his hands on some data concerning electoral violence in a country that can be very stingy with such information. Asch Harwood, the founder of Red Hook Media and an associate researcher with the Council of Foreign Relations is credited with creating the Nigerian Security Tracker, which is a project of the United States' Council on Foreign Relations' Africa program that catalogs violent incidents in Nigeria that are linked to political, economic and social strife. He has this to say about electoral violence in Nigeria;

Election related violence, sadly, has been a feature since the beginning. Elections in Nigeria, as elsewhere, are high-stakes, winner-take-all contests. With so much on the line, they are often, if not always, accompanied by violence. Politicians are all too willing to exploit simmering ethnic, religious and regional divisions to gain political advantage. They stoke community tension and even target their rivals and their rivals' supporters. Not only do average Nigerians bear the brunt of such violence, the knock-on effects to the credibility of Nigeria's political processes is hard to understate. (cfr, N.P)

Beyond its deep dent on our attempt at democracy and the credibility doubts it casts on our political processes, electoral violence has been identified as a most potent danger to our nationhood, because, there is practically no difference between a junta and a democracy where political officials obtain power through fraud and violence. The need to correct this therefore becomes more urgent than it has ever been.

many ideas had been tried and are still being tried by operators, analysts and patriots towards eradicating, or at least reducing incidents of violence from our electoral process; increased presence of security agencies during elections, inauguration of electoral reform panels, voter

education, setting up of a national peace committee, etc. But these actions, as wonderful as they are, have failed, to a great extent, to achieve the desired result of reducing electoral violence. Rather, there are schools of thought who believe that incidents of electoral violence are increasing instead of abating.

The argument of this paper is basically on investing on more creative and effective way of mass education to discourage people, especially, the youths from engaging or allowing themselves to be used in perpetrating electoral violence under any guise. Films, like every medium of the theatrical arts have been found to be a most effective method of educating, enlightening, and mobilizing the populace for any good cause of action. Film is not a mere entertainment art, but a creative and effective tool for mass mobilization, national orientation and public enlightenment. The medium of film, which is among the most patronized medium of theatrical performances is like the theatres of old; responsive to the social, economic, religious and political developments and needs of the milieu it finds itself or that it emanates from.

Films boast of a wider reach than other instruments of conscientization that may be employed by either the electoral agency or the government directly in its political education or what it usually tags; voter education campaigns. While lectures, town hall meetings and media campaigns and advertorials which are more popular means of voter education adopted by the Independent National Electoral Commission, may be fleeting in the consciousness of the target audience and also has limitations with its reach to the people, films stay with the people and extend into areas that may be difficult for other platforms of political education to permeate.

In the words of Obadiegwu; "Theatre reaches a wide range of people and speaks to them in the language they understand, the language of real life". (XV). And in the words of Kathie O'Toole; "Time and time again, cinema is mindlessly dismissed as 'escapism'. While films are predominantly created for entertainment purposes, it would be a mistake to reject 'their world-changing' potential. Films can have an impact far greater than first imagined. They can influence culture, politics, laws, and more importantly, they can change the course of history." (N.P)

It goes without saying that film is a medium of theatre performance and there are credible and authoritative schools of thought who have successfully advanced the argument that effective social, political and even religious changes are achievable through theatrical offerings. It is

therefore, the potency of the film medium in the highly sought-after solution to pervading electoral violence in Nigeria that this study shall explore.

Nigeria's Tragic Electoral Trajectory (1999-2019)

Nigeria's elections have always been bedeviled by violence, at least from 1959, when the historical federal elections, which was also the first direct elections in the country and which eventually ushered Nigeria to post-colonial rule was conducted, there has not been any election in the country without incidents of violence. What may defer from one election to the other is the extent of violence in one against the other, but every election in the country since 1959 has always left on its trail, some fatalities, arising mostly from disagreements over election results, palpable fraud, electoral malpractices, desperation and ethnic propagation. However, this paper shall only concentrate on elections of the Fourth Republic which started in 1999.

There were factors that would have made the 1999 general elections, completely peaceful and without any fatality; the fact that the two major presidential candidates were Yoruba Christians of Southwest Nigeria and the anxiousness of Nigerians for civilian rule should have made for very peaceful elections, but this wasn't to be, as reports of violence, even though low compared to previous and subsequent elections, tainted that election across Nigeria. Party primaries for the governorship and national assembly elections witnessed intense tension across the nation, with Peoples Democratic Party in Imo State disqualifying two of its frontline governorship candidates over allegations of violent conduct. Ballot box snatching, stuffing and thuggery were also reported in some areas during the election. Understandably, the election even though contentious was seen as a significant success as it led to the first military to civilian transition in about fifteen years.

The 2003 general elections recorded significant hike in tensions. Unlike in 1999, when the contest for the presidency was a straight fight between the PDP and the APP/AD alliance and between two frontline Yoruba leaders; Olusegun Obasanjo and Olu Falae, the 2003 presidential elections paraded three strong political Parties with the three major ethnic groups in the country presenting strong candidates for the presidency.

The 2003 elections which held on April 12th, 19th and May 3rd were adjudged by Karen Stauss and Carina Tertsakian in a report they authored for the Human Rights Watch as been; "marred by serious incidents of violence, which left scores dead and many others injured."(n.p). More than

100 people were reported to have lost their lives in that election while many others were injured, electoral officials were harassed and some killed by thugs loyal to politicians and political parties.

In Akokwa, a town in Ideato North Local Government Area in Imo State during the governorship election of April 19th, 2003. The governorship candidate of the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA) Dr. Ezekiel Izuogu hails from there and expectedly had significant following in the town. Among the fanatical supporters of the Dr, Izuogu were the youths of the town, who were anxious to have one of their own as a governor of the State.

However, the People's Democratic Party also had some prominent leaders in the town, who were working 'hard' to ensure the victory of their Party's candidate, Chief Achike Udenwa, who was also the incumbent governor. Some youths got news that massive ballot paper thumbprinting was going on in the house of one such PDP chieftains and they immediately mobilized to invade the house in order to stop the 'rigging', but the Party chieftain, who at that time was an appointee of the State government had a barge of mobile policemen guarding his house. In the ensuing crisis, one policeman was killed, while a young apprentice automobile mechanic by name Ekene was shot dead by a police officer.

In the run-up to the 2007 elections, the then incumbent President, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo was widely quoted as declaring that the success of his Party, the Peoples Democratic Party, was a "do or die affair". This statement from a sitting president and commander-in-chief of the armed forces was blamed, and understandably, too, for the raft of violence that eventually trailed that election. Some commentators are of the opinion that Chief Obasanjo was yet to come to terms with his alleged failure to push through a constitutional amendment that would have seen him run for a third term in office, hence, was reluctant to relinquish power. Certain incidents on the eve of the elections, nearly derailed that election, which was in itself a watershed in Nigeria's democratization journey.

Some of the significant incidents of violence that affected the 2007 elections include; few hours to the commencement of the presidential election, a tanker bomb that allegedly targeted the headquarters of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) ran into barriers and failed to explode, troops allegedly opened fire on protesting youths in Daura, the hometown of General Muhammadu Buhari, the then candidate of the now defunct All Nigerian Peoples Party

(ANPP), when a group of youths smashed cars and set some roadside kiosks ablaze, this left about two people dead, with many others hospitalized, highway robbers were reported to have killed nine policemen who were on their way to election duty in Nasarawa State, election officials were kidnapped, ballot boxes were snatched, while thugs, armed with weapons had a free reign before, during and after the elections. In all, there were scores of fatalities and many incidents of destruction of public and private properties.

The death in office of President Umar Musa Yaradua was significant in many ways, including raising in raising the tempo of ethnic politicking in the country. The emergence of Dr. Goodluck Jonathan as the country's President seems to have been too much for some politicians in the core-northern part of the country to take, as this clearly distorted the rotational presidency arrangement, as enshrined in the PDP Constitution. A number of Northern political elites made it clear that the most they could take was Jonathan's ascension to the presidency to complete Yaradua's first term, but that it was unacceptable for the Otuoke academic turned politician to seek a fresh term as President. However, like every political leader, Jonathan also had his supporters in the North, who insisted and rightly, too, that he was entitled, Constitutionally, to seek to be president of Nigeria on his own right.

The foundation for violence was deliberately laid by some ethnic leaders who made the election look like a war between the core North and the South, and between Christians and Muslims. Some prominent Northern political leaders threw caution to the winds by making statements that were beyond inciteful but assumed as treasonable by some individuals and groups. For instance, Alhaji Lawal Keita had openly threatened before the election that should Goodluck Jonathan run in the election and win; "the North would make the country ungovernable." These statements and other explosive statements from politicians of different political Parties made the 2011 election; "the most violent of all the elections of Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

A Human Rights Watch report on the 2011 elections put the number of those killed in post-election violence at 800, but there are those who feel that this figure is conservative. According to the report retrieved from their website;

Deadly election-related and communal violence in northern Nigeria following the April 2011 presidential election left more than 800 people dead... The victims were killed in

three days of rioting in 12 northern states... The presidential election divided the country along ethnic and religious lines... The protesters started burning tires, and the protests soon turned into riots. The rioting quickly degenerated into sectarian and ethnic bloodletting across the northern states... (hrw: N.P)

Except for flashes of violence and hate speeches in some parts of the country and among politicians, with the most notorious of them been a statement credited to the eventual winner of the election, General Muhammadu Buhari in which he threatened that; “Monkey and baboon will be soaked in blood, should the PDP rig the elections of 2015.” Boko Haram activities in the Northeast and the attempted bombing of General Buhari’s convoy in Kaduna are significant violent incidents before the general elections. However, President Goodluck Jonathan’s concession of defeat to his rival, General Buhari went a long way in dousing tension and averting what analysts believe would have been the mother of all electoral crises in Nigeria. Earlier, a former military head of State had been appointed chairman of a national peace committee that preached and worked to ensure that the elections were devoid of violence. Frontline candidates from different political parties were convinced to sign a peace accord.

General Abdulsalami Abubakar’s National Peace Committee which was set up before the 2015 elections continued their work into 2019. Maybe, their work and those of others, including Nollywood actors and practitioners who led several enlightenment walks and other activities in promotion of peaceful elections went a long way in reducing possibilities of electoral violence, before, during and after the 2019 elections.

Electoral Violence and the Fate of Our Democracy

Building a democracy takes more than just conducting elections, periodically. While elections are indispensable features of a thriving and working democracy, the credibility of such elections is as important or even more important than its conduct. The faults with our electoral violence have led to conclusions in not a few quarters that ours is a ‘quasi democracy’. This argument, while pessimistic is closer to the truth than any euphemism that may be mustered by propagandists who are hard-done in their efforts to downplay the extent of decadence which our democratization experiment has suffered, mostly as a result of the many infirmities of our electoral processes.

Transparent elections have been advocated as a panacea for peaceful elections, but evidences contradict this belief. The 2011 elections are adjudged as one of the most transparent elections in Nigeria's history and arguably, the most transparent since the advent of the Fourth Republic. Yet, the 2011 elections, with all its high marks, including commendations from international and domestic observers, also has the infamous record of been the most violent election among recent elections in the country. Writing for the United States Institute of Peace, Dorina Bekoe gave this verdict about the 2011 Nigerian general elections;

Nigeria's 2011 elections –in particular the presidential election- were seen widely as been well-run. This was especially important given the widely decried elections of 2007. A number of factors contributed to ensuring that Nigeria's 2011 elections were successfully administered. They include the fact that the voters' register was the most accurate, and there was also adequate training and fielding of election observers... But despite a more transparent election, 800 people- mainly in Kaduna- were killed in three days and 65,000 people were displaced. Muslims burned churches and attacked Christians and Southerners in their homes, businesses, schools and on the streets. Christians soon retaliated. Once violence erupted, only soldiers succeeded in stopping it. (Nigeria's 2011 Elections: N.P)

With the foregoing one can argue that while transparency and well administered elections are key elements in eradicating or drastically reducing incidents of violence during elections, they are not sure guarantees to the absence of violence during elections, as we have seen with the 2011 elections. Desperation by politicians, non-tolerance, the concept of winner-takes-all, lack of sportsmanship among politicians, etc, are identified as causative to electoral violence.

Kelvin Ashindorbe identifies character and orientation of politicians as responsible for violence during elections, rather than flawed elections, as may be popularly held by some people;

The formation of political tendency is shaped to a large extent by the nature of the society-Nigerian society is a highly plural and divided, where the elites that dominate politics are factionalised along ethnic, religious and regional lines with a warped value system that places great premium on social status and wealth acquisition. The implication of this state of affairs for politics and the pursuit of public office during election season is very grave, as competition is always fierce and zero-sum. The perception of public offices as an arena and instrument of accumulation and distribution of wealth through patron-clients relationship exacerbates this phenomenon. The entry of huge petro-dollar into government

coffers also changes the dynamics and raises the stakes of contestation for power among factionalised elite groups. The individual pursuit for public office is thus framed as embodying the aspiration of an entire group, his success or failure in this bid reverberates within the group. The exploitation and manipulation primordial fault lines to further narrow elite interest significantly explains the eruption of violence during and after any electoral exercise. (Ashindorbe: N.P)

No one expects elections to be devoid of drama and tension, because even in the most advanced democracies of the world, elections come with lots of tension, bickering and propaganda. The rhetoric may get combustible and emotions get to a boiling point, but rarely do we hear of violence of the magnitude we see it in Nigeria and other African nations, been meted on the electorate during or after elections in matured democracies of the world. In advanced democracies of the world, say; America, Britain and most parts of Europe, politicians direct the tension of electioneering to creative ways of winning votes and try creatively to outdo their opponents through creative campaigning and even propaganda. There is also the understanding among politicians in those climes that elections are not a win or die war, but a game, where one presents him or herself to serve the people and which its success or otherwise is strictly determined by the candidate's ability to convince a majority of the electorate to place their confidence in him or her. The key distinction between politicians in more matured and therefore less violent democracies is orientation. While politicians in more advanced democracies understand politics as a call for public service, those in Nigeria nay Africa seem to have the misconception of politics as an avenue for personal accumulation of wealth, vendetta against opponents and ego-tripping.

For instance, a former Prime Minister of Britain linked the greatness of America and the survival of its democracy to a national culture of patriotism and an understanding of political contest that promotes tolerance and fair play. Writing in the *Time* magazine of September 13, 2010, Tony Blair posited:

... America is great for a reason. It is looked up to, despite all the criticism, for a reason. There is a nobility in the American character that has been developed over the centuries, derived in part, no doubt, from the frontier spirit, from the waves of immigration that form the stock, from the circumstances of independence, from the Civil War, from the myriad of historical facts and coincidences. But it is there. That nobility isn't about being nicer, better or more successful than anyone else. It is a feeling about the country. It is a devotion to the American ideal that at a certain

point transcends class, race, religion or upbringing. That ideal is about values: the rule of law, democracy. It is also about the way you achieve: on merit, by your own efforts and hard work. But it is most of all that in striving for and protecting that ideal, you as an individual take second place to the interests of the nation as a whole. It is what makes the country determined to overcome its challenges. It is what makes soldiers give their lives in sacrifice. It is what brings every variety of American, from the lowest to the highest, to their feet when “The Star-Spangled Banner” is played. (5)

The questions that may arise from the above excerpt concerning Nigeria and its democracy are; how many Nigerians, from the lowest strata and the highest strata, believe in Nigeria so much as to “rise to their feet” when Nigerian compatriots are called to arise, to obey Nigeria’s call? Do we have a leadership class in Nigeria whose ideology about politics transcends class, race, religion or upbringing? Do we or can we ever have a generation of Nigerians – whether in the leadership class or not – who would willingly allow their individual, religious, racial and community interests take second place to that of the nation? The most credible answers to these questions are disheartening and therefore, better left unwritten.

Writing in his book; **Nigeria: Dancing on the Brink**, a former American Ambassador to Nigeria, John Campbell painted a very grim picture of Nigeria and its democracy. In one of the very disturbing excerpts from the book, John Campbell wrote: “Governance, let alone democracy, faces grievous, structural challenges in Nigeria. Popular alienation and a fragmented establishment have contributed to Nigeria becoming one of the most religious and, at the same time, one of the most violent countries in the world.” (N.P). Campbell did not stop at merely complaining about the problems endangering the country’s democracy, he also outlined what he feels are the major contributing factors to these challenges;

“Ubiquitous patronage and corrupt behavior fueled by oil money is a root cause of Nigeria’s political and economic sclerosis. The federal government has failed to provide basic security for its citizens and has lost its monopoly on violence, two basic attributes of a sovereign State.” (N.P) he posited.

Fortunately, Nigerian political leaders at different levels have variously acknowledged the prevalence of violence on our body polity and the dangers such situation poses to our democracy and our survival as a nation.

Writing for the New York Times in a February 8, 2002 article entitled; *Nigeria's President Fears For His Fledgling Democracy*, Norimitsu Onishi reported former President Olusegun Obasanjo lamenting the Nigerian security situation. The journalist described Nigeria's security situation at the time President Obasanjo made what was his 'direst' speech as; "after months of rising anarchy and a week of convulsive violence."

The then Nigerian President acknowledged that the country was; "steadily losing ground to the suffocating influences of violence and lawlessness in the conduct of our political affairs." He also conceded that; "Every occurrence of violence erodes the legitimacy of the state and its leaders, leaving democracy to stand alone and exposed to those who want to subvert it further or destroy it altogether." (N.P)

The foregoing references leave one with a credible fright about the fate, not just of our democracy, but also of our nationhood. Like it had been earlier noted, the distant precursor of Nigeria's civil war of 1967-1970 is the violence that trailed the elections of 1965. This gave the military young boys an excuse to strike in the first place, then the retaliatory strike, then, the pogrom, then, the war. There are other recorded incidents across African nations that point to far-reaching consequences of electoral violence, which are obviously dire. Therefore, stakeholders must go beyond exploration of ideas and take actions that would avert further violence in our elections, going forward.

The Place of Films in Engineering Social Change

Film is theatre and theatre has been, for as long as it has been in existence, a most veritable means of not just entertainment, but a tool for effecting social, political and religious change. Theatre is as much, a vehicle for social change as it is a medium of entertainment. While all arts are socially potent, none, may be as powerful as the theatre, through any of its forms and mediums in bringing about the needed change in a given society. From the time of the ancient man, whose experience of theatre is the magical imitation of his own shadows or reflection in the water, or a rehearsal of his hunting expeditions, or battles, till present, the theatrical arts have never been detached from the society. It has always availed itself as a mirror, not just for reflecting the ills and good of society, but also a signpost of sanity and morality, alerting the audience to a need to the demerits of evils and the merits of good. Film as the most popular medium for the exhibition or display of

theatrical performances has remained as potent as any other theatrical medium across eras and stages of human development in instigating positive social change.

The power of film is in the feeling it conveys to the audience. A socially relevant film speaks to the audience about the ills of a society and while it may not directly make recommendations on how these ills may be corrected, it leaves the audience with a feeling of self-realization, that mostly would get some members of the audience decide on their own to take actions towards correcting that evil in the society. Writing about what films do to the human emotions and consciousness, Simon Maier wrote;

Most of us relish the emotions that are displayed in movies and theatre. That's part of their appeal. Plays and films provide a mirror on life – sometimes inspirational examples of the lives of others that allow us to feel emotions quite openly and in moderate safety. There are moments when some of us weep, laugh, smile, frown, hate, or feel proud, others when we feel a tingle down our spine, yet others where we clench our fists or grind our teeth – because, for example, we know what the hero doesn't. It's the Othello moment. There are times where we gasp at the sheer horror of an action or in absolute disgust at another. We marvel at the goodness or the selflessness of a hero, shout "yippee" in our heads when the bad guys get their just deserts, or feel indignant when they don't. (10:2011)

That feeling of connectedness with the story of the film is majorly where the power of film in triggering social change lies. Because films, no matter how abstract or absurd the stories are, has a way of telling stories that the audience can easily connect with, it gives the audience a feeling of realization. Our film experience is not very different from Sigmund Freud's conjecture that theatre emanated from the prehistoric man's attempt to understand his own shadows, which at the time, he saw as spirits. The stories we see on our televisions, big screens, phones and elsewhere are similar to the ancient man's experience when he gazed into a pool or eddying brook, and saw a 'strange' man looking back at him, or when a shadow, which he didn't appreciate as his, followed him, while he walked in the moonlight or sunlight.

When we watch films, we watch a retelling of the pervasive realities of our everyday lives, told sometimes, from a subjective perspective of a writer and a director, seeking to either control a narrative or change an unpalatable situation. Films give us the opportunity of seeing our own errors and the failings of our society and the leadership system replayed to us at our own convenience

and leisure. For instance, when we hear about incidents of electoral violence, we may not immediately appreciate the extent of barbarism and inhumanness involved in that, but when we sit down to watch, a dramatic depiction or retelling of that incident, we would be better abreast with the extent of injustice, barbarism and unacceptability of electoral violence.

“Movies touch our hearts, and awaken our vision, and change the way we see things, they open doors and minds.” Said influential Hollywood director, Martin Scorsese, as quoted by Bonnie Benjamin-Phariss, in an essay he contributed to *Huffpost*. Bonnie is of the school of thought that film is more than mere entertainment and more than just that multi-billion Dollar spinning business venture. “...Film is much more than simply entertainment. Film has the capacity to change the world.” He presents film, not just as having the capacity to influence change, but as; “...an ideal catalyst for change.”

Bonnie used the Oscar-winning documentary written, produced and starred by former Vice-President of the United States of America, Al Gore, to underscore the undeniable impact of films in tackling societal issues and catalyzing change. The film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, beyond winning an Academy, also earned Al-Gore a Nobel Peace Prize. The film was found to have had much more impact on the issue of Global Warming, which is its central theme, than academic essays and news reports on the same issue.

Before the film’s release, only about a third of people surveyed believed global warming was real. Afterwards, 85 percent believed the earth was indeed undergoing climate change in part as a result of human actions. This shift in public opinion opened the doors for politicians to introduce more than 15 new climate-related initiatives, and many countries began incorporating the film into their school’s coursework. (n.p)

Nollywood Films and Electoral Violence

The Nigerian film industry, which is more popularly known as Nollywood and its outputs known as Nollywood films have shown itself not just for the well celebrated prolificity of its practitioners, but its role in molding national attitudes, catalyzing change, promoting cultures and influencing our politics and leadership, as well stoking national pride. There is hardly any issue of national importance and political discourses that do not find their way into our homes and cinemas, as Nigerian filmmakers, in their ingenious creativity would always weigh in to direct the consciousness of Nigerians to issues of prominent relevance. Beyond merely calling attention to

socio-political ills, Nigerian films also raise issues and make recommendations for resolving such ills.

Film as the most popular medium of the theatrical arts has retained that attribute of the stage which makes it relevant to the society, which is basically in lending itself, not just as a means to entertain the audience, but as a reflection of society and a signpost to the visions of majority of those who live in a particular society. Nigerian films are arguably the most effective medium for education and enlightenment, considering the enormity of popularity it commands among Nigerians and non-Nigerians alike. Gowon Ama Doki in writing about the role of the theatre artist in reforming the society, justifies the argument of this paper that the theatre artist is a responsible reformer, by exploring some of the theatrical offerings of Alex Asigbo, in relation to their relevance to the society. “At the threshold of Arts and society is the arts practitioner whose ingenuity and creative efforts result in the potpourri and survival of arts products today. They conceive ideas, research into the society, articulate these ideas, experiment and put them into creative products that do not only chronicle or scrutinize social contradictions but also offer palliative measures to solve them.” (*Fighting... 7*)

Nollywood has remained a very viable medium of exposition of social ills and reformation of the Nigerian society, especially. The industry has not shied away from discussing the issue of electoral violence and as well proffering solution to this disturbing malice. Some of the Nollywood films that have directly spoken to the issue of electoral violence are;

4th Republic;

Written by the trio of Ishaya Bako, Emil Garuba and Zainab Omaki and directed by Ishaya Bako, the film tells the story of a governorship election that was marred by violence and all sorts of electoral manipulation resulting in the death of Sikiru, who leads the campaigning organization of a popular governorship candidate, Mabel King.

In his review on the film published in the PULSE, Gbenga Bada described the film as a “thrilling political procedural that chronicles Nigeria’s political and electoral system in the last two decades” (2019:1)

Beyond the menace of election violence and manipulation of election result, the film also delves into the intrigues that surround attempts by politicians who believe they were robbed of their mandate through rigging, to seek justice in the courts.

The movie which is focused on cancelled votes from the fictitious Ikomi Local Government Area of the Confluence State is reminiscent of real life Nigerian electoral depravity and the concomitant improprieties up to the law courts, where judges handling election tribunal cases have been severally, and credibly accused of abetting electoral malfeasance by accepting bribes in order to sustain an obvious injustice.

The film which received funding from the Open Society Initiative for West Africa and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of these organisation's contribution to the development of democracy in Nigeria nay Africa, there cannot be any doubt that it's thematic focus is imperative in raising awareness against electoral violence and malpractices. Also, the film was screened across seven Nigerian univeristies in collaboration with the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the National Orientation Agency (NOA) as an enlightenment material to the populace, especially, the youths to discourage them from aiding electoral malpractice of any sorts.

IF I AM PRESIDENT

This 2018 film with a running time of roughly 120 minutes is another political drama shines light on the pervasive political corruption that has become the bane of Nigeria's democratic development.

Directed by Bright Wonder Obasi, the film is centered on the political adventure of a young, vibrant, ambitious and inexperienced Zinachi Ohams, who veered from civil society activism into running for the president of the country under a new Nigerian Rebirth Party. Mobilizing young idealists like himself, the 37 year old presidential candidate goes into the "murky waters" of Nigerian politics, upbeat about his desire and determination to bring about the long-sought change in the politics and governance of the country, but he is soon to discover that political corruption in the country runs far deeper than he had imagined.

The film which also received funding from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation is another veritable material for the enlightenment of Nigerians, especially, the youths on the challenges ahead of them in seeking to retake the country from the corrupt cabal that has held the country's political leadership to ransom over the years. The failure of Zinachi Ohams to secure the presidency even with his very fantastic political ideas and creative and energetic campaign strategies mirrors the true situation in today's Nigerian politics, where the brilliant ones who dared to participate in politics are frustrated out through intimidation, violence and brazen manipulation of election results.

CODE WILO

Before the governorship election in Anambra in 2021, a popular governorship candidate, Obiora Agbasimalo, who is the candidate of the Labour Party for that election was abducted by fierce looking gunmen. Given that such violent crimes are rife in the country and been an election season, many people took it for granted that the politician would be freed if ransom is paid to his abductors, who at the time were suspected to be hoodlums involved in kidnap-for-ransom. But, more than two years after, nothing has been heard about Obiora Agbasimalo, a young, promising political leader, and his family, including his aged mother, has been left without a closure, as it has not been officially confirmed that he is dead nor have the Nigerian Police Force given any specific about his fate.

Code Wilo reflects the dangers associated with participating in politics in Nigeria, especially, for the “non-initiates”. There appears to be an unwritten code by established politicians to ensure that younger people, women and those without adequate exposure to the corrupt way of playing politics in Nigeria are discouraged from delving into politics. This could be as a result of their fear that the involvement of these “non-initiates” in the political leadership of the country might disrupt their crude political and daft governance styles, and probably usher in a new era of more responsible governance and politics. To forestall a potential “infiltration” of the power circle by these non-initiates, the political cabal in the country use every means within their powers to frustrate and discourage qualified youths, women and technocrats from showing interest in politics.

Directed by Mike-Steve Adeleye and produced by Hauwa Allahbura, *Code Wilo* tells the story of a young female governorship aspirant, Nimi Thompson, who was abducted by political thugs,

apparently detailed by some political bigwigs in the State frightened by the potential ignition of a new fire of political consciousness championed by the youthful governorship candidate. Even though her father is a part of the ruling class and clearly one of those who are guilty of the underdevelopment and political retardation experienced in the State and the country at large, Nimi Thompsom was seen as a sort of revolutionary candidate. Her brother who is serving as a Senator and other associates of her father are found to have been involved in the conspiracy to kidnap her in order to stop her from becoming the governor of the State. As expected, her experience, becomes a kind of baptism of fire, which extinguished her desire for political power, as she is now focused more on how to wriggle out of the shackles of her abductors.

Conclusion

Films have been proven to be a viable tool for addressing societal issues and proffering solutions for some of the most prevalent ills in the society. Film, like every art, does this by calling attention to these ills through the avenue of the cinema. Over the years, especially since the Fourth Republic, Nigeria's democratic experiment has been marred by various challenges, especially; electoral violence, malpractices, corruption, godfatherism, imposition of unpopular candidates and outright and unconscionable manipulation and hijack of electoral processes. This paper has contributed its modest quota to the enrichment of academic discourses and nation building, which is one of the most fundamental roles of the theatre. While the paper laid a good foundation regarding various incidents of electoral malpractices and violence, the referenced films, also did justice to the topic by raising relevant issues related to electoral violence in Nigeria. It is expected that the paper shall serve to direct attention to the precarious nature of our politics and guide policy makers, politicians, stakeholders and academics in working more assiduously towards eliminating, or at least, drastically reducing corruption and injustice from our political processes as no nation can make the required and desired progress when its elections are riddled with fraud, thereby, alienating the people from the process of electing their leaders.

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