

Chapter 10

Documenting Nigeria's Social and Cultural History Through Cinema: A Study of Biyi Bandele's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Kunle Afolayan's *October 1*

Floribert Patrick C. Endong
University of Calabar, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

*In recent times, cinema has emerged as an alternative technology to document reality. This could be seen in the fact that both fictional and non-fictional films are increasingly deployed to chronicle various aspects of history. In the Nigerian moving pictures industry (Nollywood), this paradigm could be illustrated by the recent release of historical epic movies such as Lancelot Imasuen's *Invasion 1897*, Jeta Amata's *Black November*, Biyi Bandele's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and Kunle Afolayan's *October 1*, among others. Drawing on this relatively old trend, this chapter examines the extent to which some of Nollywood epic films are "trustworthy" records of Nigerian history. The chapter begins by examining the controversy over the nature of film as a historical document in its own right. It goes further to exploring the issue of historical film making in Nollywood and ends with a reading of Biyi Bandele's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Kunle Afolayan's *October 1* as forms of historical films.*

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INTRODUCTION

The act of documenting reality (people, places and events) has always been a central aspect of all human cultures. This is connected to the fact that the documentation of human experiences (particularly history and cultural heritage) does not only represent an excellent tool for cultural heritage preservation, but “a way of valuing people around the world who rightly want to see their unique expressions and identities recognized and valued as part of the human record” (SIL 2016). Thus, from time immemorial, man has designed various approaches to recording his activities in a realistic form; this has been in view of making them (these activities) rememorized from generations to generations. These approaches to documenting reality have been plural and formidable, ranging from the cave drawings done by early men to the ultra-modern audiovisual recording techniques.

In recent times, cinematography has emerged as a premium way of documenting events and people. Critical observations actually reveal that, all around the world, cinematically documented history has become a key instrument to safeguard traditions as well as a source of creativity among various ethnographic filmmakers (Camp 2006). Many visual anthropologists, ethnographers and culture conservation experts likewise construe the cinematic medium as being particularly valuable and important when it comes specifically to documenting both tangible and intangible culture (Engbrecht 2015; Hamar & Volanska 2015; Tari 2015). This may be attributed to the fact that the medium is a powerful visual source. In effect, through the use of the camera, a realistic rendition of history and cultural heritage may be done.

The cinematic genres which have mostly been used for this documentation purpose have been the non-story films (otherwise called documentary films) and alternatively, docudrama. This has principally been due to their non-fictional nature. However, in recent times, a number of schools of thought have underlined the potential of even story films (feature and epic films) to document history and socio-cultural heritage. In tandem with this, specific genres such as the historical epic films have been explored by some producers to record the socio-cultural heritage and political history of specific people and societies; or to simply preserve selected historical literature. Nigerian film producer Lancelot Imasuen underlines feature films' potential to record history when he notes that good or true epic films in particular do not only attempt to thrill viewers or audiences and to show them exotic landscapes. Rather, they most importantly deal with themes that are of historical, national, religious, or legendary importance. Such filmic productions use “an elevated style to celebrate heroic accomplishments” (cited in School of Media and Communication Studies, 2014). Some of these films are based on true historical events and serious ethnographic research. On these grounds, they often have strong elements of f/actuality. Others are purely fictional and though they sometimes muddle historical facts for the purpose

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