

Studying Nigerian Documentary Films' Exploration On The Intersection Of Culture, Tradition, History, And African Identity

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Abstract

This article looks into studying the profound intersection between culture, tradition, history, and African identity through the lens of two highly impactful Nigerian documentary films - *Marked* (2019) directed by Nadine Ibrahim, and *Bigger than Africa* (2018) by Toyin Adekeye. The Nigeria-set *Marked* extensively explores the enduring practice of scarification (body markings) in various Nigerian cultures, with a detailed examination of its intricate link to beauty, spirituality, and personal identity among the people of the culture. While Mr. Toyin Adekeye's *Bigger than Africa* tells a captivating story of the journey of enslaved Africans with peculiar focus on the slaves of Yoruba descent by tracing the trans-Atlantic slave trade history between the 16th and 19th century, thereby revealing the remarkable resilience of the Yoruba people and their culture even in the face of difficulty. This article analyses these documentary films within the scope of studying African identity, cultures, traditions, and the impact of foreign influence, etc.

Keywords: Documentary films, Nigeria, culture, tradition, history.

1. Introduction

African identity is a dynamic and multifaceted concept, continuously shaped by a complex interplay of cultural practices, traditions, and historical experiences (Ramphela, 2012). Documentary films have emerged as powerful tools for exploring these intricacies, offering audiences a window into the rich tapestry of African cultures (Diawara, 1995).

By capturing lived experiences and traditions through compelling narratives, documentaries can foster understanding, challenge stereotypes, and illuminate the enduring legacy of the past on contemporary African identity (Smith, 1996).

This article examines two influential Nigerian documentaries, *Marked* (2019) and *Bigger than Africa* (2018), to further explore this crucial role of documentary filmmaking. Through these films, we embark on journeys that not only showcase the vibrant diversity of Nigerian culture but also

highlight the profound connection between cultural practices, historical memory, and the ongoing construction of African identity.

2. Marked: Exploring the Significance of Scarification in Contemporary Nigeria

Nadine Ibrahim's *Marked* delves into the world of scarification, a long-standing practice in Nigeria that involves creating permanent marks on the body. The film offers a refreshing departure from negative portrayals of scarification, presenting a non-judgmental space for participants to share their experiences. Contributors discuss the diverse motivations behind receiving these marks, ranging from voluntary choices for aesthetic reasons to involuntary practices carried out within family traditions. This nuanced portrayal highlights the importance of scarification within the broader context of Nigerian culture, where it can be intertwined with concepts of beauty, spirituality, and even health (Peek, 2005). As Roy G. Willis (1991) argues, bodily markings like scarification can serve as a form of "social inscription," signifying belonging to a particular community and transmitting cultural knowledge across generations.

Marked excels not only in its exploration of scarification's significance but also in showcasing the rich diversity of Nigeria's landscape. Through captivating visuals, the film transports viewers to the rolling hills of Sokoto and the lush greenery of Oyo, highlighting the geographic context where this practice flourishes. Furthermore, the documentary captures the linguistic tapestry of Nigeria, featuring narratives shared in Igbo, Yoruba, Igala, and Hausa. This multilingual approach reinforces the concept of Nigeria as a nation deeply rooted in its diverse cultural heritage (Echeruo, 2008).

While leaving a lasting impression on the significance of scarification in contemporary Nigeria, the film acknowledges its brevity. A potential limitation is the lack of extensive historical background on the practice. This may be due to the scarcity of written records in many African communities, reflecting the impact of colonialism on traditional knowledge systems (Mudimbe, 1988). However, *Marked* undeniably succeeds in sparking audience curiosity, encouraging further investigation into the history and evolving significance of tribal marks in contemporary Nigeria. Here, the work of scholars like Philip Peek (2005) becomes even more crucial, as his research on scarification in Nigeria provides valuable historical context for understanding the practice's enduring presence.

3. Bigger than Africa: Tracing the Legacy of Yoruba Culture Across the Atlantic

Toyin Adekeye's *Bigger than Africa* embarks on a compelling journey that sheds light on the transatlantic slave trade and its enduring impact on African identity. The film meticulously follows the path of enslaved West Africans from their Yoruba homeland to the Americas and the Caribbean. Through powerful interviews and captivating visuals, Adekeye reveals a remarkable fact: despite the horrors of the slave trade and the forced displacement of millions, Yoruba culture persevered. The film demonstrates this by showcasing vibrant Yoruba traditions, religions, and languages thriving in diverse locations across the globe. From the rhythmic drumming and vibrant Candomblé rituals in Brazil to the intricate Santería practices in Cuba and the melodious Shango Baptist traditions in Trinidad and Tobago, *Bigger than Africa* illuminates the enduring legacy of Yoruba culture, a testament to its strength and adaptability (Thompson, 2008).

4. History of The Transatlantic Slave Trade

The transatlantic slave trade stands as one of the darkest chapters in human history. For over four centuries, millions of Africans were forcibly removed from their homelands and transported across the Atlantic Ocean under brutal conditions to be enslaved in the Americas and the Caribbean. This large-scale displacement of people fundamentally reshaped not only the demographics of these regions but also the cultural, social, and political landscapes (Hair, 2010).

The origins of the transatlantic slave trade can be traced back to the 15th century, fueled by European expansionism and the growing demand for labor in the Americas. The Portuguese were among the first European powers to engage in the trade, initially capturing Africans along the West African coast. As European colonization of the Americas intensified, particularly in the Caribbean and parts of North and South America, the demand for labor to work on plantations cultivating sugar, tobacco, and cotton skyrocketed (Curtin, 1995). This insatiable demand fueled a transatlantic trade route that would see millions of Africans forcibly transported across the Atlantic in horrific conditions.

The capture and transportation of enslaved Africans involved immense brutality and suffering. Warfare, kidnapping, and raids on African villages were common methods of acquiring slaves. Those captured were then herded into cramped and unsanitary conditions on ships, often referred to as "coffin ships," where disease and malnutrition were rampant. The journey across the Atlantic,

known as the Middle Passage, was a crucible of human suffering, with an estimated 15-20% of Africans perishing before reaching the Americas (Thornton, 1997).

Upon arrival in the Americas, enslaved Africans faced a lifetime of forced labor under harsh conditions. They were subjected to long hours of grueling work, physical and psychological abuse, and the constant threat of separation from their families. The institution of slavery was built on a system of racial dehumanization, denying Africans their basic rights and freedoms. However, despite the brutality they endured, enslaved Africans demonstrated remarkable resilience. They developed various strategies for coping with their circumstances, including preserving cultural practices, establishing clandestine communities, and resisting their enslavement through acts of rebellion (Mintz, 1967).

The transatlantic slave trade had a profound impact on the societies of the Americas and the Caribbean. The influx of enslaved Africans significantly altered the demographics of these regions, creating societies with a majority African population in some areas. This demographic shift had a lasting impact on cultural development, leading to the emergence of new cultural expressions that blended African traditions with European and Indigenous influences. Music, dance, cuisine, and religious practices in the Americas and the Caribbean all bear the imprint of the African diaspora (Gomez, 2005).

The transatlantic slave trade also had a devastating impact on African societies. The loss of millions of people, particularly young men and women, disrupted traditional social structures and economic systems. Warfare and violence associated with the slave trade further destabilized many African communities. The long-term consequences of the slave trade continue to resonate across the continent today (Lovejoy, 2008).

The legacy of the transatlantic slave trade is complex and multifaceted. It is a story of immense suffering, human resilience, and the profound reshaping of societies across the Atlantic world. The enduring impact of this historical event continues to be felt in the social, political, and cultural spheres of Africa, the Americas, and the Caribbean.

5. Understanding the Trade through Different Lenses

Several key areas of exploration are crucial for gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the transatlantic slave trade. Firstly, examining the economic factors that fueled the trade is essential. The growing demand for cheap labor in the Americas, particularly for plantation agriculture, created a lucrative market for enslaved Africans. European powers actively participated in the trade, competing for control of the lucrative routes and establishing complex trade networks (Klein, 2004).

Secondly, delving into the ethical justifications used to defend slavery is important. As the trade gained momentum, European thinkers and colonists attempted to rationalize slavery through racist ideologies that portrayed Africans as inherently inferior and suited for servitude. These justifications, however flawed and morally reprehensible, played a significant role in perpetuating the institution of slavery (Stuckey, 1987).

Thirdly, exploring the experiences of enslaved Africans is critical. While the vast majority were denied the ability to leave written records, their stories can be pieced together through oral histories, slave narratives, and archaeological evidence. These sources offer invaluable insights into the daily lives, struggles, and acts of resistance of enslaved Africans (Genovese, 1974).

Finally, examining the long-term consequences of the transatlantic slave trade on both Africa and the Americas is crucial. The demographic shifts, cultural transformations

6. The Strength of Yoruba Culture and the Challenges of Historical Reconstruction

The documentary's strength lies in its comprehensive approach. Adekeye meticulously interviews scholars, religious leaders, and community members across various continents, providing a multifaceted perspective on the transatlantic slave trade's impact and the remarkable resilience of Yoruba traditions. This aligns with the work of scholars like Paul Gilroy (1993), who argues for the concept of the "Black Atlantic" – a cultural space where African traditions, languages, and religions continued to evolve and thrive despite the forced displacement of the slave trade.

Bigger than Africa has garnered critical acclaim, winning numerous awards at international film festivals. This recognition underscores the film's effectiveness in fostering dialogue and promoting a deeper appreciation for the rich tapestry of African identity. Furthermore, the film highlights the

importance of historical memory in constructing a sense of self. As scholars like Thembi (2001) argue, remembering the past, even the painful experiences like the slave trade, is crucial for African communities to reclaim their agency and move forward.

However, the film also reveals the challenges associated with reconstructing African history. The scarcity of written records in many African communities, a consequence of colonialism's emphasis on European narratives, makes it difficult to fully understand the historical context of Yoruba cultural practices pre-dating the slave trade (Mudimbe, 1988).

While *Bigger than Africa* focuses on the Yoruba diaspora, it is important to acknowledge the diverse legacies of other African cultures impacted by the slave trade. Documentaries like "Sankofa" (1993) by Haile Gerima and "Traces of the Trade" (1998) by Katrina Browne explore the impact of the slave trade on communities in Ghana and Senegal, respectively. These films, along with "Bigger than Africa," offer a more complete picture of the multifaceted African diaspora and its enduring cultural expressions in the Americas and the Caribbean.

7. Nigerian Documentaries and the discussion on African Identity

Nigerian documentaries such as *Marked* and *Bigger than Africa* offer invaluable insights into the multifaceted nature of African identity. These films illuminate the intricate connections between culture, tradition, history, and the ever-evolving concept of African selfhood.

Marked showcases the enduring significance of scarification in contemporary Nigeria, highlighting the complex relationship between bodily practices and cultural memory. *Bigger than Africa* reveals the remarkable resilience of Yoruba culture in the face of displacement, emphasizing the importance of historical understanding and the power of cultural expressions to transcend geographical boundaries.

These documentaries serve as powerful tools for challenging stereotypes and fostering inter-cultural dialogue. They encourage audiences to explore the complexities of African identity and recognize the rich tapestry of cultural practices that continue to shape the continent and its people. Furthermore, they highlight the need for further research and exploration of African history, not just through traditional written records but also through oral traditions, cultural artifacts, and the voices

of the communities themselves. This ensures a more complete understanding of the past and its profound impact on the ongoing construction of African identity.

The success of documentaries like *Marked* and *Bigger than Africa* lies not only in their subject matter but also in their approach to storytelling. These films utilize powerful visuals, compelling interviews, and evocative narratives to engage audiences and create a sense of empathy and understanding. As scholars like John Carlos Rowe (1995) argue, documentaries offer a unique opportunity to explore the complexities of human experience and challenge dominant narratives.

However, it is important to acknowledge the inherent limitations of documentary filmmaking. Filmmakers make choices about what to include and exclude, shaping the audience's experience (Nichols, 1991). This raises questions about representation and the potential for bias. For example, *Marked* primarily focuses on individual experiences with scarification. While this approach offers valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge that cultural practices can evolve over time and vary across different communities within Nigeria. Similarly, *Bigger than Africa* showcases the resilience of Yoruba culture, but it is just one story within the vast tapestry of the African diaspora.

8. Exploring Documentary Ethics and Engaging with Multiple Voices

To address these concerns, it is crucial to consider the ethics of documentary filmmaking. Filmmakers should strive for transparency in their methods and ensure that the voices represented are diverse and reflect the complexities of the subject matter (Grierson, 1933). This includes acknowledging potential biases and limitations in the film's narrative.

Furthermore, engaging with a wider range of documentary voices can offer a more nuanced understanding of African identity. Documentaries like "I Am Samuel" (2009) by Peter Batey, which explores the experiences of a young gay man in Ghana, or "Fire in Babylon" (2011) by Marley Richards, which delves into the history of reggae music in Jamaica, provide alternative perspectives on the continent's rich cultural tapestry.

9. The Role of Technology and the Democratization of Storytelling

The increasing accessibility of filmmaking technology empowers a new generation of African storytellers to document their own experiences and perspectives. Platforms like YouTube and social

media offer avenues for these voices to reach a global audience, fostering a more inclusive and diverse representation of African identity (Manning-Sanders, 2017).

However, it is important to recognize the digital divide that can limit access to technology and filmmaking opportunities for some African communities. Initiatives that provide training and resources for aspiring filmmakers from diverse backgrounds are crucial for ensuring a more equitable representation of African stories.

10. Conclusion

In conclusion, Nigerian documentaries like *Marked* and *Bigger than Africa* offer invaluable tools for exploring the multifaceted nature of African identity. These films challenge stereotypes, illuminate the complex interplay of culture, tradition, and history, and encourage audiences to engage with the ongoing construction of African selfhood.

By acknowledging the power of storytelling, addressing issues of representation, and embracing the democratization of filmmaking through technology, we can ensure that documentaries continue to play a vital role in promoting intercultural dialogue and fostering a deeper appreciation for the rich tapestry of African identity.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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