

Teacher Don't Teach Me Nonsense: African Child, Film And Identity Crisis

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Abstract- An African child is in a state of perpetual crisis as he is faced with conflicting images of Africa and Africans. In this state of confusion, his attempt at finding out the authentic African image is usually faced with failure and frustration. The objective of this paper therefore is to examine the contribution of the motion picture to the distortion of African identity and the disorientation of an African child. The paper highlighted the position of scholars regarding African identity and conducted a sociological analysis of the contents of drama and films on local and satellite television stations that are indicative of what an African image is all about.

Findings showed that the relegation of African oral tradition, limited knowledge of content providers about Africa and Africans, Eurocentricity, economic factors, using the western world as denominator and low self-esteem are some of the major factors that are responsible for the distortion of the African image. It therefore recommended conscious efforts by African culture experts to build the capacity of content providers, Africans to spend more time in learning about Africa and Africans and imparting such on the younger ones and also for culture promoters to live by examples by consistently projecting the authentic image of Africa and Africans through their actions and deeds.

Index Terms- African identity, Film and African child, Identity formation, Content creation for African child.

I. INTRODUCTION

Identity is what differentiates one person or group of people from the other. It is unique to such individual or group. It is what can be used to describe you. Without a proper identity, reward and punishment would be difficult while collective yearnings and aspirations may not be easily attained. It is when you know 'who' that you can add the information relating to 'what' 'when' and 'how'. Without knowing the 'who', all other questions relating to responsibility become meaningless. Apart from the fact that it differentiates one individual or group from the other, it is also dynamic and subject to change from time to time. Identity is not literally cast in stone as situations and circumstances can facilitate the need to change one's identity either to conform or deviate from the norm.

A person may adopt different identities at various times during his lifetime while some individuals maintain several identities at once (Clarke, 1999: Par. 4). "At the heart of human experience lies an essential yearning for self-definition and self-understanding. Developing a conception of who we are, for what purpose we exist, and how we should live our lives is a basic impulse of human consciousness" (Weinberg, 2007:Par 1).

Our opinions about our identity may not be in tandem with other people's perception or opinion about who we are. It is also possible for one to have a false sense of identity when one sees himself in an image totally different from his personality. This happens when one pretends to possess qualities that one does not have or when one yearns to be seen in a better perspective than his real worth. We have both individual and group identity. The individual identity influences the group identity and vice versa. Our identity, whether individual or group, is what makes us unique and stand out in the crowd (Omoniyi & Salami, 2008:177). It is what guides the way we think or act. Without a unique identity, a person or a group does not enjoy proper recognition. He does not attract the attention of others who may be fascinated by such a person or a group's idiosyncrasies.

Some of the identity related theories that have guided discourse over time include *The Mind-Brain Identity Theory traceable to Boring's book The Physical Dimensions of Consciousness (Ullini, 2012: Par. 1)* which highlights the correlation between the mind and the brain and the similarity between what the mind thinks and what the brain processes. Henri Tajfel and John Turner's Social identity theory utilizes categorization, identification and comparison to analyse individual as a person and as a member of a social group. It also includes the impacts that being a member of a social group has on the individual (Chen and Xin Li, 2008:2).

Other identity theories include Erickson's psychosocial theory of human development which states that "...What the child acquires at a given stage is a certain ratio between the positive and negative, which if the balance is towards the positive, will help him to meet later crises with a better chance for unimpaired total development" (Chapman A. 2012: 7). Out of all these theories, Erickson's psychosocial theory of human development is the most relevant to this discussion.

II AFRICAN CHILD AND IDENTITY FORMATION

Africa is the second largest and second most populous continent in the world with over one billion population. The belief in many quarters is that human life and civilization began in Africa more than five million years ago with particular reference to the Egyptian empire and its civilization. Africa is considered as the cradle of humankind (Matlotleng, 2009:8). Africa is the home of black people the world over and many black men in the Diaspora trace their origin to this continent. "The continent is commonly divided along the lines of the Sahara, the world's largest desert, which cuts a huge swath through the northern half of the continent. The countries north of the Sahara make up the region of North Africa, while the region south of the desert is known as sub-Saharan Africa (Mehretu et al, 2009: 1).

Africa as a continent has a diverse culture with thousands of ethnic groups and languages. These ethnic groups cut across national boundaries as people from a particular ethnic group could be found in more than one country. It is regrettable however, that Africans have stronger affiliation to their ethnic ties or at best to their national identities than to the African consciousness. This may be one of the reasons why many believe that there is nothing like African identity. "National/country identity is so strong in Africa despite the fact that if you delve within this country you will discover irreconcilable differences between tribes, races, religious groups etc". (Sahara Vibe, 2007: Par 5).

This means that identity issue in Africa is better appreciated from ethnic or sometimes national point of view rather than from continental point of view. This is because several attempts made by government, in different parts of Africa aimed at fostering national identity among their people have been thwarted by diverse ethnic nature of the people. This has also made development of what one can call an African identity an impossible task in the present dispensation, as people in Africa are still more sentimentally attached to their ethnic and national backgrounds than to a regional affiliation.

In spite of this close affiliation to tribal ties however, there are still sizeable numbers of people who believe that African identity exists. Their reason for this conviction is the fact that there are certain basic characteristics that are common to Africans irrespective of their tribal or national affiliation. These include the way they dress, their communal spirit, celebrations, and eating habit; (home cooking as opposed to eating in public places). Africans only eat outside during festivals and ceremonies and do not depend on public eateries for their daily meals. Other common denominators include cultural values, as well as arts and crafts.

In Africa, every child belongs to the community as a whole and every adult member of that community sees the nurturing of any child from the community as his or her own responsibility irrespective of who the biological parents are. Other characteristics include utmost respect for adults and constituted authority as well as the sacredness of marriage institution;

infidelity is treated with contempt, disdain and outright condemnation. Africans are known for being their brother's keepers and they derive joy in common wealth rather than individual wealth.

Africa is a place where you live for your people and your people live for you. The focus is usually on the common good for the benefit of all. It has a very rich cultural values and customs transmitted orally from generation to generation. This way of life which differentiates Africans from the others was the source of pride in the good old days before the erosion of African ways of life through infiltration of foreign culture and religion.

Philosophically, African sense of beauty does not lie on the appearance which may be deceptive in most cases. A person is only considered beautiful or handsome if the physical appearance is complemented with good moral value, good behavior and sound judgement. Africans cherish their names and always strive to protect their integrity and the good name of their people anywhere they go. The question is how much of these are being transmitted to the younger generation nowadays? How many children are familiar with all these attributes that makes Africansto be unique anywhere they are whether in Malabo, Kumasi, Cape Town or Cairo.

The pre-literate African societies saddled parents with the responsibility of transferring information about these common characteristics that define the people as Africans from generation to generation. The children thus learnt about their identity through observation of what and how the adults act and react, through association and interaction with people either from the same family or lineage or outside their family or lineage. They learnt through active participation in social, religious and political activities particularly through their age grades. Children also learnt from their parents and other adults with exemplary behavior and attitude who are chosen as role models. Parent and guardians use the moonlight story time to educate and orientate the younger generation of where they come from, what they are noted for in terms of values, attitude and prowess as well as societal expectation from individual members.

It is expected that a child must be nurtured in the ways of life of Africans by doing what is culturally acceptable and staying away from what is regarded as taboo. He or she is trained through observation, association, participation, role modeling, and orientation. However, as capitalism finds its way into Africa, parents become more engrossed in pursuits of economic survival with little or no time to take care of their responsibilities to their children. Children became disconnected from their histories, values and orientation. This explains why most African children cannot trace their histories but are excellent in discussing the history of other parts of the world. The onus of educating an African child on virtually all aspects of human endeavour, including their African identity was first transferred by the parents to the school system but now the mass media has hijacked that responsibility because of its audio-visual appeal.

III DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Film and motion picture have always been used interchangeably in America while the British refer to this same medium as cinema. All these names are used to describe the moving images projected through the big or the small screen. The big screen being the cinema, while the small screen includes; the television screen, Computer screen, phones as well as other electronic devices with audio visual components. The potentials of the film in image creation cannot be overemphasized. Guttentag, Kramer and Libresco are all of the opinion that film is a veritable tool for social change and that its impact in stimulating the brain for 'sociability', engaging with others and empathy cannot be over-emphasised. (Gary, 2010: Par 6). Other scholars; Leal and Villa Bandeira, (1995:53), and Hartmurt (1986:43) have also articulated the educational potential of film.

It is important to note that majority of the information at the disposal of an African child to guide his identity formation is accessed through the film. He is at the mercy of either the real life character or cartoon character he sees regularly on the screen. Apart from the medium through which the information is passed, the content of such information is equally diluted with syncretic elements. The child's understanding of his culture and environment, including societal expectation therefore becomes opaque as he is placed in a state of perpetual confusion orchestrated by conflicting semiotics that confront him daily.

In terms of African identity with regards who we are and what distinguishes us from others, many of the films and television drama based on Africa and Africans transmitted through local television stations as well as cable satellite television stations in the past are mostly malicious, misleading and prejudiced. They portrayed Africans as primitives, savages, cannibals, and at best not different from animals. In such old films like the *Tarzan films*, *Amos* and *Andy*, and the National Geographic's documentaries are glaring examples that readily come to mind. In these films and many others, there is apparent distortion of facts about African's way of life. There is also apparent hasty generalization, in which violence, savagery, hunger and starvation are projected as daily occurrence in the continent.

Most of them also echo white supremacy over uncivilized Africans. Films like *Coming to America*, *Mr. Johnson*, *Congo*, and *Shaka Zulu*, are in this category. The films mentioned above were produced in Hollywood and the underlining factor is that somebody somewhere is always eager to misrepresent Africa in order to create confusion and distort the facts with regards to situations in Africa as well as African's ways of life. In those motion pictures, African civilization is relegated to the background and western ideas are projected as the best form of life that any child can dream of. "The emasculation and inferiorisation of black people...was achieved through the fabrication of racist myths of white superiority in opposition to black inferiority. White humanness contrasted to black animalism". (Tirykian in Gordon & Gerguen, 1988:77 cited in Okagbue, 2009:20).

It is regrettable to note that, with increasing number of 'woods' that are now in Africa, from *Nollywood* to *Gannywood* to

Kannywood to *Swahiliwood*, among others, promotion of authentic African identity is still given a relatively insignificant attention in the films. From Capetown to Lagos, and Kumasi to Nairobi, the screen is still agog with films that ape the western media by only projecting negative things about Africa and Africans. It is as if corruption, incest, prostitution, backstabbing, modern day slavery and wanton disregard for law as well as senseless murder only happen in Africa and not in the rest of the world.

Most African films still present Africa as home of rituals where no conflict is established without reference to the supernatural forces. Africa is portrayed as a place where human life means nothing and an average African is seen as a refined cannibal. Because African children are influenced by what they see on the screen either at the cinema or on the television screen, the situation at present is such that more attention is directed towards cultural re-orientation in a globalised world. This globalised world is the one in which some cultures are better and superior to others and the superior ones must be adopted meekly by all. This "globalization is antithetical to cultural diversity and in that respect, it denies others of their identity which is an important aspect of fundamental human rights. Africa will be lost in a world without cultural diversity" (Isola, 2010: 18).

Since Africans willfully transferred the role of the 'teacher' to film as they become highly engrossed in mundane things, the new teacher is doing its best to teach their children all the nonsense in its arsenal. That explains why African children are daily bombarded with pictures of western ideas all in the name of globalization. The screen continues to chronicle situations and events in the ideal world of bliss where every youth should aspire to live and flourish.

The children are now being taught about life through cartoons whose background bears no identity to their own environment. Instead of learning how to relate effectively with his fellow human beings, he learns through the cartoon how to relate with animals and other inanimate objects. Instead of seeing things that are relevant to his environment and can promote his even growth and development, he is taken into the land of dream and fantasy. These dreams and fantasy continue to deceive him of the utopian world where all seemed perfect and thus become ill-equipped with necessary skills to be able to face developmental challenges as he grows.

Apart from being introduced to experiences that are far away from their own environment and being chauffeur-driven into dreamland, many programmes on the screen, continue to promote obscenity, foul language, nudity and violence. That is why violence among school students, with one stabbing the other or another going on a shooting spree, killing anybody in sight which used to be associated only with the western world in the past, has now become a daily phenomenon in Africa. Hatred, xenophobia, ethno-religious crisis, arson and looting as well as high-tech crimes being perpetrated among youths are equally traceable to what children see from the films they see.

In terms of dressing, African actors and actresses are indirectly advertising for the popular labels in Western world, with highly revealing and emotionally tempting mode of dressing. Chastity is thrown into the dungeon; as flirtation; double-dating, adultery and prostitution are seen as 'cool' and acceptable. The concept of beauty in Africa is now distorted as only girls with chemically induced and highly cosmetic physical appearance are considered as the beautiful ones. Male actors are wearing earrings and actresses in low-cuts, as if in a state of mourning. This has redefined the way African children dress. It is the norm nowadays for boys, even from the remotest village to 'sag' while *Spaghetti*, *Mini skirt* and *Body Hug* is the 'must-have' in every girl's wardrobe. Pre-marital sex is now seen as 'cool' in order to be considered romantic leading to upsurge in cases of unwanted pregnancy and unsafe abortion among children and young people.

Hair weaving that was the prerogative of Africans was not considered acceptable until both women and men from different parts of Europe and America started weaving their hair. Only what comes from the West is considered acceptable. This is what many considered as being in a state of perpetual servitude and continuous dependent on the west for guidance. The reasons articulated for the colonisation of most parts of Africa in the past. Now African men are weaving their hairs because their sports and musical idols as seen on the screen are doing the same.

The ideal world projected through the motion pictures is far from what Africa is or what it represents. That is why in films like *Loosing You*, and *Power of Love* African youths are encouraged to defy reason, logic as well as parental guardian whenever they are in love because love is the utmost. Other films encourage children to query tradition without proper understanding of such traditions. Films like *Blood Money*, *Brotherhood of Darkness* and *Reign of the Wicked* portray Africans as fetish, blood-sucking demons and cannibals. Youths are discouraged from visiting the countryside because the uncle or the aunt at that end has no other business to attend to than to snuff out innocent lives in order to take over their parent's property or as a result of envy; since his own children are not doing well like others.

In society today the construction of a personal identity can be seen to be somewhat problematic and difficult. Young people are surrounded by influential imagery, especially that of popular media. It is no longer possible for an identity to be constructed merely in a small community and only be influenced by family. (Hamley, 2001:1)¹

An African child has to contend with this reality on a daily basis. This is coupled with the fact that the foundation of self and group identity that was supposed to have been built by the parents and other agents of social cohesion was not available leaving the child to grope in the dark with regards what is right, reasonable and acceptable. One may begin to ask; how did things get this bad? What motivated African content providers to produce counter-culture films. Is it a deliberate attempt to undermine the culture and jeopardise the future of the children?

One thing is clear, what you do not have, you cannot give. Educational standard in many African states are at its lowest ebb and content providers are not properly trained on content development. Most of these content providers have initially experienced culture disconnect and the only culture they could connect with was the one introduced by the films they watch on a daily basis for inspiration. Therefore most of the content providers do not have adequate knowledge about Africa and Africans.

That is not all, many of the present content providers while growing up have been brainwashed through the school and religious system that the western ways of doing things is the best and only way of achieving the greatest good for the greatest number. This Eurocentric indoctrination did not allow them to differentiate between culture and religion. Anything that is in antithesis to the practice in Europe is barbaric, uncivilized and should not be projected to avoid rocking the boat and being tagged backward. The implication is such that justifications are now being found for issues that are alien to African culture, like homosexuality, lesbianism, transgender and same sex marriages. It is important to note that "What is needed is more of modernity and less of "the Western spring," (Mazuri, 1996 cited in Falola 2003: 49)

The fact that anything that is connected or traceable to Africa has been stigmatized has affected people's psyche to the extent that those who like to wear African dress among the children have developed low self esteem as they are regularly taunted by their peers. In order to corroborate the strong impact of the mass media particularly the film on how we behave as individual after coming in contact with the motion picture, Bandura's Social Cognitive theory articulates the fact that "by observing the performance of actors, audience members can experience strong emotional reactions, acquire new thought patterns and values and change their behaviour...", (JHUCCP, 2003:1-7). This explains the magnitude of the moral decadence now being experienced among young people in Africa. Since they cannot separate myths from facts, they take everything they see on the screen hook, line and sinker. They act, react and interact based on what they see. Their sense of value and judgement are guided by the dictates of the films they come in contact with on a daily basis.

It is highly imperative for all Africans, irrespective of status, to go back to the basics and start learning about all those cultural and social indices that distinguish Africans from other race elsewhere in the world. This is not an attempt aimed at constituting the 'We' versus 'them' nomenclature but to ensure the sustainability of the Africanness in the Africans. To ensure that the children think, move and behave like Africans. The children need to inculcate the numerous African values because it is these values, beliefs and ways of life that have shaped the continent's even growth and development, peaceful coexistence as well as social cohesion over the ages. Therefore, culture advocates also need to do more than lamentation and concentrate on how they can make the smallest unit of the societal stratification, that is; the family more responsive towards educating the children about African ideals. They should advocate for parents to spend more time at home with their

children and process what these children watch so that they can separate the facts from the myths and put contents from the films into perspective from an African point of view

African film content providers owe Africa a duty to contribute to promoting authentic African identity as represented by what they do, what they believe in, how they relate to one another and their socio-political point of view with regards African common wealth. Good things about Africa and Africans should be consistently promoted and the youths properly guided through the contents in the films about societal expectation from an African child irrespective of where he lives. The content providers should be mindful of negative effects of their contents on the development process of a child that is exposed to such contents without proper guidance.

To be able to do this, content providers need to learn more about African values and how they have shaped the continent's collective identity. Inspiring stories which will make the children better, productive and source of joy to their parents and their communities should be preferred to sensational stories that provoke cheap emotion and confuse the children in their quest for personal and to a large extent, African identity. Both content providers and culture promoters should also live by examples by consistently projecting the authentic image of Africa and Africans through their actions and deeds.

The confusion which currently bedeviled the African child can only be cleared when the screen is consistently filled with what is culturally acceptable and disapprove of the 'nonsense' being promoted on the screen at the moment. National governments in Africa also need to do more by moving their people out of the microscopic lineage and ethnic loyalty to a more broad based national and African identity. This will enable Africans to be able to speak with one voice as far as culture and identity formation is concerned. Africans do not need to ape the developed world. They only need to be themselves and appreciate who they are in order to earn respect from others.

IV CONCLUSION

We have situated Africa on the world map, highlighted what is controversially known as African identity as a selection of characteristics common to Africans irrespective of where they live. We also discussed how these characteristics are externalized and exhibited. We discussed how we have failed as parents and as communities to shape the children in the right direction and the resultant effect of our failures. We also traced the advent of motion picture on the continent of Africa and how this has brought distorted images about societal expectation from an African child.

Now, African identity is fast becoming a mirage because parents could no longer perform their responsibility and allow the screen to do the job for them. The 'whispering noise' of culture experts and advocates is consistently dwarfed by the loud noise from the film's sound track. The inconsistency of those who believe in the sanctity of African identity is been eroded by the consistency of those shouting global compliance. This is boxing an average

African child into a corner with the image of civilization which is fast breaking the umbilical cord that binds Africans to their motherland. It is important to start asking questions about what can be done to redress the anomaly and preserve the authentic African identity.

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