

ECO-HORROR FOR ECOLOGICAL CHANGE: REINVENTING NIGERIAN MYTH IN FILM

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Abstract

This work proposes that film is a veritable tool for social change and thus could be used for advocacy in addressing varied environmental issues in Nigeria with the aim of stimulating social change. Environmental havoc in Nigeria is largely associated with human activities ranging from bush burning, blockage of drainage systems, to industrial activities like oil exploration and deforestation. The degradation of the environment through human activities is a major developmental issue bedeviling the Nigerian society. The medium of film is conceived as a veritable tool for Communication for Development (C4D) that can help shape human interaction with the environment. Thus, the lacuna of how films of African extraction could be used to tell stories that can stimulate positive behavioral change towards environment is the major premise for this work. This paper proposes that in the primordial times, the Nigerian society advocated and preserved the ecosystem through mythic stories. These mythic stories were popular in many traditional societies to the extent that people referenced them when dealing with the environment. Thus, the reinvention of these mythic stories that served as watch dog for environmental preservation in the time past could be translocated into screenplay and consequently produced into an eco-horror film in recent times. This paper recommends that the translocation of African mythic stories into motion picture could be a veritable film genre that can stimulate positive changes in term of how human beings interact with the environment nowadays. This assumption is premised on the evidence that these stories are still potent in many Nigerian societies where supernatural powers are attributed to inanimate objects like rivers, mountains, trees, caves etc. and thus people are cautious in their interactions to avoid being hurt by these residual powers. The preservation of the ecosystem is part of UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This crux of this paper is in finding veritable approach for advocating for a green environment in Nigeria through the medium of film. The medium of film is popular and thus it could be used to reinvent mythic stories in places like Enugu state where mythic realities are still potent.

Keywords: Environment, Ecosystem, Degradation, Change, Development

Introduction

There are many developmental issues prevalent in Nigeria. These include gender issues, migration problems, obnoxious cultural practices, health issues, environmental issues to mention but a few. The focus of this paper is on environmental problems bedeviling Nigeria as a country. One of the

major ways of addressing developmental issues is through communication-based advocacy. According to Ezeaka et al (2025: 2), “A strategic communication approach is essential for addressing inequalities in Nigeria, advocating for evidence-based policies, and promoting sustainable practices especially in the healthcare to ensure no individual is left behind.” Development communication has been explored through the medium of film in addressing various issues on development. Sule & Adeyanju (2007:56) state that “One medium that has become very dominant in Nigeria's communication system and could be used for the realization of the reforms agenda is the Home Video (Nollywood) industry in Nigeria.”

Scholars have note that in Nigeria, ecological degradation is a pressing developmental issue as such requires urgent attention. Olusakin argues that in many parts of Nigeria, deforestation, gas pollution, oil exploration, spillage and industrialization take place unchecked and often times happen in contradiction to the laid rules. These abusive human activities result in environmental degradation and pollution of the ecosystem (2018:70). The collapse of the ecosystem in Nigeria is largely orchestrated by human activities such as deforestation, oil spillage caused by exploration of oil in the Niger Delta etc. Air, water pollution and global warming are mostly traced to unpredictable activities of man at various economic development stages, such as, the pre-industrial, industrial and services-driven stages (Ejuvbekpokpo, 2014). Despite governmental policies such as Conservation and Management of Natural Resources and Waste and Environmental Pollution policies targeted at curbing the constant violation of the ecology, ecological degradation is on a geometric increase in Nigeria yearly. According to John-Adegbesan and Nwaorgu (2021: 16) “the need to protect the natural environment, which may also be referred to as “the natural habitat”, is the determinant factor in the enactment and enforcement of environmental policies.” Unfortunately, the environmental protection policies in Nigeria seem not have functioned effectively in the protection of the ecosystem. This is because environmental deterioration has remained major setback Nigeria's health and economic growth. Environmental issues like deforestation; pollution, global warming, and inappropriate pesticide use are a few of these issues. Despite the environmental laws already encapsulated in the Nigerian constitution, it still appears that the nation is in degenerative state since these environmental regulations are not properly implemented (Odey 2023:91)

From the foregoing, it is evident that the ecosystem in Nigeria is continually being violated by human activities and therefore there is need to create awareness and lend voices in such a way that the principal actors involved in the violation of the environment might have a rethink. It is in view of this that the film medium is conceived as a tool for social behavioral change in relation to environmental preservation and safeguarding. Films are easy to understand and because appeals at the minds and hearts of audience. It could serve as veritable tools to advocate for the preservation and safeguarding of the ecological space in Nigerian (Anyanwu, 2023). Yet the question on how to use films for education on climate is what the research work addresses. How then can problematic Nigerian ecosystem be presented in motion picture narratives for purpose of stimulating positive human behavior towards the environment? This works tilts towards translocating primordial mythic stories that were used in ancient times as watchdog to preserve the environment into eco-horror film. These stories should appear as eco-horror films so as to present a dramatic experience capable of catharsis for the purpose of purgation of emotions of pity and fear.

Literature Review

Films can be used as tool for communication development (C4D) and as such can stimulate social behavioral change towards the environment in many climes. Alexa Weik von Mossner (2014) in her essay, “Melodrama, Emotion, and Environmental Advocacy: A Cognitive Approach to Erin Brockovich” uses the analytical tools of cognitive film theory to explore the ways in which *Erin Brockovich* employs affective appeals to engage viewers in its melodramatic representation of a historical case of environmental injustice. This suggests that films are also veritable in communicating climatic change. The book, *Communicating Climate Change*, edited by Yusuf and St. John (2021) presents a collection of works that focus on how experts, advocate for climate change information citing the roles of films in effectively disseminating these awareness messages. McCormack et al (2021) explains that Environmental films are more than just sequences explanations of ecological phenomena or arguments for change. Rather environmental films could appear as narratives that can foster behavioral change on the audience. Seale (2023) explores how environmental films can be used to engage people on how to make changes on some of human interactions with the environment that is detrimental to the ecology. Adrian Ivakhiv (2013), Graves and Morris (2023), Plantinga (2019) in their works show that narratives around climate change on screen have a huge ability and potential to affect audiences’ awareness, knowledge, beliefs and, crucially, actions on climate change.

Nigerian film industry popularly referred to as Nollywood, appears to be making films that address the pressing issue of environmental degradation. Nigerian films offer compelling social narratives that explore the consequences of human actions on the environment and advocate for sustainable practices yet these films appear not have made much impact in relation to human interactions towards the Nigerian environment. Since 2010, I have worked professionally as a filmmaker in the capacity of a producer and a director with twelve major titles to my credit. My most recent film; *Blood Vessel* showing presently on Netflix shows how ecological degradation of the ecosystem in the south-south part of Nigeria leads to a cauldron of contradiction that paves way for anarchy and break down of law and order in the society. As a filmmaker who uses storytelling as a tool to reimage the society, I ponder about effective approaches to solving ecological problems.

Previously, films which address ecological themes have been produced by various Nigerian filmmakers. Some of such films include *Olobiri*(2016) produced by Roger Ofime and directed by Curtis Graham, *Blood and Oil* (2010)directed by David Attwood and *Black November*(2012) directed by Jet Amata, Akpama (2014) directed by Nwakile Ozoemena. Among my students, I have consistently tested if these films address environmental issues in ways that can impact behavioral change. This conversation in the past three years happens as Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) where film students watch some of the aforementioned films and then break into groups for discussions. The feedbacks from my students show that these films have not proffered possible solutions. The responses I have received range from more than fifty percent (50%) of my students insisting that the films do not in away create a consciousness on environmental preservation in them to others not identifying any environmental issues in the films. The implication of this is that these works have not been able to create a nexus between

environmental issue and audience in terms of a paradigm shift in human interaction with the environment.

In the course of interactions with the students, it seems that they are quicker to believe in sacredness of rivers than they would take seriously impending draught due to global warming. A typical example of this is the popular Ogbunike cave in Anambra state of Eastern Nigeria. The entrance of the cave is surrounded by a flowing stream that serves as a major source of drinking water to the people of the community. The myth about this cave and the stream is that any woman in her mensural cycle who swims in the stream or enters the cave will be barren for life. This belief is very strong and has helped keep clean their source of drinking water. This research thus capitalizes on existing belief systems that integrates scientific explanations on the impacts and implications of environmental abuse to mankind and thus propose a revitalization of Africa traditional belief systems from the purview of scientific explanations like the ozone layer depletion to greenhouse effects and integrate them into films to protect the ecology. This means that some of the adverse effects on environment caused by abusive human activities are scientifically proven. However, in many African societies, Nigeria inclusive, people seem to acknowledge scientific knowledge yet that they still engage in activities capable of complete collapse of the environment. For instance, the constant bursting of oil pipelines and persistent illegal exploration and refining of oil in the Niger Delta for many years have polluted the region and contaminated their waters yet these activities are still ongoing despite governmental onslaught on offenders (Momodu, 2025).

The study explores avenues through which mythic and folkloric narratives are reimagined and adapted into films scripts, ascribing supernatural attribute to natural phenomenon in order to promote the preservation and safeguarding of the ecology. The idea is to story tell the environment from the purview of myth and horror, to consolidate scientific standpoint on the effect of environmental degradation. Hence the research question: How can African folkloric stories be presented in film to instigate ecological preservation?

The Eco-Horror Film Paradigm

The eco-horror film genre is recommended for the presentation of Africa mythic stories in motion pictures. From the foregoing, it has been established that the mythic stories and folklore were effective tools used during the primordial time to deter people from gross violation of the ecosystem. Okpewho (1998) explains that in many Nigerian culture, myth is an important part of traditional, because it offers sacred narrative to explains situations that appear to be above human comprehension. These mythic stories often times feature the gods, heroes, or supernatural beings in such a way that it explains natural phenomena and cultural beliefs. Many cultural sensibilities in south east Nigeria preserve their natural habitat through myth. So, practices like bush burning and defecation inside the rivers are culturally conceived as taboos. This cultural often times are solidified with the premise of mythic stories. These mythic stories are passed down from one generation to another and these stories still exist even in present day. Mythic stories about environment in their very nature are horrifying and therefore people seem to respect their validity. This is why this work recommends the integration of these stories into environmental films of Nigeria extraction.

In Nigeria, films like *Blood and Oil* (2010) directed by David Attwood, *Delta Blues* (1997) directed by Gary Thieman, *Oil Spills in Nigeria: The True Price of Crude Oil* (2012), produced by The Guardian, Lin Bin's *Faces of Africa*, Ken Saro-Wiwa's *All for My People* (2016) and others present in less melodramatic forms the degraded ecosystem. These films present the social realities on the environmental issues. These social realities are identifiable but they may not have necessitated the purgation of emotions of pity and fear (catharsis) which can lead to social change. The eco-horror genre proposes the through the incorporation of mythological and primordial stories on environment films, the idea of catharsis could be necessitated. In view of this, the idea of eco-horror films appears to be an option for the adaptation of mythic and folkloric stories into film for the purpose of ecological preservation. Eco-horror reaches across media (literature, film, etc.) and works with concepts (Gothic, ecophobia, agency, etc.) The term eco-orrer has been in use since at least the mid-1990s to describe works of literature and film in which human characters are attacked by natural forces, typically animals and plants that have been altered or angered by humans in some way (Rust and Soles 2014). Murray and Heumann (2016: 270), thinks that "Over the last few years, increasing scholarly attention has been dedicated to the relationship between eco-criticism and the horror genre." In the western world, there have been a plethora of works that leverages the efficacy of eco-horror genre for environmental preservation. Murray and Heumann (2016:270) point some of these works that examine the intersections between mythic stories comingled in horror for environmental preservation through films. They noted that works like Smith and Hughes' *Ecogothic* (2013), Gregersdotter et al.'s *Animal horror cinema: genre, history, and criticism* (2015), and Keetley and Tenga's *Plant horror: approaches to the monstrous vegetal in fiction and film* (2016), have highlighted the genre's deep connection to ecological thinking, most notably through its recurring 'revenge of nature' narratives that reflect ongoing fears around environmental destruction.

Environment and horror comingled together and presented in filmic form have the ability to provide insightful discussions that can crystalize change of behaviors toward ecological space. This could be done through this genre by illustrating and highlighting thematic preoccupations that portray frightening realities of social, cultural, and environmental change.

The African myths and folktales that tell stories in favour of the ecology present the environment inanimate natural phenomenon like trees, mountains, river, rock, island, deserts etc as having some supernatural powers and can hurt anyone who violates or abuses them. There are mythic stories and beliefs that are still respected in Nigeria to this day. During my undergraduate days, my classmates and I visited the Adada River in Eastern Nigeria. Upon our arrival, the natives promptly informed us that no one is allowed to urinate, spit or do anything to contaminate the river while swimming. We were told that any attempt at such the person involved will be drowned by the river. We were told how the river has spiritual beings on guard and these invincible beings will drown anyone found violating the river. Many of us declined to swim afterwards. Later, it was discovered that the stream is their only source of drinking water in the village and they have preserved it from contamination due human activities by telling and retelling these stories. Many of such horrifying myths abound in Nigeria and they are being useful; however, its popularity is questioned hence the idea of reinventing these stories into motion pictures from the purview of scientific explanations as opposed to myths.

Horror as a concept evokes the feeling of terror and danger. (Hick 2022). For Rust and Soles (2021) horrific events take place in our world every day, so it is only natural that these events find their way into our collective imagination through literature, cinema, and other forms of art and popular discourse. These days, phrases like global climate change, the sixth extinction, and environmental injustice alert us to the horrific events poised to alter life as we know it on this planet. When one considers the terrors that humanity hath wrought upon the planet, particularly over the past two centuries, it is easy to be scared. *Delta Blues* a 2010 film by Tomas under the auspice of SBS Australia production, exposes environmental pollution in the Niger Delta region. This film documentary shows the oil spillages on the waters and land and also captures the roles the indigenes of the Niger Delta play in contributing to the environmental degradation through oil pipeline vandalization and illegal refining of oil. Through media ethnography the filmmaker captures the opinions of some major stakeholders and leaders through interviews. These interviewers affirm that despite many governmental and non-governmental efforts at sensitization; the oil companies in the that region and also the indigenes still indulge in environmental practices that hugely violate and degrade their ecology (Okpadah:8) It is in view of this that this research seeks to reinvent primordial African stories into eco-horror films scripts for the purpose of preservation of the threatened ecological space in Africa/Nigeria. In other words films are viable tools that can stimulate social change

Quest for Nigerian Films in Eco-horror Genre

This work is faced with the lacuna of reinventing the unique primordial methods of storytelling used by Africans to preserve the ecosystem during the primordial times and then find out ways how this method can be re-adopted to preserve and protect the ecosystem in our contemporary society. Besides, being of huge economic relevance, the Nigerian film industry popularly referred to as Nollywood is very pivotal in driving popular opinion and as such has remained a veritable tool for development in Nigeria. Ajiweet al (2015:79) state that, "Nigerian video film has proven very influential on its people towards propagating social change. Thus, film is a powerful man-made instrument used for shaping and re-shaping individuals and the society at large leading to what has become the 'Nigerian popular culture' of today. It has grown very influential. Being a visual medium, the audience's interest is primarily sustained by what they see in the film and the story." Through the medium of film these stories can be reinvented in generic forms like eco-horror films. The eco-horror genre of film is suggested as an approach for reinventing primordial stories because horror evokes the reaction of the physical by showing in horrifying manner something wrong with the physical (King 2010). The hypothesis is that by leveraging on the peculiarities of horror to story-tell the environment from the prism of primordial stories used in time past to preserve the environment, there could be a paradigm shift in terms human interaction with the environment. Human activities are major causes of environmental havoc in Nigeria. This research seeks to find answers to the following questions:

1. What are these primordial folkloric and mythological stories Africans used to safeguard the ecosystem?

2. How can these stories be reinvented, reimaged alongside scientific explanations and be adapted to serve as veritable tools that can positively affect human interactions with the environment in Nigeria?
3. How can eco-horror films be used to have social impact, i.e., bring about behavioral change in the manner people interact with the ecology?

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this research is to reinvent veritable approach of telling and retelling African mythological stories that were used during the primordial time to the late 19th century in Africa and Nigeria to preserve the ecology through the model of eco-horror film genre. The objectives of this study therefore are:

1. To decipher how Nollywood films can deliberately reinvent, and re-tell stories drawn from mythic reality incorporating scientific angles for the purpose of environmental protection.
2. To explore how African original stories were used for the preservation of the eco-system and how these stories can be transitioned into eco-horror stories that can be made into films
3. To examine the efficacy of mythic stories and folklores of African origin as capable tools that can be used to shape attitude towards preservation of the ecology.

Theoretical Framework

Cognitive film theory is employed as a research paradigm that serves as pointer to the hypothesis for proposing that primordial mythic stories can be reinvented into eco-horror films for the purpose of environmental protection. This is because this research through reinventing and reimaging of primordial Africa stories aspires to explore the efficacy of film as veritable tools for change in the area of ecological preservation. The argument is that films should be presented in ways that will necessitate a level consciousness in terms of humans making an informed decision that can lead to preservation of the ecology while interacting with the ecosystem. Cognitive theoretical is therefore adopted for this research because according to Richard Allen (2003:174) “there is a belief that film has a special relationship to human psychology”. This theory emerged in the 1980s as a distinctive research paradigm in film on the basis of how films do not appear like mental processes but rather films actually engage mental process. This implies that cognitive film theory seeks to understand how films engage human minds. Some of the major proponents of this approach are David Bordwell, Edward Branigan, Noel Carroll and Gregory Currie. Currie (1999: 106) explains that this theory premises the role of film in the human society from:

the ways in which our experience of cinematic images and cinematic narrative resemble our experiences of seeing and comprehending events and processes in reality... This leading idea suggests a method as well as a doctrine: in seeking to understand our responses to film, apply the best available theories of perception, information processing, hypothesis-building, and interpretation.

So, from the purview of psychological effects of films and the consequent influence of film on the audience, the presentation of eco-horror film from the premise of Africa primordial mythic stories used to preserve the environment in the past, reimaged and reinvented as films along this idea can be crucial in stimulating social behavioral change towards the environment. Here, the audience watching a film tends to understand the story which can lead to understanding the

problem. For Bordwell (1985) Cognitive film theory approach explores how through identifiable images seen on the screen which he referred to as “schema” the audience form a visual knowledge that serves as hypothesis for understanding the messages in films. This “schema” creates lasting memories. Environmental films can use emotional storytelling from the purview of reinventing primordial African stories inform of compelling imagery to create vivid and memorable experiences that influence viewers' behaviours towards the environment. Leveraging on this cognitive film theory approach, films could be scripted as eco-horror for the purpose of foster empathy by allowing viewers to experience the environment from different perspectives. One of such perspective that might work for the African audience is the mythic stories that have been used primordially to protect the environment. Such stories are notable for attributing supernatural powers to inanimate objects like threes, rivers, waters, animals etc. The presentation of these stories in reinvented forms could appeal to the emotions of the viewers, thus a change of attitude towards the environment.

More so, this studies also leverages the theory of eco-criticism to emphasize the role literature (myth, stories, folklore) plays in the critiquing the adverse effect of human activities on the ecosystem. Marland (2013:846) explains that:

ecocriticism is an umbrella term for a range of critical approaches that explore the representation in literature (and other cultural forms) of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman, largely from the perspective of anxieties around humanity's destructive impact on the biosphere. Other terms for the field include ‘environmental criticism’ and ‘green cultural studies’ the latter term reflecting the increasing diversity of the field's remit – its recent focus on film, TV, virtual worlds and popular music, for example, as well as its growing interest in representations of urban environments.

Thus, in this instance, the theory becomes efficient for translocating primordial mythic stories that critique human abusive relationship to the environment and also goes further to show how ecological collapse or degradation in turn affects human lives

Proposed Methodology for Eco-Horror Screenplay in Nigeria

This paper recommends a qualitative approach that uses the Participatory Research (PR) methodology. The PR methodology is considered for this research not just because its research-to-action nature but because it uses systematic inquiry methods to collaborate and engage with those (respondents) directly affected by the issues being studied (Cargo and Mercer, 2008). This way, the filmmaker who is interested in using eco-horror film to advocate for the preservation of the ecosystem in Nigeria targets a partnership with the selected communities in Nigeria where there are obvious ecological issues like erosion, environmental pollution etc.

To nuance the concept of eco-horror film within the context of Nigerian situation, this research spotlights Enugu state as a possible location in Nigeria, where their primordial mythic stories could be translocated into the filmic genre of eco-horror. Some of the communities in the aforementioned state have long history of environmental degradation caused by human activities. These communities are also notable in the primordial times for using myth and folklores/stories as watchdog for ecological protection. In Enugu state, Nsukka community is one of those places where the mythic stories have remained relevant. For instance, there is a particular forest in a small

town called Obukpa in Nsukka local government. It is a common knowledge to the people of this town, that it is a taboo for anyone to engage in bush burning. The common belief is that the spirits of their forebearers live in that forest and as such anyone who puts fire therein has set the ancestors ablaze and thus there is always grievous consequence. One could argue that this story serves as a deterrent so as to avoid wildfire entering into homes and destroying lives and property since the natives live very close to the forest. During the pre-colonial and colonial times, most of the houses are roofed with thatches that are highly inflammable. So, one could fathom why it has become highly prohibited to safeguard this forest from fire.

Through PR research methodology these stories will be collated. More so, other stakeholders like the writer's and director will be encouraged to collaboratively engage with these stories to reinvent and retell them as eco-horror film script for the purpose of ecological preservation. This way the film when produced becomes a "well-made" film that contributes in using stories through the motion picture medium for preservation of the ecology. Qualitative approaches for data collection processes like Focused Group Discussion (FGDs), interviews, participatory observation and reflective journal approaches could also be used for data collection.

It is suggested that the sampling technique should purposively target communities in Nigeria that are at presently dealing with major environmental issues and also communities that have in the past used mythic stories to preserve their environment. For instance, there is a certain river called "Obinna" in Uzo Uwani Local government area of in Enugu state Nigeria, where it is highly prohibited for anyone to defecate or urinate inside the river. Story has it that anyone who dares to defecate or urinate inside the river, the water spirit will throw the person up three times and then throw the person on the ground as a dead person. The corpse will be thrown into the evil forest and the family members will have to clean then periphery of the river for seven market days. These kinds of stories will be gathered through in-depth interviews and focus groups. These stories will be taken to story workshops with selected member's scriptwriters' guild of Nigeria (SWG N) and also writers from other climes. The workshop targets to actualize a screenplay where these stories are reimaged with in the premise of eco-horror. This process allows for myths and science to be fictionalized and presented as horror in the eco-horror genre. The workshop will sample possible approaches for reimagining and reinventing these stories to benefit the campaign on safeguarding and preserving the ecosystem. The aim is to actualize a framework for scripting eco-horror stories that deals on environmental issues based on the Nigeria reality. The sample pilot script could be a template; however, one expects that the data collected from various communities might differ remarkable. Therefore, the story workshop seeks a framework for creating eco-horror screenplay for film production

Conclusion

Thus far, the thesis of this paper is that in Nigeria, eco-horror films could be designed as a genre that leverages primordial mythic stories to play significant role in advocating for environmental preservation by creating frameworks for screenplay that turns crises into visceral and emotional narratives. These narratives show that nature could be an animate object that possesses force of revenge by showcasing ominous consequence of environmental abuse and degradation. The screenplay should target to confront the viewers with possible outcome and result of abusive relationship with the ecosystem. This research spotlights that the degradation of the ecosystem has

remained a major developmental issue. The preservation of the ecosystem is listed as one of the major sustainable development goals. This work appreciates the efficacy of film medium as a veritable tool capable of stimulating social behavioral change especially towards the environment. This is because it has been widely accepted that human activities especially in Nigeria accounts mostly for many of the collapse in the ecology. The eco-horror film genre as recommended in this work leverages primordial stories that in the time past were used as mythic reality to preserve the environment. The translocation of these stories into motion pictures (film) could make a positive social impact.

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