



Muted conspiracy: The (Mis) representation of the *Dibia* institution in Nollywood

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Abstract

The Igbo of South East Nigeria has played significant roles in Nollywood - the film industry in Nigeria. Nollywood is peopled by a fair percentage of the Igbo in sensitive positions. Hence, Nollywood films easily attempt to portray aspects of Igbo culture, tradition and worldview. Bearing this in mind, it becomes worrisome that many traditional Igbo institutions and philosophical standings are grossly misrepresented in many Nollywood as if this is a silent attempt to join the conspiracy to erode every important aspect of the African life in general and those of the Igbo in particular. One of such institutions so badly represented in Nollywood is the *dibia* Institution. This work looks at the image of the *dibia* institution in Nollywood with a view to assessing its representation in that film industry. This is approached through documentary research and content analysis of selected Nollywood films. Findings of the work show that there are gross misrepresentations of the *dibia* institutions in Nollywood especially in areas such as none categorization, costume/make-up, shrine depiction, application of effects, and depicting the *dibia* as jobless people. The *dibia* took care of a bulk of the needs of the Igbo people long before the coming of the colonial master and still does same for some persons. The work concludes by admonishing Nollywood filmmakers to attempt to abandon their stereotyped image of the *dibia* in Igbo cosmology and conduct research on the *dibia* institution and use the instrument of film to re-tell our stories and set records straight.

Keywords: *Dibia* institution, *Dibia*, Film industry, Igbo culture, Nollywood, The Igbo

1. Introduction

The Igbo nation is one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria and their language (the Igbo language) one of the widely spoken languages in Nigeria. Ndi Igbo populate the five states of the South Eastern part of the country Nigeria extending further to areas in present day Rivers State and Delta State in South-South Nigeria. The Igbo people are very industrious and travel wide.

...In terms of location, the Igbo occupy the bulk of the South-eastern parts of Nigeria. It is usually said that while the other two major ethnic groups in Nigeria (the Hausa and the Yoruba) also inhabit other countries in Africa, the Igbo are found as an indigenous population in no other country in the world than their present Nigerian setting...

The Igbo have a common border with the Igala and the Idoma on the Northern part of Nigeria, the Ijaw and Ogoni on the South, the Yako and Ibibio on the Eastern boundary and the Bini and Warri on the West. The principal rivers are Niger, Imo, Anambra, and the Ulasi River. The Niger divides the Igbo into two uneven areas... (Nwoye, 2011: 305).

The role of the Igbo ethnic nationality in the evolution, growth, development and sustenance the film industry in Nigeria christened Nollywood cannot be over emphasised. In the exact words of Friday Nwafor,

The story of the video film industry in Nigeria cannot be told without mentioning the contributions of the Igbos of South-East Nigeria. In fact, the Igbo ethnic group have played a central role in the development of the industry. That the stories and the locations are predominantly eastern is simply in accordance and agreement with the popular saying that he who plays the piper detects the tune. This is not to say that the industry is ethnic in outlook... (Nwafor, 2009: 112).

Nwafor goes further to state that the sponsorship, marketing and distribution of the films in Nollywood “rests in the hands of the same easterners who are in charge of the outlets located in Idumota (Lagos), Upper Iwaka (Onitsha) and Pound Road (Aba) respectively” (Nwafor, 2009: 113). This notion is affirmed by Shaka (2002: 184) when he posited thus:

The majority of the video films produced in Nigeria are sponsored by Igbo traders selling electronics or motor parts at either Idumota Street, Lagos or at Upper Iwaka Road/Main Market Onitsha. These merchants/executive producers also constitute the marketers, and by virtue of this fact, they dictate what goes on in the industry.

In his book *Trends in Nollywood: A Study of Selected Genres (2014)*, Barclays Ayakoroma concurs that the Igbo ethnic nationality has played a significant role in Nollywood as they are the major financiers of the industry. Hear him:

Since the financial control of the industry is in the hands of the Igbo businessmen, it has been easy for the EPs to raise many Igbo film stars. It is not surprising then that a greater number of the selling faces are of Igbo extraction (Nwafor, 2009: 97).

This does not apply only to the stars of the industry as every aspect of film production and distribution/marketing in Nollywood is peopled by a fair percentage of the Igbo who “consciously or unconsciously continue to sustain their position as having the highest number of players in the industry” (Nwafor, 2009: 118). Hence, many Nollywood films easily attempt to portray aspects of Igbo culture, tradition and worldview. Says Nwafor again,

The medium has also served as a vehicle for the promotion of the culture and traditions of the ethnic nationality. The Igbos and their way of life are so exemplified in the stories that one cannot but recognise the people’s culture at any given time (Nwafor, 2009: 118).

Bearing in mind the above scenario of Ndi Igbo being actively involved in all aspects of film production and distribution/marketing in Nollywood, and that most of those films are seen to portray the culture and tradition of the people, it becomes very worrisome that many aspects of the Igbo cultural and traditional institutions as well as philosophical standings and world views are grossly misrepresented in many Nollywood films. One is tempted to ask: Is this a ploy to join the conspiracy to erode every important aspect of the African life in general and those of the Igbo in particular? In the exact words of Asikaogu,

...globalization has made profound impact on the culture and religious of the *Igbo* people, uprooting the people in most cases from the comfort of their culture and religious (sic) with European cultural background.

This profound impact of globalization on the culture of the *Igbo* people has placed the *Igbo* mind in a cultural Dilemma. This global influence has eliminated *Igbo* from their ancestral cultural practices and yet not deeply rooted in the new culture they embraced. The economic and political structure evolved by the *Igbo* people to attend to their basic needs was greatly affected and very highly weakened... enforcement of religious and cultural values was highly eroded (Asikaogu, 2018: 48 – 49).

One of the traditional institutions in the Igbo worldview that has been so badly represented in Nollywood is the *dibia* Institution. It is therefore pertinent to ask: where are these misrepresentations stemming from? Is it as a result of sheer neglect or lack of research or accumulated misconceptions?

Some apologies will suffice before we proceed further. Firstly, a non-Igbo reader will, at a glance, be worried about the use of the word ‘*dibia*’ in the title. Such a reader may be fast to ask “Why not use the English equivalent?” An apology ab initio: the Igbo word *dibia* does not have a perfect, flawless equivalent. In the exact words of Umeh (1997: 76), “those who have tried to find the English equivalent terminology for *Dibia* have wasted their time for **there is no such English equivalence**” (added emphasis). In the Preface to his book *After God is Dibia*, Umeh reiterates that the book “...deals with Igbo *Dibia*, a terminology which does not have an English equivalent...” However, efforts will be made in the paper to, as much as possible, explain the concept of *dibia* for the benefits of the non-Igbo readers.

Secondly, the word *Igbo* is used in this work to refer to the people and language of the ethnic nationality that occupy the South Eastern part of the country Nigeria extending to areas in Rivers State and Delta State in the South-South. The word *Ibo* has been consciously left out. To those who are more familiar with *Ibo* we owe this apology before confusion sets in. One of the difficulties that beset studies about the Igbo is the existence of two alternative spellings: *Ibo* and *Igbo*. It should be pointed out without going into the details of explanation that the correct word is *Igbo* which “the overwhelming majority of the Igbo now prefer...which they regard as indigenous in contradistinction to the inaccurate ‘*Ibo*’ of colonial days” (Isichei, 1976: xv).

2. The *Dibia* institution in Igbo cosmology

Etymologically speaking, it is said that “*Dibia* is a shortened form of *dibiala* (master of things of the land, community, cosmological forces, fortune, misfortune, illness, and remedy)” (Uzochukwu, n.d., para. 2). Explaining who the *dibia* is, Ogbukagu (2008: 485) believes that the

Dibia is the traditional medicine person (man or woman) charged with prescribing and/or executing sacrifices (*aja*) and also performing all sorts of esoteric and diabolical duties. They also are herbalists and healers of diseases. *Dibia* operates under the power or influence of elemental spirits or salamanders specially equipped with powers for probing the realm or abyssal zone of mysticism.

According to Uzochukwu (n.d, para. 2), to become a *dibia*, one “requires discipline, ambition, determination, time, and resources. After selecting a candidate, followed by the installation of the agwu shrine, the potential *dibia* undergoes apprenticeship that may last between 3 to 10 years.” Also, to Iroegbu, the *dibia* is an indispensable figure in the society as

it is important to recognize the massive authority and power that a *dibia* embodies and weighs in the things of the land – calming down (*ijjala*, *ibiala*, *di~ibiala*) – a master who re-authors the land. Entirely, a *dibia* for the Igbo is a cosmological engineer – a relational order builder of this world and that world, health and society, descent and blood, kin-people and neighbours, fortune and misfortune, fecundity and expansion... In other words, a *dibia* is to be seen as the existential ground of culture, knowledge system, of the land and all else (Iroegbu, 2011, para. 4).

He goes further to give this long exposé of the *dibia* in Igbo cosmology- a explanation which is a pointer as to why it is difficult for the *dibia* to fit into a straight jacket translation in the English language:

A *dibia* embodies a layer of forces – ecological and awe-inspiring, in other words transcendental and transformational – illness to health, misfortune to fortune, weakness to strength, lack of power to empowerment, inability to ability and capacity, invisible to visible reality. But one can only give what one has – spiritually, materially and culturally. A *dibia* is empowered to be all that is – and is consequently represented...a *dibia* is an institution and status quo ante to be grown into... A *dibia* is transformed to shade a community. A *dibia* resonates with a cultural metaphor applied to the theory of health and life people live with (Iroegbu, 2011, para. 5).

To show the value the traditional Igbo society placed and still places on the *dibia*, Iroegbu (2011, para. 5) offers to explain that “something that either creates a wonder, amazement, awesomeness, ingenuity and class is linked to *agbara*... Deities or minor spirits are found everywhere in Igbo localities but only a few can be classed as *agbara*.” Yet “*dibia bu agbara*” (an expression that shows that a *dibia* is spirit, magical, wonderful, a trail blazer) “is a constructed reference to imply achieving feats to resolve problems” very often used to refer to the *dibia*. Iroegbu sees this reference to the *dibia* as *agbara* to be “a metonym of being exceedingly a utility, enigmatic and belligerent” (Iroegbu, 2011, para. 6). This explains why John Umeh, in his book *After God is Dibia* (1997), insists that in the Igbo cosmology, the *dibia* comes immediately after God.

There are several branches or categories of the *dibia* concept. They include:

1. *Dibia* Ngborogwu Na Mkpa Akwukwo/Ahihia (herbalist)- specialists in discovering, and treating all manners of sickness using roots, herbs, tree trunks and other natural materials. Hence, their main aim and goal is to save lives.
2. *Ezemmuo* (Chief priests of oracles)- who serve as mediators between the people and the oracles. They are seen as the mouthpiece of the gods. Their major role is to see to the maintenance of the moral order of the society and re-uniting the society to the gods through sacrifices and cleansing. This category of *dibia* is referred to as “*dibia oje na muo*” (*dibia* that moves in the spirit) in some quarters.
3. *Dibia* Mgba Afa/*Dibia* Afa (diviners/soothsayers/fortune tellers/seers)- these make all kinds of spiritual inquiries. Their aim is to get from the gods the root causes of problems and remedies to same.
4. *Dibia* Nha Mmiri (rain makers or rain doctors)- they have the powers to control the activities of rain, thunder and wind. They can cause rain to fall or cause it to stop in specific areas and times.
5. *Dibia* Owu Mmiri- these are the mediators between the water goddesses and man. They are specialist *dibias* as their work is to help people who have issues that relate to water spirits such as *ogbanje*- “part human and part spirit beings whose lives are confounded by the added loyalty which they owe to spirit deities” (Achebe, 1986: 27). *Dibia* Owu Mmiri also helps those with mental issues.
6. *Dibia* Ogba Okpukpu/*Dibia* Okpukpu (bone doctors)- these are the orthopaedic doctors. They specialize in the treatment of bone related issues. When such bone issues occur from birth, the *dibia* most time attribute it to re-incarnation for which grave(s) may be visited or even opened.

These categorizations become another pointer to why there is no exact flawless English equivalent to the Igbo word *dibia*. One *dibia* can embody two or more categories in him/her but hardly is any one *dibia* an embodiment of all the categories. Okonkwo supports this view by stating that “although, a few *dibia* do a general practice; most *dibia* specialize in certain areas” (Okonkwo, 2012: 72). It must be stated that there are other minor variants of *dibia*.

The ultimate call of the *dibia* is to heal, save life, teach, restore normalcy and most importantly uplift the people. Yet, Ijeh (1997: 162) believes that the *dibia*'s “art is shrouded in mystery and sometimes accompanied by dramatization, all of which add to the inspiration of awe on the part of his patient.” There are many things yet to be researched about the concept of *dibia*. But like the concept of culture which is not fixed, a *dibia* changes with people and society and adapts as he/she responds to the needs and circumstances of individuals and the society being served.

It should also be pointed out that having the knowledge of saves life entails having the knowledge of what destroys life. So it is with many other professions. Hence, *dibia* possesses both positivity and negativity. A popular biblical allusion in the Christian parlance has it that “in every twelve, there must be a Judas.” So it will be right to note that there are charlatans among the *dibias* just as there are charlatans among every other profession. It will be wrong to use the activities of few charlatan *dibias* to over generalize on the *dibia* practice generally.

3. Reading the image of the Dibia in selected Nollywood films

The submission of Remy Ilona as cited in Iroegbu (2011, para 2) that “we often claim we know what the dibia does, but the truth is that we have not studied them and therefore know little or nothing to represent them accurately” aptly applies to Nollywood with great emphasis. A review of some Nollywood films here will help prove this point.

In *Sound of Ikoru*, Prince Nnabuife (Ken Eric) accidentally meets Obioma (Cha Cha Faani Ekeh), an orphan maiden constantly maltreated by her aunt Nkolika (Nkechi Angel Nweje). Against all odds and counsels, the Prince decides to have Obioma as his wife. The Queen Mother disapproves of this because Obioma is from a poor background. The King and the Prince decide to hatch a plot that sees Obioma faked to be the daughter of a noble member of the community, Chief Ilodibe (Cardinal Okpanum). Acting as Chief Ilodibe’s daughter, Obioma gets the approval of the Queen to be the wife of the Prince. On the day of the traditional marriage, Chief Ilodibe exposes the plot that led to Obioma’s acceptance. This provokes the Queen Mother and from this moment on, her hatred for Obioma is increased greatly. This is also the case with Nkolika who is angered by the fact that Obioma her maid, and not Ijeoma her only daughter, is the wife to the prince. Both the Queen Mother and Nkolika make various attempts to stop the marriage.

In the palace, the King (Mike Odiachi) appreciates the character and conduct of Obioma and therefore entrusts in her all the food he is to eat in the palace. One day, the king mysteriously dies after eating the food prepared by Obioma. Obioma is accused of poisoning the king and is banished from the land of Agbada-Ani. As soon as Nnabuife is crowned the new king, calamities begin to befall the community. To worsen it all, the new king slumps and goes into coma. The chiefs of the community are forced to consult a Chief Priest from another community who referred them back to the Chief Priest of Agbada-Ani,- Ogbuefi Udenegbaola. It is the Chief Priest who reveals that Obioma has given birth to the heir apparent to the throne in foreign land. He directs the chiefs on how to locate Obioma and the new born prince who must be welcomed back to the palace with gunshots and the sound of the Ikoru (big community wooden gong). At the arrival of Obioma and the prince with the accompanying gunshots and the sound of the Ikoru, stunning revelations are made of how the Queen Mother and Nkolika attempted to poison Obioma but the poison ended up killing the king. Nkolika had mysteriously died, the Queen Mother is then banished from Agbada-Ani and normalcy returns to the kingdom.

In this film, we are presented with see two *dibias* and told of one through the dialogue of the chiefs. The Chief Priest of Agbada-Ani kingdom is Ogbuefi Udenegbaola who did not buy the idea of the Queen Mother on the dirty deal of silencing Obioma. The chiefs of the land also talked about the Chief Priest of another community who they consulted during their crises period who referred them back to the Chief Priest of Agbada-Ani,- Ogbuefi Udenegbaola. We are presented with another Chief Priest who Nkolika consulted for the same dirty deal of killing Obioma. He obliged by giving her substance to poison Obioma which unfortunately killed the king. The repercussion is the mysterious death of that Chief Priest as well as Nkolika.

The film *Modern Oracle* shows the activities of certain dibia’s (native doctors) in the land of Uburekwe. In the film, Ikenna (Zubby Michael) is the son of a renowned dibia Akataka who never used his dibia craft to cause any harm to humanity. After the death of his father, Ikenna was reluctant to take over his father’s dibia craft but his mother persuaded him to do so. He becomes a powerful dibia who healed the people of his community especially those struck with such sicknesses by other evil dibias. He also dedicated his duty to directing the younger ones aright and they in turn come back with much gifts to appreciate him. The other dibias become so angry with him and plan to eliminate him. One of the dibias in this ploy is Ejiofor (Lemmy Iwuji) whose son Nnaemeka (Diamond Okechi) is Ikenna’s childhood friend. Out of jealousy, Nnaemeka sets out to a far away land to get supernatural power that will make him outshine Ikenna. There, he is made to murder his father and the head used to secure the needed power. On return, he kills the father’s dibia colleagues Duru (Otex Osuji) and Adika (Goddy Nkwopara) so that no dibia can challenge him. But his major worry is Ikenna. At the end, Ikenna and Nnaemeka meet and confront each other with charms at the house warming ceremony of Uchenna (Simon Chibuzor) whose mother had invited the church for the same function. The confrontation is halted at the arrival of Fr Jude (Bishop Bright Chima) whose holy water destroys Nnaemeka’s powers and leads to his death without touching Ikenna’s powers that comes from God.

4. Discussion

There are some issues about the dibia that are usually not properly presented in Nollywood films. One major misrepresentation is in the presentation of dibias in Nollywood is the issue of none categorization. The categories of dibia discussed earlier including the variants not discussed are usually lumped into one person in many filmic representations. Again, in many Nollywood films, we see the Stereotyping of dibias mainly to diabolical activities. They usually are made to possess powers they use to perpetrate evil in the community. This to say the least is unfair to the dibia institution.

The costuming of dibias in Nollywood is also faulty in many instances. This notion is aptly captured in this view below:

If one is watching a traditional genre, for example, one sees native doctors, who most often have shrines under trees! He or she must be adorned in white or red cloths; and usually, a confidante takes the affected person to the so-called shrine (Ayakoroma, 2014: 99).

It must be added that in some instances, the dibia is made to wear black coloured materials with white and/or red designs. This pattern of dressing does not apply to modern dibias any longer. Most modern day dibias do not put on such attires. Rather they dress the way any other member of the community will dress. Hence, one hardly recognizes a contemporary dibia with his/her dressing even while such a dibia in the course of duty. The Nollywood portrayal of the dibia’s make-up

is that his face and parts of the body are usually smeared with kaolin (nzu). Many dibias of the old can fit into this representation as they wore kaolin on their faces in the course of their duties. Such dibias were seen somewhat as charlatans and the phrase ‘dibia anya nzu’ or ‘nwa dibia anya nzu’ (dibia with kaolin on the eye) was derogatorily used to refer to them. Many real dibias use substances that do not visibly stick and reveal items used in preparing them. one of such is the ‘edo’ (which can be literally translated to ‘eye cleanser.’

The representation of the dibia’s shrine is another issue of concern. As stated in Ayakorom’s view above, the dibia most often have their shrines under trees and in the bushes. The reality of the situation is that the dibias do not normally have their shrines out of their residences. So the shrines of many of them are in their compounds- at their backyards, obi (hut), sitting rooms or a corner of the compound. Again there is the issue of wrong use of effects. Most of the effects are over exaggerated giving the dibia undue mystical and magical powers. Such include the powers to appear and disappear at will, pass through impossible and improbable places like trees, and walls, emerge from any space (ground, space, rivers etc), possess bullet proof bodies, and call up persons both dead and living to appear before him. It must be pointed out here that the typical dibia is not a magician.

There is also the use of already prepared solutions by the dibias in Nollywood films. Once the patient narrates his/her problem to the dibia in the films, the dibia simply brings out an already manufactured solution and hands over to the patient. This is misrepresentation. In actual fact, prescriptions for sicknesses and problems are case specific. Even the dibias that heal sicknesses interrogate the patient about issues like their medical history, family background, and allergies before mixing concoctions for them. it could be said that the filmmakers in Nollywood use the already prepared solutions to save filmic time. The stand of this paper is that the right thing should be presented. Using mise en scene construction, the right practice can be presented in few seconds. A situation where the filmmaker uses real time in some scenes and cuts corners in dibia presentation to save time is unacceptable.

One other representation of the dibia that needs attention is presenting them as jobless people who are always in their shrine. Many dibias in contemporary times are gainfully employed in other ventures and are not always in the shrine. Those who refer patients to them hand in contacts including phone numbers. Appointments are booked for cases that are not life threatening. The dibias use family relatives as clerical staff who know how to contact them in case of emergencies. Similar to this is the representation of the dibia in Nollywood as people who render free services. In reality, dibias charge fees for their services and payment plans are stipulated, negotiated sometimes, and adhered to with some level of strictness.

5. Contribution of the study

This work has contributed to scholarship in many ways. It has attempted a fair discussion of the dibia institution as well as an exposé of the categories that of dibia existing in the Igbo cosmology. There is a paucity of materials on the subject of the Igbo concept of dibia. This can be said to owe to some degree to the effect of Christianity and the Igbo people. Many persons who see themselves now as Christians dread the topic of dibia- scholars inclusive. This has therefore added to the few existing literature on the topic. Also, the work has provided some form of checklist for Nollywood practitioners, the audience and the critics of the industry.

6. Implications of the study

This work has thrown open the flood gate for further serious scholarly works on the dibia institution in general and Nollywood interaction with it. Hence, it is expected that academic works in form of students’ long essays, theses, and dissertations will suffice soonest. Full blown academic workshops, seminars, colloquiums and conferences are in view.

7. Recommendation for future study

The dibia institution in Igbo cosmology is shrouded in secrecy. This is also the case with virtually all professions. An age long Igbo adage goes thus “ebube agu na eche agu” (it is the aura of the tiger that protects it). The secrecy shrouding the dibia institution is part of what is sustaining it. Yet, the dibias, especially the educated ones, should at some points let out information to researches to the level that will not affect certain sustaining values and result in abuse of the profession.

8. Conclusion

Often people claim they know what the dibia does, but the truth is that the dibia concept has not been adequately studied and therefore little or nothing is known about the dibia to represent them accurately. Being a dibia is a culturally endorsed professional role. The dibia took care of a bulk of the needs of the Igbo people long before the coming of the colonial master and still do same for some persons now. They are also traditional scholars with very vast knowledge of the history and culture of the people. The dibia institution is still known to settle cases that defy the contemporary western peacemaking processes.

It could be right to say that the activities of the Christian missionaries and the attendant western civilization greatly changed the religious landscape in Igboland and misinterpreted the traditional practices of the people. However, several decades after colonization, it is a bit harsh to still attribute this cultural neo-colonization to the Europeans. This is more so now that we have the instruments to re-tell our stories and set some records straight. One of such instruments is the film medium. How the dibia is stigmatized and referred to as a native doctor, witch doctor, pagan priest, healer, and other nuances over time in Nollywood is worrisome and does not in actual sense reflect deeper things in Igbo life and

culture. It must be requested here that Nollywood filmmakers attempt to abandon their stereotyped image of the dibia in Igbo cosmology and conduct research on the dibia institution. It will shock the filmmakers to discover that their church members, even priests, who are practising dibias. A typical example is Rev Fr Raymond Chukwunyerugwu Arazu (1939 – 2021) a catholic priest in Awka Anambra State who was also the Chairman of Anambra State Traditional Medicine Board. Such a dibia cannot be seen wearing a red, black or white flowing gown or a combination of these colours with cowries and other shells attached, his face of part of it painted with kaolin, and having a shrine under one tree idly waiting for his patients to come for consultation and treatment free of charge.

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