

THE CONCEPT OF *DEUX-EX-MACHINA* IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN SELECTED NOLLYWOOD MOVIES

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Abstract

The Greek theatre provided a quintessential model for drama and the various genres of drama. While Aristotle, the great philosopher provided the first body of treatise on the analysis and appreciation of dramatic literature, dramatic theories got reviewed year in, year out. During the Athenian period, many devices were injected into the overall aesthetic of the play. One of such innovations was the concept of *Deux-ex-Machina* literally meaning "god from the machinery". The mechanical device was meant to resolve plot; especially complicated plots where an improbable character or unconvincing event is used to resolve a plot. Thus, this paper is aimed at provoking and generating arguments on the proper/improper concept of *Deux-ex-Machina* in the analysis of conflict resolution in two selected Nollywood movies. The paper hinges on a contextual analysis of the selected movies vis-à-vis the application of the '*Deux-ex-Machina*' in resolving plot(s).

In the final analysis, it concludes by asserting that one of the main reasons for the application of the *Deux-ex-Machina* concept is due to the loose nature of prevalent story lines associated with most Nollywood movies. We therefore recommend that script writers should be more creative to enable a vibrant Nollywood.

Key Words: Concept, *Deux-ex-Machina*, Conflict Resolution.

Introduction

The birth, development and growth of the Nigerian home videos popularly referred to as Nollywood is arguably traceable to the robust stage theatrical exploits visible in the then Western Region and now known as South West. This is dated back to the sixties with the likes of Hubert Ogunde, Kola Ogunmola, and Oyin Adejobi (all late now) strutting the theatrical stage. This trend started with stage performances in the forties when churches played hosts to theatre performances. Subsequently, these performances became larger than the church as the need for professionalism on the part of the theatre troupes mounted, Hubert Ogunde would eventually champion this movement away from the churches. Oyewo (2005:44) lends credence to this fact when he posits that;

The religious drama" ... started giving way to the secular. He took a bold step into admonitions by critics to make his second opera, *Africa and God*, a complete departure from the first, as regards subject matter, commitment and source.

This exit from the church paved the way for a more secular type of drama and a committed drive towards professionalism. Plays like *Worse than Crime*, *Tiger's Empire*, *Strike and Hunger* triggered off nationalistic agitation which marked the beginning of his confrontation with the colonial masters. These plays will later be referred to as Angst plays/ Agitprop etc. Other troupes like those headed by Duro Ladipo, Kola Ogunmola etc. soon joined in this quest as well. The birth of television station in Nigeria by 1959 in the then Western region brought a new dimension to the theatrical outlook. First, was the Western Nigerian Television (W.N.T.V) Ibadan and the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation Television (N.B.C.T.V) Lagos. These television houses were now featuring the troupes regularly in turns for serial/episodic packages. This regular performance slots amongst other factors will eventually lead to the decline of stage performances and the eventual demise of itinerant Yoruba theatre troupes. Some of the benefits are further buttressed by Oyewo (2005:52); when he submits that, this also increased their popularity and helped them financially. The leaders could endeavor to place their group members on regular salaries and the profession became more attractive to young school leavers.

The effect of this development was in many folds. First, was an influx of different troupes. Second, was the breaking away of members to form their own groups. For example, Afolabi Afolayan (Jaguar) and Isola Ogunsola (I-Sho-Pepper) left Akin Ogungbe's group to form Afolayan-Ogunsola Theatre in 1964. That most of these unions did not last is altogether another story. The encroachment of the electronic media will become the final punch in the decline of live performances. Papp (1986, ii), in Mary Henderson's *Theatre in America*, summarizes what needs to be done to wade of this encroachment when he posits thus; "In a society dominated by films and television, we need to be fiercely protective of our theatrical tradition." The astronomical effect of the Petrol-Naira era in Nigeria provided succor to most families which could then buy gadgets. The numbers of television houses had soar; by 1977 the Federal Government had re-named the television houses as Nigerian Television Authority (N.T.A). Programmes like *Bode Wasinmi*, *Kootu Asipa*, *Awada* by Oyin Adejobi, Duro Ladipo and Moses Adejumo respectively, were already making waves.

From the seventies upward, celluloid was encroaching upon the scene. For example, in 1977 Ola Balogun had produced *Ija Ominira*, *The Boy is Good* was produced by Edi Ugboma in 1978, and Ogunde produced *Aiye* in 1979. This trend continued with *Orun Mooru* in 1982 by Moses Olaiya of the Alawada Kerikeri group. However, the squander maniac recklessness of our leaders would eventually lead to the collapse of the economy. The financial burden on the film makers forced them out of the celluloid business. These subsequently provided the ambience for a more cost friendly alternative in the world of video. Thus this trend will eventually give birth to the rise of the Nigerian home video, an industry that is now known as Nollywood.

Nigerian Home Video: Nomenclature Clarification

The issue of clarification is necessary at this stage so as to erase all ambiguities hitherto perceived. First, is the issue of appropriately classifying what we have in Nigeria either as home video or film industry. This paper posits that what is obtainable in Nigeria is home video. This is because ninety-five percent of the movies released are in video format. As earlier mentioned, the cost of celluloid is overwhelming so much so that majority of the practitioners cannot afford to produce in this format. Apart from the cost implication, the issue of inadequate personnel who should manipulate the equipment involved in celluloid film production is another debilitating factor. However, the crux of the issue lies in the overall concept of the celluloid. Enwefah (2009:19) clearly defines film as... Nothing but 'moving' pictures or pictures in 'motion'. They are a series of slightly different pictures (still pictures) passing before our eyes in a sequential order, and at a regular speed to tell a story. The movement of the pictures is done so rapidly that it seems as though they are moving. This is known as optical illusion.

However, video movies are "recordings of both the visual and audible components". It is the recording of images and sound through the use of video cameras". Therefore, Nigerian home videos are most appropriate rather than Nigerian film industry. Furthermore, the assertion by Richard and Olufemi (2009:63) that "above all, the home video has become a source of entertainment in many homes since the decline of celluloid film production." is a pointer to the fact that the home is the first point of call for the video produced. The implication of the above statement is in two-folds. One is the wide gulf between film and video both in production process and cost. The second is that the video has provided a viable alternative for the celluloid. Although, when in the home video made its entry in 1980, it was first perceived as inferior to the celluloid but gradually, especially with the noticeable financial differences and the immediacy of the video format; tailor-made for home viewing rather than the cinema, the video became popular ironically.

The issue of the emergence of Igbowood, Nollywood, Kannywood, or Yorubawood is a bit worrisome. This paper is of the stance that all these 'woods' are one and the same. This is because the process involved in all the "woods" is the same; the only difference is the medium of communication through which they communicate. - Yoruba/Hausa/Igbo/English. Again, there is an inter-change of actors and actresses; there is a "cross- wood acting". For example, Olu Jacobs, Joke Silva, Jide Kosoko, Femi Branch, Emeka Ike, Ramsey Noah Richard Mofe-Damijo, Ngozi Nwosu, Jibola Dabo, Sola Fosudo, and Shola Sobowale have all appeared in both Yoruba and Nollywood in such movies as *Eewo Orisa*, *Atopinpin*, etc. To further justify our argument, Mercy Aigbe, an actress who also features in both Yoruba and English movies was emphatic in her

response to a question regarding the difference(s) between the various “woods” on a television programme; *Idan Irawo* on the 28th September, 2011. Her response was: there is really no difference as far as the processes are concerned; the only demarcating line is the medium of communication. While one is in Yoruba, the other is in English and the fraternity that exist in the Yoruba aspect.

Earlier, Eddie Ugbomah, a veteran Nigerian film-maker had expressed his disappointment at the division in the “woods” in an interview extracted from Richard and Olufemi, (2009:69) when he opines that,

...Movie making has disintegrated into three schools- the school of Afenifere film-makers, the Ohanaeze Ndigbo film-makers and the school of the Arewa Sharia film-makers, God save Nigeria.

Ugbomah's prayer at the end of the expression is not surprising; this fear is expressed in line with the dichotomy existent amongst the various ethnic groupings in the country. While lending a voice to Eddie's observation, Richard and Olufemi described this trend as shameful categorization. To them; “a film actor is supposed to be able to act in any film”. Unfortunately, majority of the Yoruba actors are illiterates. This trend is however, about to improve as most of them are already empowering themselves by going to schools. For example, Kola Oyewo and Sola Fosudo are both lecturers now with (PhD) while Funke Akindele, Mercy Aigbe, Femi Adebayo, are all university graduates.

Lastly, the fact that Kannywood and “Yorubawood” both have sub-titles in the English medium makes the more this issue of nomenclature confusing and absurd. Apart from this, in most Yoruba and Nollywood movies, there is always the interlacing of languages. For example, in movies like *Igberaga* (2009), *Aseda Orun* (2009); Yoruba is mixed with English. This interface of the English with Igbo language is also visible in *Gods Mercy* (2008) especially with the dibia.

Besides, the concept of Nollywood in Nigeria is certainly not in line with her American counterpart where it is supposedly borrowed from. Fosudo quoted in Oni, (2010) shows this misapplication when he argues that,

I think we are confusing the concept. In America, there is a place called Hollywood where actors and producers(s) meet for the purpose of making movies. In India, there is Bollywood where the business of movie making also takes place. Here, we talk about Nollywood, yet if an American visits the country and requests to be taken to Nollywood, where do we take such a person to? (p. 36).

While it is agreed that films do have tradition, the fact that they are all a product of the same country make it more reasonable for a unified name; For example, “Nigeriawood” can represent all films made in Nigeria. While regional/ religious/ethnic affiliations and identities may be expressed in movies produced because of the federation nature of the country, greater emphasis should be placed on our nationality because we will not want to appear to the outside world as splinter groups but one formidable federating state. This will indeed promote a level of unity in a country that is still battling with religious/ethnic bigotry after fifty-one years of independence.

Deux-Ex-Machina: The Greek Concept of Conflict Resolution

Greek civilization provided a model for most countries, much of our civilization developed out of Greek experience. Terminologies inherited from the Greeks are visible enough especially from their mythology. For example, scientific terminologies like Ajax for detergent, Hercules for batteries, and so on. However, these are at the level of tangibles, at the intangible level, we have the Greek ideals expressed in art, philosophy and politics, most especially in probing into the mysteries of human existence and basis for human behavior. For example, what does man owe himself and his community, what are the proper relationships between man and the supernatural? By the 5th Century, Pythagoras had proclaimed that; “Man is the measure of all things.” Humans were elevated to a place of great prominence, but happiness still depended on a conjunction of human and superhuman forces. When the two were in harmony, life could be peaceful but the truce was always fragile and could be broken without warning; such a view promoted a theatre and drama that centers on human struggles but one in which the supernatural element is always strong. Not surprising therefore, that the Greeks conceived of

their gods in human terms. Zeus for instance presided over a number of other deities who were as unpredictable as their human counterparts. If wooed by prayers and sacrifices, the gods might help people but were just as apt to take offence and hold grudges. This made all Greeks not immune to fate which lurked behind all Greek thought and made all destinies both human and divine.

The above preamble is necessary so as to give an insight to the significance of the concept behind the *Deux-Ex-Machina* at least in the Greek world. The Greek theatre introduced the *Deux-Ex-Machina* literally meaning “gods from the machine.” Euripides was criticized for his frequent use of this concept which was detested by Aristotle because it falls outside the plot of the play, where he argued that; “the resolution of a plot must arise internally” (Dukore, 1976:31-66). The *Deux-Ex-Machina* is a mechanical device arguably credited to Aeschylus or/and Euripides used as a means of conflict resolution. For example, in Aeschylus’ *Eumenides* and Euripides’ *Alceste* where the heroine agrees to give up her own life in order to spare the life of her husband Admetus; it was Apollo a Greek god who eventually saved him. *Deux-Ex-Machina* is thus defined by Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deus-Ex-machina>) as: a hack literary trick where the problems of a plot are resolved at the end of the story by the sudden introduction of a new element or used to extricate the protagonist from difficult situation.

The sudden introduction of a new element at the end of the story refers to the ‘external’ plot emphasized by Aristotle. Here element refers to some supernatural force way beyond human experience. *Deux-Ex-Machina*, therefore, helps in the resolution of conflicts in a situation where all hope seems to be lost.

However, the application of the *Deux-Ex-Machina* has gone beyond the stage, it has now been extended to embrace the movie industry (video films) inclusive. From film application’s point of view, we have four forms; the *Deux-Ex-Machina* can take. These are the total, illogical, cut and paste, and the fridge brilliance. The film usage is quite similar to the original Greek version. The film usage is seen as; “a general term for any event in which a seemingly fatal plot twist is resolved by an event never foreshadowed or set up.”

(<http://tvtopes.org/pmwilki.php/Main/deuxExMachina>). For example, if secret documents are in French, one of the characters could reveal that he had learned the language. Though in the Greek period, only the first two types were used due to the religious affiliation. However, for the purpose of this paper, we will concentrate on the Yoruba films since the Greeks and the Yoruba’s have shared similarities in terms of their gods which has been established by both Ola Rotimi and Wole Soyinka in their works like; *The Gods are not to Blame* (1971), and *The Bacchae of Euripides* (1973), respectively. This association with their gods shows the belief in the world of the supernatural and superstitions.

The Use of *Deux-Ex-Machina* in Selected Nigerian Home Videos

Above, we have attempted to examine the concept of *Deux-Ex-Machina* in the Greek period. What we are now concerned about is to enumerate the application of the *Deux-Ex-Machina* in some selected Nigerian Home Videos. We then start with *Agbara Obinrin*; (2005), a Nigerian video directed by Adebayo Salami (a.k.a Oga Bello). It is a political thriller that revolves around a good president who marries a bad wife despite his father's repeated warnings. The plot goes on to show how his wife tries to chase away a supportive, hardworking and dedicated female politician with good leadership qualities, and who also has made great contributions to the society. She nags and assumes that her husband is having an affair with her (Minister for Agriculture). The president is then forced to marry another wife who epitomizes the ideal woman. The new wife becomes the effective ‘First Lady’ as against the nagging one. The president played by Ayo Akinwale is then forced to consult with the spirit of his dead father who guides him to the right decisions. Thus, first, the *Deux-Ex-Machina* is internal to the story as opposed to the external construct of the Greek period. Secondly, they both applied the help of the supernatural to assist in the resolution of the conflict. For example, the president’s late father had to be summoned by the president. He appears to him through his picture frame hitherto hung on the wall. The appearance of the father is seen as a necessary intervention which would have left the film perhaps unresolved since it was the late father that provided him with the foresight of taking another wife; rather than beating the cantankerous first wife, which ordinarily would have been the step of an average Nigerian man. He thus goes ahead to marry

the second wife, rents/builds a house for her and placed on her responsibilities meant for his first wife.

Like the *Deux-Ex-Machina* of the Greek plays, the plot gets resolved through a very illogical channel which the writer of the screen play or the film producer will want to explain away as the intervention of some supernatural agent; the father of the president having died is assumed in Yoruba belief system to have become a deity worthy of worship and capable of providing solution to very knotty human problems.

A second film in our focus is *Abeke Eleko* directed by Ade Ajiboye (2007). The story revolves around an average family striving to survive when the daughter is made pregnant by Kola. Kola denies it while the father drives the mother and her daughter out of his house. The mother resorts to selling pap to make ends meet. On the other hand, Kola, 'freelances' with other girls. The girl eventually gives birth to a baby girl but lost her own life in the process. The child grew up to become Abeke. Eventually, justice catches up with Kola as he goes blind. To resolve the conflict, Abeke's late mother who had earlier appeared to Abeke in a different body to rescue Abeke in her times of need is now summoned by a medicine man (Babalawo) to appear in her real self. She does, and is pacified to forgive and forget in order to give a new lease of life to her daughter as well. After much persuasion, she forgives Kola and restores his eyes bringing the play to an end.

The use of *Deux-Ex-Machina* in this film also tallies with that of the Greek view, it came at the tail end of the film while at the same time, the evocation of supernatural forces is involved. Again, the use of the *Deux-Ex-Machina* in this film is structured internally as against the externalized Greek type. In films like *Eewo Orisa*, *Olu Igbo* (2009), *Inawo Oru*, all employed the *flashback* technique to link the disjointed bits to serve as the *Deux-Ex-Machina*. This cluster of flashbacks becomes too over used that exposes the weak story line of the film. The first observation in most of these films is the thin story line that makes the use of numerous flashbacks inevitable. For example, most films in Yoruba, English, Igbo, Hausa, are guilty of unnecessarily over dwelling on scenes like party scene, wedding scenes, and prolonged driving scenes. This is simply because they lack good and tight story lines. Apart from this, they unnecessarily split films to parts when it would have been over within the normal frame of time. We are therefore not surprised that for most part of the Part II, half the time is spent on coming attractions while the remaining half is spent on what had happened in the previous part.

Our findings reveal that this use of the *Deux-Ex-Machina* is not in most cases even known to the film makers since majority are not educated nor have any knowledge in theatre arts per se. The application or non-application of the concept is therefore an issue of chance work if and when it is seen in films especially the Yoruba films.

In the final analysis, the similarities between the Yoruba and the Greek world view as shared in their gods is thus reflected in the use of supernatural forces to resolve conflicts as seen in *Agbara Obinrin* or *Abeke Eleko* where Abeke's dead mother had to be transformed into her 'physical' self and made to appear to resolve the conflict. However, they both differ in terms of the structural application, while in the Greek world view, the *Deux-Ex-Machina* is external to the story, the case is not the same with the Yoruba films, as it is internal, and structurally part of the story line.

The use of the *Deux-Ex-Machina* though effective in some films, is in most cases either over used or wrongly applied. This perhaps accounts for the reason why the uses of *Babalawo*, *Dibia* or supernatural forces characterize most of the Nigerian video films. The porous story line of most of these films is indeed responsible for this misapplication, over application and in most cases reducing the films to a battle of gods and super human beings. What then is the way forward?

The Way Forward

First, as a way of empowering themselves, actors should look at the prospect of educating themselves. Kola Oyewo is a living testimony and a good example of this experience. He entered the University of Ile-Ife at the age of almost Forty (40), he was in the class with his first son and yet, he never got discouraged. Today, he is a PhD holder and the Head of Department of Theatre Arts, Redeemer's University, currently at Ekiti State University. Others are following his footsteps, Shola Fosudo, Funke Akindele, Mercy Aigbe, and a host of others are now either graduates or students of the various universities in Nigeria.

Secondly, the script writers, marketers, producers and directors should all forget about quantity and, concentrate on quality. Rather than release thousands of films annually that will end up in trash cans because of lack of quality, they should come up with good stories that will stand the test of time. Producing ten films a year with credible and good standard will promote the industry rather than producing five hundred bad films. All stakeholders must unite and work together in order to arrest this anomaly. Most often, we hear such incredible “behind the scenes” gist that most of them do not have scripts for their films and they just improvise on locations. This is very sad. It is unfortunate to know that there is an anti-progressive rivalry between the actors and actresses. For example, a situation whereby Funke Akindele, Adebayo Salami, Fathia Balogun, Funsho Adeolu, Muyiwa Ademola, Bukky Wright and all the numerous Yoruba actors want to write their scripts and produce them irrespective of their areas of specialization becomes an issue of quantity and unnecessary “I don arrive” syndrome.

In conclusion, the reality is that; while the video industry has come to stay, the benefits when properly managed can generate revenue for the country; it can promote tourism; it is a medium for the recent campaign on re-imaging, re-branding Nigeria. It is also an avenue for preserving and exporting our rich cultural heritage. While all hands must be on deck from all quarters to make it work, the practitioners must also stand up to meet the challenges of the industry and have the foresightedness of projecting the future. For example, between 2008 and 2010, the Yoruba video film industry had released a staggering One Thousand Five Hundred and Forty-Six (1,546) video films. This is in contrast to the meager Hausa video films at 529 (Five Hundred and Twenty-Nine.) On the other hand, the English-Nollywood video films stood at Seven Hundred and Fifty-One (751), (Duro’s Oni inaugural lecture 2010). These figures are indeed worrisome considering standard and the overall quality of these films. That the industry has come a long way is an understatement, but that we are not getting it right after more than fifty years should be an issue of concern.

Finally, and most annoying, is the issue of sub-titles in most often Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa video films. Ekundayo Simpson quoted in (Oni: 2010:41) was quick to show this anger succinctly when he says: “Basic errors of language, spelling mistakes, ungrammatical sentences and phrases, stylistic errors, malapropism abound in the sub-titles with which these film producers aspire to sell their products to the rest of the world....”.

The world is a global village; this is the right time for Nigeria to compete with the Western World not just in terms of quantity but quality as well.

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