

June 2023

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Recommended Citation

Endong, Floribert Patrick C. (2023) "Nollywood Cinema as a Tool for Pro-Lesbian Advocacy: A Feminist Reading of Unaiedu Ikpe-Etim's *Ife*," *Journal of International Women's Studies*: Vol. 25: Iss. 4, Article 4. Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol25/iss4/4>

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Nollywood Cinema as a Tool for Pro-Lesbian Advocacy: A Feminist Reading of Unaiedu Ikpe-Etim's *Ife*

By Floribert Patrick C. Endong¹

Abstract

In spite of the homophobic nature of Nigerian society, the LGBTQ+ rights movement has been very visible in Nigeria. A number of local pro-LGBTQ+ initiatives have sought to challenge the conservative myths and homophobic stereotypes that prevail in the society. One method used for such advocacy has been avant-garde cinema, particularly lesbian or gay films. A case in point is Ikpe-Etim's 2020 romantic film titled *Ife*. As an unusual Nollywood movie, *Ife* strongly makes a case for the human rights of lesbian, bisexual, and queer women in Nigeria. Its very positive representation of what Nigerian legislation and censorial forces consider deviant sexualities has fueled a huge controversy in the Nigerian socio-cultural sphere. This controversy has been understudied. Using Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony and the feminist film theory as interpretative tools, this paper examines how Ikpe-Etim's film is both a counter-hegemonic and queer feminist initiative. The paper argues that although *Ife* contributes to proselytism for LGBTQ+ rights and feminism in Nigeria, it has serious weaknesses and limitations. Despite the producer's and director's sexual identities and work as activists, straight Nollywood filmmakers have remained reluctant to join the LGBTQ+ rights movement.

Keywords: Counter-Hegemony, Lesbianism, Conservatism, LGBTQ+, Homophobia, Nollywood, Queer cinema, Nigerian cinema

Introduction

The stringent homophobic legislations adopted by the Nigerian government since 2011 have seriously stultified pro-LGBTQ+ sentiments in the Nigerian film industry (codenamed Nollywood), as well as in many, if not all the other fields of Nigeria's cultural industry. Greatly inspired by doctrinaire religion and conservatism, Nigerian legislations such as the 2011 *Same Sex Prohibition Act* and the 2016 *Nigerian Broadcasting Code* have negatively affected the social and media representation of LGBTQ+ communities in Nigeria. These legislations have been one of the key factors causing most LGBTQ+-related films produced by heterosexual Nigerian directors to mainly portray non-heterosexual sexualities in an abysmal way. Most Nigerian cineastes have been pushed by these legislations to shape their filmic productions to subtly advocate the marginalization, stigmatization, and ostracization of LGBTQ+ people in Nigeria. In a bid to arrest this social injustice, a number of LGBTQ+ people have entered the Nigerian film business with the revolutionary and liberal philosophy of representing marginalized sexual and gender identities to echo the voice of LGBTQ+ people. Such initiatives have provoked LGBTQ+ filmmakers to

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produce counter-hegemonic films through which they deconstruct the negative image of Nigerian LGBTQ+ identities and assertively campaign for homophilia or LGBTQ+ rights in the country. One such film is Ikpe-Etim's 2020 romantic film titled *Ife*, entirely shot in Nigeria, which makes a case for the human rights of lesbians in the Nigerian Federation. Since its release in 2020, *Ife* has fueled a huge controversy in the country's socio-cultural sphere. In spite of the controversies mentioned above, the film has remained grossly understudied by both Nigerian and exogenous film researchers. The majority of film critics that have focused on the film have only looked at the role it plays in the LGBTQ+ rights movement in Nigeria. This paper seeks to examine the film beyond the LGBTQ+ rights movement. Besides fueling the fight for the human rights of lesbian, bisexual, and queer women in Nigeria, *Ife* makes a case for feminism in Nollywood and in Nigeria as a whole. The film contributes to reversing the underrepresentation of women in directorial positions and deconstructs the gloomy representations of women, particularly lesbian women, in the industry.

Using Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony and feminist film theory as interpretative tools, this paper examines how Ikpe-Etim's film is both a counter-hegemonic and feminist initiative. The paper argues that although *Ife* contributes to the LGBTQ+ rights proselytism and the feminist movement in Nigeria, it has serious weaknesses and limitations. These limitations are due to the fact that, despite Adie and Ikpe-Etim's sexual identity/activist status, the straight Nollywood filmmakers have been reluctant to join the LGBTQ+ rights movement.

In line with the above-mentioned objectives, the paper is divided into four main parts. First, the paper provides the theoretical framework of Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony and feminist film theory. Second, the paper provides a background which explores the views of lesbians, bisexual, and queer women in the Nigerian imagination. This second part also explores the impact of conservatism on the representation of homosexuals in the Nollywood industry. The third part of the paper focuses on *Ife* as a counter-hegemonic initiative and an expression of the LGBTQ+ rights movement in Nigeria, while the last part of the paper explores *Ife* as a feminist movement.

Theoretical Framework

Cultural Hegemony

The theory of cultural hegemony—also known as hegemonic control—was developed by Antonio Gramsci (1971) in his famous prison notebook. The theory seeks to explain how power works, how it is wielded or won, and how a dominant social class is able to control or exercise power over weaker classes by mere consent rather than coercion.

At its inception, the theory sought to nuance radical Marxists' belief that the best way for the oppressed social classes to attain power was to take over a nation's means of production and administration, namely factories and the state. However, Gramsci had in his youth witnessed situations where workers took over the control of factories in Turin, only for them to hand these structures back to their original administrators a few weeks after the takeover. The reason for such handovers was that the workers knew nothing about how to run the factories. Meanwhile, Gramsci observed how the Catholic Church was able to use doctrine to exercise real power and subtle control over its followers. These experiences inspired him to argue that the creation and maintenance of a new society could only be actualized through the construction and sustenance of a new consciousness. According to Gramsci, this new consciousness is constructed through culture. Culture, in its aesthetic and anthropological sense, includes the norms and mores as well

as the social narratives that structure and condition our quotidian lives. Culture by this understanding is the force that determines our worldview, ideas, knowledge, and perceptions of the ethical, the beautiful, and the just.

What gives cultural hegemony so much power is its invisibility. In effect, cultural hegemony appears more powerful than an army in the sense that it resides in the hearts and minds of the people. Wrapped in such immaterial things as stories, language, figures of speech, and images, it constitutes a politics that doesn't look like one. Thanks to this invisibility, hegemonic culture is hard to either notice or neutralize. A hegemonic culture is subconsciously accepted as common sense by the majority in a society, including those whom it marginalizes or oppresses. A culture becomes hegemonic through socialization or the subtle agency of such powerful social institutions as religion, media, education, the family, and the law among others (Freire, 1970). According to a number of postmodern thinkers, most conventions are hegemonies. In line with this, heteronormativity is most often viewed as a hegemonic culture (Lasio et al., 2018). Allen and Mendez (2018) define heteronormativity as an ideological composite. The two authors say the concept is a vast and pervasive system that privileges three overlapping binary composites, namely gender ideology, sexual ideology, and family ideology. These three binaries represent the principal means through which heteronormativity works to constrain and privilege individuals today. Allen and Mendez add that:

To conceptualise heteronormativity, [...] it is important to consider the concept of hegemony, which we understand as the social, cultural, political, structural, and institutional power and dominance of one or more groups, identities, behaviours, and/or practices over others. Building on [...] construct of hegemonic masculinity, we conceive of hegemony as fundamental to heteronormativity. [...] Hegemony manifests in each of the three heteronormative binaries wherein real men and women, natural sexualities, and genuine families are diametrically opposed to their deviant, unnatural, and pseudo-counterparts, respectively; the former categories afforded dominance, privilege, and normalcy (2018, p.73-74).

However, no culture is absolutely hegemonic. Movements will always emerge, aimed at denouncing or resisting hegemonic cultures. Gramsci (1971) calls such movements “counter-hegemonic” cultures. Put in simple terms, a counter-hegemonic culture is a way of doing or thinking that challenges a hegemonic culture. In our modern world, counter-hegemonies could be found in postmodern cultures that seek to deconstruct received ideas or what is popularly accepted as the norm. They are generally backed by an advocacy or activism which may be subtle or explicit. The goal of the proponents or apologists of such an activism is to “build a radical counter-culture within the shell of the old society and wage the struggle for a new cultural hegemony” (Duncombe, 2017, p.93). In the specific case of the LGBTQ+ rights advocacy in Nigeria, counter-hegemony consists in using the civil society and media such as the Internet, queer literature, and cinema to advocate that queer sexualities and gender identities are human and natural. In the Nigerian film industry more specifically, counter-hegemonic cultures consist in producing gay or lesbian films that deconstruct popular homophobic narratives and demonstrate the veracity of the concept of African/Nigerian homosexuality.

Feminist Film Theory

One of feminist film theory's most important early contributions was Laura Mulvey's classic article titled "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema." The theory has also been propounded by Kuhn (1994), Nussbaum (1995), and MacKinnon (1989) among others. Feminist film theorists critically interrogate the representation of women in cinema. They have two principal arguments: the first is that a "male gaze" predominates in cinema and the second is that there is a need for a women-driven cinema to counter the misrepresentation of women in mainstream cinema (Mulvey, 1989). Concerning the first argument, Budd Boetticher (cited in Erens, 1990, p.108) argues that, in most films, women are made to be the spectacle. They are represented as passive objects that exist for the sole sexual pleasure of the male characters. As Boetticher puts it, what is important in most films is "what the heroine provokes, or what she represents." It is the influence she exerts on the hero that makes him act the way he does. In herself, the woman has no importance. This denial of agency to women in films is also brought to the forefront in Mulvey's (1989) "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema." Mulvey argues that women are sexually objectified in film for the purpose of providing visual pleasure to the heterosexual male spectatorship through scopophilia (the pleasure to see). They are assigned exhibitionist roles which cause them to be simultaneously "looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, 1989, p. 28). This scenario causes women to be the bearers of the meaning and not the makers of the meaning.

In addition to this, Mulvey (1989) argues that films stimulate visual pleasure by integrating aspects of voyeurism and narcissism into their verbal and visual narratives. They present women as sex objects to be gazed at by the heterosexual male spectatorship. This occurs in two ways: the first is that the camera often films from the optical and libidinal point of view of the heterosexual male character; the second way is that male characters often direct their gaze toward female characters. The two above mentioned scenarios influence the spectators to likely identify with what Mulvey calls the "male gaze." All these create a situation of triple sexual objectification. In other words, the female character is objectified by three entities: the camera, the male characters in the film, and the spectator.

The second tenet of feminist film theory states that the appropriation of the film medium by women has the potential to empower and enable them to (re)write their stories and challenge patriarchal social structures/strictures. By this tenet, feminist film critics such as Claire Johnson (1979) and Patricia Erens (1990) also believe that the growing presence of women in the cinema industry may go a long way to engender more true-to-life or realistic representations of women in films. They thus believe that feminine cinema can work as a "counter cinema." Such a counter cinema will be revealed by filmic productions produced by women that challenge sexist ideologies and propose alternative representations of women (Anneke, 2016).

Over the years feminist film theory has become more attentive to the intersectionality of class, race, and sexuality (Doty, 1998; Omar 2017). It has for instance been greatly influenced by lesbian and queer theories. Anneke (2016) underlines this influence in her analysis of lesbian and queer feminist critics of Hollywood films. She writes that:

Lesbian feminists were among the first to raise objections to the heterosexual bias of psychoanalytic feminist film theory, which seemed initially unable to conceive of representation outside heterosexuality. The shift away from the restrictive binary oppositions of psychoanalytic feminist film theory resulted in a more historical and cultural criticism of

cinema by gay and lesbian critics. This involved re-readings of Hollywood cinema, for example of the implicit lesbianism of the female buddy film. The argument was advanced that the female spectator is quite likely to encompass erotic components in her desiring look, while at the same time identifying with the woman-as-spectacle. The homoerotic appeal of female Hollywood stars has been widely recognized. (Anneke, 2016, p. 3)

In line with this queer and lesbian critic's reading of the films, there has also emerged the belief that lesbian and queer films could represent a counter cinema, capable of redressing the misrepresentation of lesbian, bisexual, and queer (LBQ) women in films (Keller, 2021, Tobin 2020; Lindner, 2021). With close reference to the Nollywood film industry, Arurf Oluseyi argues that "No one can represent you and tell your story better than you can. Chances are you will help others and yourself in the process. And I think queer people are aware of this and lately, they have been creating some content for short films and feature-length films" (cited in Desmond, 2020, para 17).

Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer Women in the Nigerian Imaginary

Like the other members of the LGBTQ+ communities, Nigerian LBQ women are seriously marginalized in their society of origin. The prevalence of religion and conservatism in the country has fueled homophobia as well as the social exclusion of LBQ women in both glaring and subtle ways. In effect, the dominant religions of the country—namely Christianity and Islam—strongly frown at concepts or practices which are counter to hetero-normativity. These religions inform the legislative and administrative systems and many other myths governing local cultures and human industries in Nigeria. In tandem with this, lesbians and queer women are popularly regarded as pariahs and social deviants. They are often ostracized, stigmatized, shamed, blackmailed, threatened, harassed, arrested, and compelled to live in hiding. The precarious situation compels Nigerian LBQ women to only frequent gay-only bars, clubs, houses of activists, or openly gay churches—such as Lagos-based House of Rainbow—which cater to them (Human Dignity Trust, 2014; Kaleidoscope Diversity, 2014; Alimi et al., 2017; Desmond, 2020).

The literature is even replete with studies on cases of LBQ women who were disowned or abandoned by their respective families because of their sexual identities/orientations (Nelson, 2020; Unoma 2020, 2011; Kelleher, 2021). Various surveys conducted by both local and international institutions from 2014 to 2018 indicate that levels of acceptance of male and female homosexuals in Nigeria have increased, but they still remain seriously low. Since 2014 the rate of acceptance has been below 10 percent of the population (The Initiative for Equal Rights, 2014; Nwauboni, 2017; Alimi et al., 2017; Home Office, 2019).

In the minds of most Nigerians, a lesbian, bisexual, or queer woman is either an ungodly, westernized, or mentally ill person. In line with the popular fantasy, LBQ women are westernized because homosexuality is popularly believed to be an un-African or un-Nigerian identity. In a letter expressing support for the Nigerian Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act of 2013, the former Primate of the Anglican Church in Nigeria Akinola J. Peter, captures this popular belief. He writes: "Same sex marriage apart from being ungodly is also unscriptural, unnatural, unprofitable, unhealthy, uncultural, un-African. It is a perversion, a deviation and an aberration that is capable of engendering moral and social holocaust in this country [Nigeria]" (Republic of Nigeria, 2013, p. 5).

In the same line of argument, lesbian, bisexual, and queer women are likely to be viewed as possessed. In the Nigerian popular imagination, they are women whose spiritual and physical sickness warrants the prompt intervention of God or a divinely-assisted curative method. It is common to find religious leaders and other social arbiters who prescribe prayers, exorcism, and spiritual deliverance for the “health recovery” of lesbian, bisexual, and queer women (Unoma, 2020; Nelson, 2020; Religion Watch, 2019). To such religious leaders, only divine assistance can deliver a lesbian, bisexual, or queer woman from her critical situation. Religion Watch (2019) identifies the above mentioned tendency in a Lagos-based progressive church called Tribe Lagos Church. Religion Watch (2019) writes that:

[The Tribe’s] conversations about homosexuality have often played out “via correctional undertones and are sometimes avoided altogether.” When asked about the Tribe’s stance on L.G.B.T.Q. issues, the pastor said that while the church will not exclude gays or pray against them, he encourages his congregants to be open to the possibility to becoming straight when they encounter teachings from the Bible (p. 3).

Besides these religion-based approaches to “curing” lesbianism, more muscular remedies are often suggested. One of such remedies is corrective rape. In line with this, the phenomenon of corrective rape against lesbians has progressively become a popular practice in Nigeria (Oriye 2019; MacMillan & Liz, 2020). A study conducted by Oriye (2019) suggests that 42.9 percent of LBQ women in Nigeria have experienced violence as a result of their sexuality. Of those, more than half (57 percent) have experienced sexual violence. Perpetrators of this corrective rape range from victims’ own relatives to forces of law and order saddled with the responsibility to enforce anti-gay legislations. In tandem with this, Abiodun and colleagues (2020) observe that corrective rape is a tactic used by police who target lesbians and other members of LGBTQ+ communities in Nigeria.

All the above mentioned forms of social exclusion and marginalization against LBQ women, however, are incongruent with the number of same-sex marriage systems tolerated in traditional Nigeria. In effect, empirical evidence suggests that same-sex marriages and homosexual practices have been part of specific Nigerian traditional cultures such as the Yoruba, the Igbo, and the Efik respectively of Southwestern, Eastern and Southeastern Nigeria (Igwe 2009; Onuche, 2013; Olugbenga, 2018; Egun, 2018). Among the Efik people for instance, there have been the two cultures of female-husband marriage and woman-to-woman marriage. The two phenomena are contexts in which a married woman who is barren or faces childbearing challenges is allowed by the culture of the land to marry another woman with the prospect that the latter will bear children for her husband. A number of commentators have argued that the female-husband and woman-to-woman marriages—also observed in many other African cultures—can be associated with lesbianism (Olugbenga, 2018). However, scholars such as Oyedotun and Akinlade (2016) make a nuanced distinction between the two forms of same-sex relationships. They argue that

African female-husband and male-daughter practices are different from the woman-to-woman marriages or lesbianism practiced in the Western world. Whereas the African practices are to enable the people who face challenges in child bearing, the lesbianism practiced in the Western world and elsewhere is mainly for sexual satisfaction. (Oyedotun & Akinlade, 2016, p. 22).

Conservatism and the Representation of Lesbian, Bisexual and Queer Women in Nollywood Films

As earlier mentioned, Nigeria is popularly viewed as a very conservative society. Religion—in the form of doctrinaire Christianity, Islam, and ancestral worship—in the country still strongly defines the most influential Nigerian social institutions including public administration, education, and cultural industries. In line with this, religious movements continue to be strong opinion molders, social arbiters, and sensorial forces in the Nigerian cultural and entertainment sub-sectors. In fact, it is common to come across media criticism of products of the entertainment industry that are essentially based on Christian or Islamic dogmas. Cinematic or musical productions which dare to question or deconstruct core precepts of Christianity or Islam usually generate serious controversies in the country. Such productions are bound to face the fury of religious movements or puritanical social arbiters including media regulatory bodies (Servant, 2003; Endong, 2021). A case in point is Judith Opara's soft porn movie titled *Destructive Instinct* which generated much controversy in Nigeria from 2014-2015. Critics focused on the explicit scenes of the film to label the film's director an ungodly and unrepentant harlot (Endong, 2021). The situation described above has made expression of pro-LGBTQ+ sentiments in the Nollywood industry a taboo or an issue to be treated with contempt.

In line with Nigerian homophobic legislations and religious popular cultures, Nollywood cineastes have mostly represented homosexuality and members of the LGBTQ+ communities in a negative light. Homosexual characters are most often depicted as people who are spiritually or mentally deranged. Some films depict them as people who need spiritual and medical assistance or are problematically westernized. These stereotypes are in line with local Nigerian Islamic and Christian religious doctrines and movements which oppose same sex marriages or relationships.

Homosexuality is a marginalized topic in the Nollywood film industry, and films which attempt to depict non-heterosexual sexualities are very rare (Lasisi, 2016; Green-Simms, 2012). The few films that even explore the phenomenon are subtly homophobic and relatively myopic in their definition of homosexuality and queerness. Such homosexual-oriented films make their gay or lesbian characters minor features of their storylines or simply relay all the gloomy social representations of queerness in Nigeria. This is true to movies such as *Pregnant Hawkers* (2013), *Strippers in Love*, *Dirty Secrets* (2010), Moses Ebere's *Men in Love* (2010), Nwandu's *Rag Tag* (2006), and Oduwa's *Emotional Crack* (2003). In line with this, Nollywood homosexual-oriented films most often depict homosexuality (or anything outside hetero-normativity) as the influence of occult and satanic powers. Thus, lesbianism, bisexual, and queer identities are portrayed as reprehensible abominations that constitute a social problem emanating from the rapid westernization of Nigerian society (Lyonga, 2014; Green-Simms, 2012).

In *Men in Love* (2010) and *Emotional Crack* (2003), for instance, homosexuals are mainly portrayed as sex-driven maniacs or opportunist harlots who represent serious dangers to heterosexual couples as well as threats to the social/natural order. *Emotional Crack* in particular recounts the story of a couple whose marriage is ruined by a lesbian who succeeds in seducing the wife. The film's director conveys the message that lesbians are lascivious women, driven by sex and money, who prey on emotionally unstable married women and ultimately ruin heterosexual marriages. In tandem with this, Desmond (2020) argues that most Nollywood films that feature homosexual characters tend to depict queer Nigerians as dangerous people who plan to destroy the sanctity of marriage and as beautiful people who no one wants to trust because they are always bent on turning their neighbors into queer people and destroying lives.

Thus, by giving an insignificant attention to homosexuality and by negatively representing Nigerian homosexuals, Nollywood films and directors have given the impression that the plight of gays and lesbians in Nigeria is not important and that they are quasi-invisible entities. Another problematic impression given by the under-representation of lesbian, bisexual, and queer Nigerian women in Nollywood is that the Nigerian LGBTQ+ people constitute a community which has no right to be part of the Nigerian culture.

In addition to the above, Nollywood actors tend to mostly view gay or lesbian roles in films as an oddity or a risk to avoid at all costs. As noted by Hoad (2013), “it is difficult to get Nollywood stars—many of whom are happy to air the anti-gay views that much of the country’s devout population share—to play gay, which is sometimes left to Ghanaian actors further out on the fringe of the industry.” In an interview granted to the Nigerian tabloid *Vanguard*, Nollywood actress Queeneth Hilbert aired such popular homophobic views when talking about the presumed emergence of lesbianism in the Nollywood film industry. She opined that: “Most of the girls who engage in this act [lesbianism or the acceptance of lesbian roles] are not in Nollywood to act, they are just there to cause trouble. They are all over the place but I don’t think they are there to work” (Onikoyi, 2013).

The few Nollywood actors who accept homosexual roles resent the possible reactions of the public. The dominant belief is that accepting to play a gay or lesbian role may earn one stigmatization and shaming from fans or the general public. In line with this, most of the actors who take such roles are new faces in the industry or entities who are inclined towards avant-garde cinema. A case in point is Promise Amadi who played the role of Bobby, a broken-hearted gay in *Men in Love*. Amadi was just making his debut in Nollywood. In an interview granted to the online tabloid *No String Nigeria*, he reveals the fear he had when he accepted to play a gay role in *Men in Love*: “To tell you the truth, I was a bit concerned about what the outcome will be, particularly about how I would be perceived, especially in a country where homosexuality is considered a taboo. But I was new in the industry and wanted to try something challenging too” (Deamon, 2018, p. 7).

However, all the above mentioned realities are contradictory to recent rumors that a good number of Nollywood filmmakers are gays and lesbians. The popular discourse on sexual harassment and sex in exchange for roles in the Nollywood industry is characterized by stories purporting that homosexuality has progressively and perceptibly become rampant in the industry. In an interview with the Nigerian online tabloid *Premium Times*, Paul Obazele, a former president of the Association of Movie Producers in Nigeria, claimed that the Nollywood film industry is dominated and even ruled by gays and lesbians:

I would not lie, we have gay producers and lesbians in the Nigerian entertainment industry and they are the people in control. Why are we hiding it? When I was president of the Association of Movie Producers, I was against them. Why are we pretending that it does not happen? If you mention the names of some producers, I would gladly tell you if they are gay or not; they cannot do anything to me. If they bring a war to me, I would take it to their doorsteps. (Premium Times, 2018).

In the same line of thought, Nollywood film producer and director Mildred Okwo notes that there is a high probability that Nollywood will be seriously queered in the near future (Desmond, 2020). When this happens, the Nollywood film industry will definitely support the

LGBTQ+ rights movement through better filmic representations of queer Nigerians. Okwo notes that “a lot of young people that are gay and lesbian are living their lives and I think if that continues to happen, writers will write about what is happening around them [...] that being the case, there will be a more positive representation [of queer Nigerians in Nollywood films]” (Desmond, 2020, p. 15).

Be that as it may, apart from the likes of Bisi Alimi and Ikpe-Etim, homosexuals in the industry have hardly come out to their compatriots or initiated pro-LGBTQ+ cinematic projects. This situation has continued to give the impression that the Nollywood film industry is still dominated by heterosexual people and relatively homophobic filmmakers. Thus, films like Ipke-Etrim’s *Ife* are very rare examples of cinema-driven initiatives in favor of homosexuality or LGBTQ+ communities in Nigeria.

Ikpe-Etim’s *Ife* as a Counter-Hegemonic Movement

Ife, which means love in the Yoruba language of Nigeria, is a romantic comedy shot and released in July 2020. Produced by Adie and directed by Uyaiedu Ikpe-Etim, the film recounts the story of two young women, Ife and Adaora, who fall in love with one another after a 3-day date but have to surmount the current of homophobia and queerphobia that rules the society in which they live. Released only online, the film casts Cindy Amadi as Adaora and Uzoamaka Uniunoh as Ife. The film explores the many issues associated with lesbianism in a country like Nigeria as well as the social strictures lesbians need to confront in their quotidian lives. The film is also said to be the very first full-fledged lesbian film in the history of Nollywood. Thus, *Ife* came to correct an old age homophobic tradition in Nollywood: the tendency of directors and film producers to not give the plight of Nigerian LGBTQ+ communities a modicum of attention or to downplay their agency in the social and political life of the country.

As noted above, early Nollywood films that dealt with the issue of homosexuality in Nigeria have tended to do so in a manner that demonizes LGBTQ+ communities. Ikpe-Etim’s film seeks to correct these representations by depicting lesbianism as positive and a culture which possesses humanity. This is done by associating the name of her lesbian characters with positive values; for instance, *Ife* means love. The cineaste also challenges gloomy Nollywood representations of Nigeria lesbians by portraying same-sex romance as an experience which is as normal as heterosexual romance. In one of the film’s scenes the two protagonists have a love chat while lying in bed. This conversation is used by the cineaste to depict lesbian relationships as a normal and very natural occurrence. Recounting her experience with coming out to her family, Ife says “I told my mum first, took her about a week to come to terms with it,” and Adaora replies humorously, “Which is short for a Nigerian mother!” Adaora then asks Ife as they cuddle, “Is it too soon to say I might be in love with you?” to which Ife answers, “We are lesbians, this is the perfect time” (Ikpe-Etim, 2020).

Ife as a Tool for the LGBTQ+ Rights Movement in Nollywood

For years there has been a need for Nollywood to serve as a medium of expression for sexual minorities. Ikpe-Etim’s film appears to be a response to this need and a form of overt activism in favor of the LGBTQ+ community. The activist dimension of the film project is clearly revealed first by the professional experience and sexual orientation of the film’s producer and director. Producer Pamela Adie is a LGBTQ+ rights activist and founder of the LGBTQ+ rights organization Equality Hub while director Ikpe-Etim is a lesbian. In other words, the film is the

handwork of two female LGBTQ+ right activists bent on breaking stereotypes and provoking social change in favor of Nigerian LGBTQ+ people.

In various interviews, the two women expressed their strong desire not only to represent the voice of the voiceless Nigerian LGBTQ+ people but also to be the image makers of marginalized sexualities in the country. Producer Pamela Adie unequivocally told the Nigerian online tabloid *Pulse* in one interview that *Ife* is actually just part of the pro-LGBT right activism she has been conducting under the banner of her NGO called Equality Hub (Nwogu, 2020).

In the same line of thought, Director Ikpe-Etim expressed her ambition to echo the voice of the LGBTQ+ people and ultimately improve their image through *Ife*. She suggests that the act of laundering the image of LGBTQ+ people in Nigeria implies the deconstruction of all the anti-gay stereotypes that have long persisted in Nigerian society. She concedes that:

As a film director and storyteller, I understand how storytelling can be used positively or negatively. I'm always concerned with how stories can be used to build up or to destroy [...] I wanted to create something that would restore the dignity of LGBT+ people in Nigeria. Something they could be proud of. I wanted them to see themselves represented as regular humans who fall in love, who have their hearts broken, who break hearts, who love their families etc. Just regular people, who exist, who matter and who deserve to have their stories told. We are pretty much saying with this film, 'we are queer, we are here and we are proud' (cited in Olaoluwa, 2020, p.93).

Part of the marginalization of LGBTQ+ people in Nigeria has consisted of denying them personhood and agency as well as their right to exist as queer people. This has partly been done not only through homophobic legislations and various vigilante systems but more insidiously through Nollywood films that represent Nigerian LGBTQ+ people as less than human, or possessed people who need divine intervention to regain or gain their humanity. Denial of personhood has also been done through Nollywood film directors' tendency to accord very little attention to the LGBTQ+ plight and movement in Nigeria. This has contributed to creating what a number of social scientists call the "invisibility" of LGBTQ+ people. Literary critic Adrienne Rich (1984) explains how this invisibility may be damaging for some social minorities:

Invisibility is a dangerous and painful condition... When those who have power to name and to socially construct reality choose to not see you or hear you.... when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. Yet you know you exist and others like you, that this is a game with mirrors. (p. 199)

By bringing the agency, personalities, and plight of Nigerian LGBTQ+ people to the forefront, the two filmmakers push for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in Nigerian popular narratives, thereby helping to increase awareness and acceptance of diversity in broader Nigerian society. As Springate (2016) observes, "Seeing oneself as part of the story, as part of history, is important to feeling like part of a society—a sense of cultural belonging" (p. 13-14). In an interview with the US television network CNN, Ikpe-Etim confirms the above observation: "I

wanted to represent LGBTQ characters in a different light than how they are shown in past stories, to change how heterosexuals view them” (Kelleher, 2021, p. 15).

Heterosexual Nigerians are just one of Ikpe-Etim and Adie’s targets. If the filmmakers seek to change straight Nigerians’ mentalities in favor of lesbianism, they don’t neglect or overlook the imperative to sensitize LBQ Nigerians towards accepting their sexualities. In an interview with the British broadcaster BBC, Ikpe-Etim explains that “before now, we have been told one-sided stories. What we are doing with this film is normalizing the queer experience, we are normalizing the LGBT romance. It will begin to erase that shame that LBQ [lesbian, bisexual and queer] women face” (Olaoluwa, 2020, p. 24). Thus, the lesbian cineaste’s activism is both directed at Nigerian heterosexuals and LGBTQ+ communities.

Ife as a Conversation on Lesbianism and Feminism in Nigeria

At first sight, *Ife* could be viewed only as a LGBTQ+ film that advocates in favor of the Nigerian LGBTQ+ community. However, a second look at the film reveals that the film’s director and producer were interested in starting a conversation on lesbianism from a feminist standpoint. At least two elements in the film can help illustrate the director’s feminist standpoint. The first of these elements is Ikpe-Etim’s use of what could be called a lesbian rather than a male gaze in a number of intimate scenes in the film. In theory, the lesbian gaze is a subset of the female gaze (Tobin 2010). It consists in constructing a film with lesbian viewers in mind and departing from the culture of seeing or representing female characters from the libidinal position of the heterosexual male spectator. According to Bendix, the lesbian gaze entails “validating the way women see and experience being seen by another woman” (Bendix, 2020, p. 6). The gaze is not necessarily of a sexual nature, as it may be illustrated “in scenes of sibling bonding (*Tomboy*)...intergenerational underground abortions (*Portrait of a Lady on Fire*), and female friendships that turn into chosen family (*Girlhood*)” (Bendix, 2020, p. 6). Thus, the lesbian gaze enables queer or lesbian filmmakers “celebrate[e] and interrogat[e] women’s relationships through a distinctly queer, feminist lens” (Bendix 2020, p.6).

In *Ife*, Ikpe-Etim deploys the lesbian gaze by making her two lesbian characters (Ife and Adaobi) look romantically and seductively at each other in most of the intimate and date scenes. In many of such scenes, the two lesbian women look at each other with profound desire and shots of their facial expressions are artfully used by the director to suggest that the two lesbian women do not only view each other as desirable partners but also consider their respective bodies as sexually attractive. In the opening scene of the film for instance, Ife is shown watching the attractions of her own body in the mirror with admiration and satisfaction. The facial expression she exhibits in the scene suggests that she views her body as being sexy enough to be desired by the visitor (Adaobi) she is about to receive. In many other scenes in the film, the two protagonists look at each other’s physical endowments with strong desire. This technique helps the director to depart from the widespread depiction of women as sex objects for men. It also helps the director show to viewers—irrespective of sexes and genders—the complexity of lesbian intimacy and express the fact that sensuality in a lesbian relationship is located far deeper. This sensuality goes beyond the simple act of touching and looking at each other.

The second index of Ikpe-Etim’s feminist standpoint is seen in the fact that she specifically focused on the stories/predicament of women in the queer community in Nigeria. And besides the depiction of Nigerian lesbians’ plight, they sought to emphasize the deconstruction of the multiple negative stereotypes of women in Nollywood films. Adie Pamela clearly reveals this ambition when she confides that:

We chose to make this film because of the dearth (if any at all) of stories centered on the realities of lesbian, bisexual and queer women in Nigeria. LBQ women are mostly portrayed as people to be assaulted, or the object of the male gaze and gratification, and even ridiculed. We have been portrayed as people to be feared, “cured,” “treated,” etc., and it is time for this to change. We are taking our power back and telling our stories by ourselves. We wanted to show Nigerians a little part of our lived realities and what it means to be lesbian in Nigeria (Nwogu, 2020, p. 7).

In effect, Nollywood filmmakers have entrenched patriarchal and heteronormative culture not only by objectifying Nigerian women in their movies but also by representing a long list of negative stereotypes based in gender bias. Some of the awful stereotypes include the *femme fatale*, the gold digger, the housewife and women as objects of sacrifice, violence, or ritual practices. In line with this, Nollywood movies have often represented lesbians as women who are objectified firstly because they are women and secondly because they are non-heterosexual. In other words, Nigerian LBQ women are often doubly objectified on the bases of their gender and sexual identities or orientations.

In *Ife*, women are instead represented as people who take their future into their hands and who can bravely confront the homophobic strictures of their society and ultimately forge a path for themselves. This is a deconstruction of the popular demeaning representation of lesbians in the Nigerian cinema. Besides breaking the age-old negative stereotypes of Nigerian women, the film could be considered an attempt to reverse the under-representation of women in Nigerian cinema. This underrepresentation has long been partially responsible for the stereotyping and misrepresentation of Nigerian women in the industry. According to the feminist film theory, films made by women are potentially a strong pillar of the fight against the misrepresentation or stereotyping of women in films. This observation follows from the fact that women-driven filmmaking gives women the opportunity to (re)write their story by themselves and challenge their demeaning representations in the medium. In the Nollywood film industry, there have been a number of women film directors who have applied the principles of feminist film theory in their movies. A case in point is Genevieve Naji who, in her film *Lion's Heart*, has sought to deconstruct popular myths that Nigerian women are just housewives, *femme fatales*, objects of sacrifice, or gold diggers. Similar to Genevieve Naji, Ekpi-Etim depicts Nigerian lesbians as women who hold none of these popular negative stereotypes.

That *Ife* is produced and directed by two openly lesbian filmmakers is a sign that feminist LGBTQ+ women are progressively seeing the need to challenge homophobic and patriarchal representations in Nollywood films. This development may be applauded by LGBTQ+ and feminist activists. However, this same development is paradoxically banal and not really spectacular, if one considers the fact that a marginalized subculture or minority group will naturally be inclined towards countering hegemonies that work against its interests. In other words it may be expected that a lesbian filmmaker would leverage her film to attempt a reversal of the homophobic representations of her sexual identity in cinema. The queer activism of *Ife*, however, is not yet bought up by the majority of Nollywood filmmakers. And unless straight Nollywood filmmakers fully embrace the paradigm of ameliorating the representation of LGBTQ+ women in their films, films like *Ife* will continue to be popularly viewed as the work of a forward-thinking but unrealistic cineaste. For the moment, most Nollywood filmmakers are anxious about

portraying sexual minorities as a normal part of Nigerian society, rather than how they are typically viewed by conservatives. As put by Okwo:

Nollywood rarely is forward-thinking [...] People rarely realize they can create worlds with movies and create them as they want them to be. So when we have people that are more creative, that are forward-thinking, that look into the future and see what will be in the future and depict them in films today, then we'll have more positive LGBTQ+ representation (Desmond, 2020, p. 17).

Therefore, Nigerian heterosexual filmmakers need to join the pro-lesbian film movement for it to be popular and impactful. Such a development will definitely correct the impression that lesbian friendly films such as *Ife* are more than a queer-only movement.

Conclusion

The Nollywood film industry has long been a homophobic and straight-dominated industry. Inspired by anti-gay laws and a host of homophobic stereotypes, the industry's films have mostly misrepresented the Nigerian LGBTQ+ community. These films have mainly othered LGBTQ+ people by depicting them as less than human and un-Nigerian. Besides this, the industry has so far given very little attention to the LGBTQ+ people's plight. This insidious marginalization has thus created a situation of invisibility for this minority community. All these factors have made Ikpi-Etim's film *Ife*—which is devoted to lesbianism in Nigeria— an important initiative. In effect, *Ife* inaugurates a culture where openly lesbian filmmakers appropriate the film medium to fight for their rights in Nigeria.

This paper has argued that *Ife* not only contributes to the LGBTQ+ movement in Nigeria but also fuels the nation's feminist movement. The film deconstructs various negative stereotypes against lesbians and challenges the misrepresentation and underrepresentation of women in Nollywood. It is grounded in feminist film theory which stipulates that female filmmakers are great defenders of their rights, especially if they intelligently deploy the cinema medium to rewrite their stories or participate in the construction of popular narratives about them.

It should however be emphasized that the gender, profession, and sexual orientation of the film's director and producer could represent some weaknesses for the film. Given the fact that the producer is a LGBTQ+ rights activist and the director is a lesbian, one gets the impression that *Ife* is just what the Bible refers to when it evokes the natural law by which a species can only give birth to its own kind.² In other words, *Ife* is the logical and much expected fruit a lesbian and LGBTQ+ right activist will bear. The sexual orientation, gender, and activist profession of Pamela Adie and Ipki-Etim subtly suggest that only LGBTQ+ filmmakers or activists devoted to the LGBTQ+ rights movement may show interest in the plight of homosexuals in Nigeria. This impression can only be dissipated if an increasing number of straight Nigerian cineastes join Ipki-Etim in her movement. Therefore, there is a need for an increase in the number of straight Nigerian cineastes who represent LGBTQ+ people positively in their films.

² In Mathew 7:16, the Christian Bible alludes to the law of nature by which a species can only give birth to its kind. It says “[...] Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?” I relate this analogy to the circumstances leading to the production of *Ife* to say that Pamela-Adie and Ikpe-Etim's film is just the fruit one will expect from a lesbian and an LGBT right activist.

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