

## **Nigerian video-films on History: *Love in Vendetta* and the 1987 Kano riots**

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This paper considers a Nigerian video-film from 1996, *Love in vendetta*, featuring Zach Orji and inspired by the 1987 Kano riots, one of the many incidences of violent clashes between Christians and Muslims in the 1980s, which resulted in thousands of deaths, injuries and arrests. This Nigerian adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* presents two lovers: an Igbo man and a Hausa girl, who plan their marriage in the midst of strong family opposition on both sides. They eventually discover that their parents' attitude is the result of deep scars left by the 1987 Kano riots and bloodshed. Love eventually prevails, sending a message of hope to the whole country and heralding a time when ethnic and religious differences would be part of the Federation's rich cultural heritage.

### **Mid-way between reality and fiction**

This is the very plausible story of two young people in love, just back from abroad with all it takes to start a successful life back home, who try and translate their dreams and plans into reality but soon realise that these do not match their families' expectations. They then try persuading their fathers, in vain, and discover in the process that the two families' close friendship of old has been destroyed by a dramatic event linked to the past. Bent on building their life on their dream, they are left to struggle and, unable to get employed in spite of their credentials and certificates, as their parents' partners feel reluctant to help, resort to desperate solutions. Finally, in the nick of time, a few helpful intermediaries intervene, offer a much needed support to the couple and help the two families to come together again; the root cause of the families' feud is eventually found and dealt with, a baby arrives and all ends well for both parents and children. This 1996 video film places the young couple centre stage, offering viewers a few occasions to share their moments alone: in the taxi which brings them back from the airport, discussing their first impressions of Lagos; in their parents' home, sharing their hopes of family acceptance and fear of possible last minute glitch; on the phone, encouraging each other; in a friend's place, enjoying a short moment of tender intimacy. They already form a close-knit unit, which will only be strengthened by the obstacles they will meet on the way. Their being thrown from affluence into acute poverty and unemployment, their having to live in a cramped, bare room after basking in luxury, their losing their last, hard-earned money at the hands of armed robbers – nothing will discourage them.

Foreign viewers could have regarded this couple as a lone, independent entity. Yet for those awaiting their return home, Uche (Zack Orji) and girlfriend Zaynab (Kate Henshaw) were rather individual members sent on a communal agenda and now expected to fit back into the family programme. The film painstakingly follows genuine efforts made by all parties to fit the puzzle together again, and presents a corporate story, in which individuals are not free to think or operate on their own. There is no place for the individual in such a setting. As noted by Malkmus (1991: 210-212), "the space, set and group structure of African film narrative operate at a collective level" and "the protagonist is necessarily defined by his or her relationship to the community". Uche and Zaynab's postgraduate studies were primarily designed to equip them to fit into their parents' plan. While Zaynab's father starts planning to seal his business partnership with the marriage of his daughter with his friend's son Idris, just back from Germany, Uche's chat with his Dad reveals that his degrees in business administration and International relations were clearly intended to enable him gradually take

over his father's business.<sup>1</sup> Even though the couple's abroad experience, which brought them together, has equally given them a new western-inspired agenda – Uche had already 'proposed' and got an encouraging response from Zaynab, their return definitely marks their coming back into the fold, their reintegrating their family and cultural circles for good.

On reaching home, the two present their parents with their plans to marry and initially receive a lukewarm response that introduces viewers to the film's historical agenda. Zaynab's father is mostly concerned with the fact that Uche is "a kafir, an infidel" whose involvement with his daughter will damage his reputation as the Dan Kano, and an Igbo whose culture he considers as very different from his own. Uche's mother is worried that her Hausa daughter-in-law may not welcome her on visit. This part of the film also introduces viewers to the two families' home: the Dan Kano, a quiet and mature leader and his two subdued and romantic wives who readily support Zaynab's dreams; and the Ikemefunas, a couple sharing equal influence on each other. The film equally reveals both men as caring but authoritative fathers, and the two houses as very similar, projecting both breadwinners as successful, affluent businessmen.

In a bid to persuade their parents and advance their cause, Uche and Zaynab share their views on life and try to persuade their parents. They consider themselves well prepared for a life together: Uche grew up in Kano where his parents had settled like many other Igbo businessmen, schooled there, got friends there, knows the Hausa better than his own people and even speaks some Hausa. As for Zaynab, she too has Igbo friends, knows some Igbo, and Uche considers her as "completely detribalised"; for her, neither tribe nor religion matter, and unity can only be preached through love, exemplified through intermarriage. The Dan Kano listens to his daughter and reassures her that he does not believe in tribal or religious discrimination either – an important side of his personality which will be confirmed later on; he only worries that she may not cope with "the ups and downs" of such a marriage. In the end, Alhaji Suleiman accepts to receive Uche and hints to his Hausa business partner, who tells him about the son's interest in Zaynab, that such a marriage would please him greatly, but that "children of nowadays have a mind of their own" and that he just waits for his daughter to bring the man of her choice.

At that point, the message of the film is that the children's agenda must meet with the parents' good will to be crowned with success, but nothing seems to threaten the young couple's plans. The later decision of the two fathers to disown their rebellious children has therefore devastating effects on their daily life and immediate future: as the story unfolds, with their future and that of their unborn child now at risk, Uche and Zaynab find themselves torn between two families at war with each other. The families' feud, accidentally brought to the fore by the unexpected meeting and subsequent engagement of their two children abroad, will have an enormous impact on Uche and Zaynab, their life and dream of a shared future.

### **The shadow of the past**

Uche brings Zaynab home to his parents and introduces her to them. They make her feel welcome and now seem happy with Uche's choice of bride. The couple then travel together to Kano to meet Zaynab's parents, who equally welcome Uche. While Zaynab and her father's wives chat happily upstairs, Alhaji Suleiman engages his prospective son-in-law into

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<sup>1</sup> This is further highlighted by the father's report about one of his friends' misfortune, caused by the son's decision to make his life in the States instead of coming back to support his father's business.

a broad exchange. They talk about the past: Suleiman explains that he built his house in 1978 when he was in government as Secretary of State. Uche on his part informs Suleiman that he is the only son of his parents, having lost his sister during the 1987 Kano riots, while he was in the US. The mention of this detail, whose importance he could not have gauged as someone who had been out of the country for quite a while, will cost him dearly. Suleiman expresses his condolences and asks about Uche's father. At this point, the situation suddenly takes a turn for the worse: as soon as Uche mentions his father's name, Alhaji Suleiman starts lamenting in Arabic and tells Uche: "it is not possible. No, no. Nothing personal. I like you but I will not give my consent to your marriage. You may leave now" before order the family's driver to take Uche back to town. Uche returns home in a fury, discloses the name and title of Zaynab's father to his Dad and asks him about the reason behind Suleiman's refusal. His father then exclaims: "that idiot! Wholehearted fool! I will never forget or forgive that man!" before adding that, had he known Zaynab's father's identity, he would have behaved the same way. The two lovers are now faced with their fathers' refusal and denied any explanation.

Viewers, on their part, have been given a clue, right at the beginning of the film and in a very unconventional way. Immediately after the appearing of the title on the screen, and before the presentation of the cast, history filled the screen with images - the silent, anonymous filming of streets littered with maimed and disfigured corpses, charred remains, burning churches and other buildings, thick plumes of smoke in the air, dilapidated structures, people packing their belongings into lorries, soldiers walking about, women running.<sup>2</sup> This real life document, titled: 'Kano Nigeria Religious Riots, 1987', was accompanied by a double subtitling in English and French<sup>3</sup> whose complete text follows:

What started as a little fracas has degenerated into utter breakdown of law and order. People allow their animal urge get the better of them. They burn, loot, maim and kill. Innocent people lose their lives, are maimed forever, physically and emotionally. They lose their beloved ones and properties that have taken a lifetime to acquire. Custodians of the law watch from vintage positions, pretending they are not watching, with hands tied. But as the inferno dies, and the gory carnage abates, leaving behind charred remains and ashes that are blown about as if nothing had happened, this day and this event that came with it are etched indelibly into the minds of people. People can forgive but may not forget. Only time and love can heal. In fact, love conquers even in vendetta.

Once this prologue done with, the film will neither make any reference to it, nor explain the reason behind this unexpected footage.

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<sup>2</sup> Producers of war films have sometimes been accused of « assembling useful film footage to make a point without unduly concerning themselves about the real origin of that footage" (Isenberg 1981: 27). In the case in point, it is obvious that the short video footage is the work of an amateur, most probably one of the civilians caught in the riot. Its anonymity and the absence of a definite location turn to be an advantage as it can then be used as representative of all such incidents.

<sup>3</sup> « Ce qui avait commencé comme une petite bagarre a dégénéré en dégradation complète de l'ordre public. Les gens permettent leur côté bestial triompher d'eux. Ils incendient, pillent, mutilent et assassinent. Des innocentes gens perdent la vie, sont à jamais estropiés de l'affectivité et physiquement. Ils perdent leurs bien-aimés et des biens acquis toute leur vie. Les gardiens de la loi observent, bien placés, tout ce qui se passe mais ils font semblant de ne rien voir, mains liées. Mais comme le brasier diminue et le carnage sanglant s'apaise, laissant derrière eux des restes humains carbonisés et des cendres que le vent disperse, comme si rien ne s'était passé, ce jour et cet événement qui est venu avec ça sont gravés ineffaçablement dans la mémoire de tout le monde. Les gens peuvent pardonner mais peuvent ne pas oublier. Rien que le temps et l'amour peuvent guérir les chagrins. En fait, l'amour vainc même dans la vendetta." All French subtitles were done by Zach Orji, who speaks French; note that there are grammar and spelling errors in the French subtitles.

For quite some time, in the film, both fathers will remain buried in their grief, refusing to talk about the events that shattered their lives and tore so deep into their souls that they could not even share their pain with their wives, as evidenced by the latter's inability to enlighten their children on the matter. Meanwhile, Uche, going over his chat with Alhaji Suleiman, eventually figures out that his father holds this man responsible for his sister's death in Kano, but it will take more than the young couple's plea to change the situation. Alhaji Suleiman has Uche put into police custody for harassing his daughter. Bailed out by his barrister friend who encourages him, saying he went through the same difficulties when courting his wife, Uche now disguises himself as a mallam selling baskets, goes into Zaynab's house and both elope. At that point, Uche's father has disowned him, and Zaynab's father does the same. They then go and marry in court, accompanied by a few friends, and start life together in Lagos, quietly relieved. Two months later, they are still looking for jobs and Zaynab is pregnant. Having lost the only money they had left at the hands of armed robbers, they go to their old family doctor to request for an abortion. The old doctor talks them out of it and offers Zaynab free antenatal care and delivery. He then tries in vain to reconcile the two fathers on the occasion of the hospital's anniversary.

After the baby girl's birth, the two mothers are called to visit and start chatting. At Zaynab's request, Uche's mother finally clarifies the reason for the feud between the two families. While Uche and Zaynab were in the US, in 1987, the Ikemefunas lived in Kano, where they rented one of Alhaji Suleiman's apartments. The two couples were good friends, and the two men did business together. Then riots started. She continues: "When the riot broke out, some religious militants came and told us that Alhaji Suleiman had told us to pack out of his house. We pleaded to no avail. By this time, the streets were burning. But they kicked us into it. We were not all lucky. So your sister Chichi and our houseboy, they both died in the riot. Since, my husband has not been able to forgive Alhaji Suleiman." Zaynab's mother shakes her head: "this is misinformation... The militants came and asked my husband to eject you from the house. He refused. They beat him to unconsciousness. They nearly killed him. When my husband came back from his unconsciousness, he looked for you but could not see you anywhere. He did not eat for two days because he felt so bad." Uche then laments: "what a waste!"

### **An unusual treatment of history**

At this point, it becomes evident that there is more to the film than a love story. *Love in vendetta*, a collage of real footage and fictional story, is indeed one of the very few Nigerian video films directly inspired by the ethnic-religious riots that have been plaguing Nigeria since 1945. To understand the purpose of the film, one must first consider film history worldwide, which offers many examples of cinematic treatment of conflicts, prompted by the search for fresh insights into their causes and impact on ordinary civilian lives. Nigeria's troubled history has been plagued and crippled by violent confrontations involving Muslims and Christians, usually sparked by seemingly insignificant local incidents or even, at times, reports from faraway places like Denmark or Israel. These then spread rapidly to neighbouring towns and villages and end up engulfing the whole region, resulting in important losses of both lives and properties. Between 1945 and 1967, several such riots occurred in northern Nigeria, affecting Kano, Jos and several other northern cities, claiming more than 50,000 lives. Such killings led, in 1966-67, to an Eastward mass exodus of Igbo people from all corners of the Federation that eventually brought about a three year- civil war. Since 1970, confrontations have once more become a recurrent feature, affecting the whole north and spreading to the Plateau area – internal Muslim in-fighting such as the

Maitatsine riots that claimed nearly 9,000 lives between December 1980 and 1984 (Harnischfeger 2008: 74), but more often clashes between Muslims and Christians, that reignite every so often. Usually, these hardly get aired on local radios, and only get known outside the federation when they are triggered by outside incidents like the Danish cartoons of the Prophet. Such pieces of Nigerian history remain buried.

The screening of such stories by the video film industry, targeting local audiences, can thus be viewed as an acknowledgement of the devastating effect of these confrontations, and, in the perceived absence of forthcoming offers of solutions, as a will to explore collective memories of past violence with what can be considered to be a broadly political agenda: an audiovisual contribution to the understanding of a recurring phenomenon, with the hope that this may lead to a better societal management of cultural diversity. As one experienced documentary director puts it:

I want to put my viewers in touch with historical reality. I want, using a certain artistry, to convey important ideas to people who know little of the subject.<sup>4</sup> I want to encourage the viewers to ask questions after the viewing. I want to tell a good story that will engage both the head and the intelligence, and the heart and the emotion. I want to put viewers in touch with the past in a way that academics can't do. I want to help them keep memories alive. And I want to recall a forgotten history or an overlooked piece of history that seems to me important (Rosenthal 2005, quoted in Rosenstone 2006:87).

Ethnico-religious clashes have often been hushed and most video-films have shied away from putting them on screen, for fear of inciting to even more violence. Orji's film offers viewers a unique occasion to relive the past and "watch history unfold before our eyes" (Rosenstone 2006: 11).

Since *Love in vendetta*, confrontations have continued unabated, with a difference: they are now reported on the Internet, with websites like *YouTube* joining the audiovisual concert. In 2000, for example, such a confrontation took place in Kaduna after Sharia was introduced, involving Christians and Muslims and claiming more than 2,000 lives. In 2002, new killings took place in the north, spreading southwards to Jos<sup>5</sup> and Makurdi following a controversial statement from a journalist at the occasion of a beauty contest.<sup>6</sup> Between May and April 2003, new clashes between Muslims and Christians claimed more than 6,000 lives in Plateau and Kano States.<sup>7</sup> Everywhere these confrontations leave the same carnage, the same devastation reported by *Love in Vendetta*: razed villages, schools and churches burnt down, streets littered with maimed and dismembered bodies, terrorised refugees fleeing south – here again, nothing new since 1997. On 18th May 2004, Obasanjo, then Nigeria's Head of State, acknowledged for the first time, in a TV conference, that Muslim-Christian riots now

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<sup>4</sup> Written in English, this film is primarily destined to an urban audience of Nigerians who may have heard about the riots but are most likely to know very little about its local impact if they were not directly affected. The French subtitles target a West African audience from neighbouring countries like Benin, Niger, Chad and Cameroun who is even less likely to be familiar with these events.

<sup>5</sup> Jos, headquarters of several missionary organisations established long before the Independence, has remained a predominantly Christian city.

<sup>6</sup> Religious violence erupted in Kaduna State after an article published on 16th November 2002 in the newspaper **This Day** hinted that the Prophet would have gladly married one of the Miss World competitors, due to take place in Abuja on the 7<sup>th</sup> December that year (UN 28 nov. 2002; Barnabas Fund 25 nov. 2002; BBC 24 nov. 2002; MET 22 nov. 2002). [http://www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/fr/recherche/rdi/index\\_f.htm?action=record.viewrec&gotorec=434051](http://www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/fr/recherche/rdi/index_f.htm?action=record.viewrec&gotorec=434051)

<sup>7</sup> Cf. France-échos, article from Y.Hamar dated Friday 14th May 2004, <http://www.coranix.org/archicoray/2004/05mai/864.htm>

threatened the whole country's civil peace.<sup>8</sup> In February 2006, after the publication of cartoons deemed hostile to the Prophet in Denmark, Reuters reported new killings in several Northern States, followed by bloody reprisals in several Igbo States and made news in the US and several European countries.<sup>9</sup> 2007 and 2008 saw new waves of killings.

Nigeria is renowned for its historians and many books have been published on the troubled history of the country. Films, it must be said, do not replace books: but given the difficulties surrounding book production and circulation in countries like Nigeria, "it is possible that such history on the screen is the history of the future" (Rosenstone 2006: 132). Films like *Love in Vendetta* take viewers through a different experience; they increase the impact of history on their audience through the blurring of boundaries between fiction and reality and propose personalised accounts which help viewers both get a better understanding of history and adhere more readily to the values upheld by the film as they share the protagonists' emotions and identify with them. Rosenstone once asked (2006:163): "what do we want from the past? Why do we want to know it?" *Love in vendetta* goes back to the root of ethnic and religious violence in a fictionalised, personalised way, showing the problems to be the result of a wrong reading/interpretation of the past.

### **A unifying agenda**

The film is both traditional and modern, and makes use of facts and stereotypes to push its agenda. The plausibility of the scenes in Kano, which tend to present a traditional view of Hausa life - polygamy, customary gender separation, men drinking *brukutu*<sup>10</sup> on mats and interspersing their talks with ejaculatory prayers in Arabic - while Igbo are shown bragging about their flashy cars, brings the story closer to real life. The reference to the Kano riots, killings and other relevant details, the mention of a bilingual community and friendly ties between Hausa and the immigrants, and the setting of Ikemefuna's business in that northern city where "many Igbo and Yoruba [...] established themselves in their new homeland as traders and craftsmen" (Harnischfeger 2008: 66), all reinforce the move towards the historical agenda of the film. As noted by Wilke (1997: 181): "if these videos address a cosmopolitan 'modern' urban subject, then Muslim Hausa are the internal other against which that modernity is imagined. Hausa cosmopolitanism, focused as it is on dynamics in the Muslim world more than in the West, is readily stigmatised as 'backward', 'traditional' and 'ignorant' in Southern Nigerian stereotypes." Although these stereotypes initially appear in the Ikemefuna's attitude, the portrait of Alhaji Suleiman would help viewers distance themselves from such prejudices: the Hausa elder is far more composed than his Igbo counterpart, and consistently presented as very moderate and accommodating. The story told by his wife will confirm his fidelity to his friend in the face of danger, and his commitment to his daughter's happiness. The Hausa women presented in the film: Zaynab's friend Hadiza - who plots with her and harbours Uche with her husband's support - and the Alhaji's wives who readily accept Uche, are all very positive characters.

The "distinctive African relationship between individual and group" (Malkmus 1991: 210) also forms an important part of the film, with Uche and Zaynab refusing to identify with their ethnic group, yet remaining committed to their parents. The move from ethnic groups to intercultural couples is presented as a solution to the nation's woes. Yet history has been written by groups, and neither individuals nor couples can, on their own, erase the scars: they

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.interet-general.info/article.php3?id\\_article=1442](http://www.interet-general.info/article.php3?id_article=1442)

<sup>9</sup> [http://blog.washingtonpost.com/worldopinionroundup/2006/02/cartoons\\_not\\_the\\_only\\_cause\\_of.html](http://blog.washingtonpost.com/worldopinionroundup/2006/02/cartoons_not_the_only_cause_of.html)

<sup>10</sup> a chocolate- coloured, faintly sour fermented drink made from sorghum

still need the groups' change of heart and blessing on their way. This film, though mostly Igbo in cast, definitely addresses the "pan-Nigerian, English-speaking urban subject" mentioned in Larkin (2003: 180). At a structural level, it combines historical flash-back and fictional elements to project a Nigerian agenda, unifying north and south as it brings together themes usually found in Hausa movies - those of love, "especially the tensions between arranged and love marriages" (Larkin 2003: 184) – and those of Igbo films – the high premium placed on graduate education abroad, the keenness on business ventures and the street violence.

A crucial element of this agenda is the young couple's Western education and long sojourn in the US, coming after the cross-cultural experience provided by a childhood in a multilingual, multicultural setting. The dilemma they face, to abort the child they love or keep her against all odds, is more than a detail in the story: the unborn child represents the nation's future, the new breed in the making, the fruit of a relationship that transcends faith and ethnic identity, who will be raised to feel at home anywhere in the Federation. This kind of future can only be delivered by those who have invested in it and are prepared to sacrifice to it, like the medical doctor. The treatment of space is an integral part of this agenda, shuttling viewers between Kano, the East and Lagos, with both families – Igbo and Hausa - eventually coming together on to a neutral platform and getting reconciled in Lagos, on Yoruba soil, an interesting metaphor of Nigerian unity. The film tracks the protagonists' difficult trajectories (delayed flights, traffic jams, journeys affected by armed gangs' activities) used as symbols of their struggle to extract themselves from ethnic and religious boundaries. The white-haired medical doctor married to a Yoruba embodies both traditional wisdom and modernity. Open-minded, forward-looking, he belongs to a new breed of Nigerians, sharing with the young Igbo barrister practising in Kano, who married a Hausa girl, and with the young couple at the centre of the story, a new outlook on life.

## Conclusion

After the mothers get involved in an accident on their way to market, the two men are finally brought back together to Ituah hospital, in Apapa, Lagos, where they reconcile, share their past experience for the first time and discover that they had falsely accused each other. Uche will have the last word: for him, "the problem of the country is not in tribe or religion or culture but that of a disgruntled few who can only achieve their aims in chaotic divided time. We cannot go any further if we do not learn to forgive and forget." One may disagree with such a view, but at least, *Love in vendetta* boldly brought the question to the fore and proved Barrot right: "the Nigerian video production [...] represents one of the most impressive manifestations of African freedom of speech [...]. Fiction allows one to tell truths which a journalist would have found very difficult to express" (2005:52).

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## **Filmography**

*Love in vendetta* (1996), a Zach Orji film, featuring Zach Orji, Kate Henshaw, Justus Esiri and Victor Decker. Producer: Zach Orji, Director: Chico Ejiro. Contech Ventures Ltd, 114mn  
Songs in the film:

1. Love in vendetta (Mike Nliam)
2. Everything will only get better (Zach Orji)