

PERSPECTIVES OF NIGERIAN ETHNIC METAPHORS IN *MYHOUSE HELP***Stephen Umoh (Ph.D)**

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Abstract

The numerous tribes existing in a nation can be a factor of strength and progress through distinguishable contribution of morality along the ethnic decent, but in Nigeria, one of the topmost challenges is dual loyalty which ethnicity comes first. The attempt to highlight the generalized outlook of each Nigerian tribe based on its image at the central stage has been escaping exhaustive critical attention. Using qualitative method based on labeling theory of Howard Becker which focuses on the way people are stereotyped based on what is conspicuous in their cultural dispositions to others. The study analyze My House Help, a recent Nigerian movie with the intention of identify the various ethnic metaphors that each tribe is stereotyped. Findings show that each ethnic group has a generalized metaphoric denotation pointing at what the ethnic group mostly indulges in. the Igbos are portrayed as money-mongers, and wayo, Warris are Wafi, the Kalabari women are basket-nyash, Akwa/Cross are Boi-boi, Hausas are beg-beg, while the Fulanis are head-nodders. Each ethnic group attempts to project the values of its tribe by accrediting the best of their deeds to their ethnic background. The study concludes that the proper use of film medium can unify and promote Nigeria, indicating that filmmaking should be restricted to only those who are knowledgeable with the socio-cultural fact of the ethnic outlook of the nation to mold it to a didactic instrument for social reform.

Keywords: Creativity, Ethnicity, Metaphors, *My-House-Help*, Nigeria,

Introduction

The use of films to portray social issues has made filmmaking and drama the most intimate and reliable media for coding socio-cultural undertones that identify the way people are looked, taken to be or labeled. In a country like Nigeria, there are many ethnic groups. In the view of Elizabeth Isichei, "Nigeria has more than Two hundred and fifty ethnic groups" (77). This is corroborated by Emmanuel Iroh where he asserts that "Nigeria is a conglomeration of multi cultural and multi ethnic groups, made up of people from different cultural and ethnic nationalities" (8). These ethnic groups maintain a distinguishable culture and a sense of homogeneity bound by language.

Describing a people based on their language is a common knowledge. However, in recent Nigerian films, certain metaphors are appropriated to various people based on their ethnic peculiarities. These metaphors are used symbolically. According to Friedrich Ungerer and Jorg Schmid:

A metaphor links a referent to a seeming quality in directly or indirectly capturing of the name or outlook. The scorch and target are not conceived in isolation... A metaphor is not only the property inherent in the individual concepts but the structure... A metaphor is the mapping of the structure of a source model unto a target model. As the distinction between concept and cognitive model is often vague, we use the more neutral terms such as concept and target. (118)

The ethnic referents about Nigerian tribes are basically framed along abstractions that are quite typical of the people. There are people called “beg-beg” in Nigeria, there are the ones called the “house maids”, there are the ones known as “money-mongers”, there are the ones known to be “dirtier” – All these referents are understandable as they depict each ethnic frontier in the nation as represented in contemporary films.

Despite the attempt to unite the nation as a people with a common destiny in a republic, the nation is rather divided along ethnic identity, and the upsurge for any leadership role bends towards the ethnic self, resulting to dual loyalty. More so, each ethnic group attempts to justify its worth at the public space through elaborate argument and self-appraisal. According to Benson Oluikpe, “dual loyalty divides the mind to consider the general interest and a specific one... the specific overrides the general leading to bias in action” (216). Such loyalty to one is the beginning of disloyalty to the other. Consequently, as Paul-Gordon Chandler observes, “ethnicity overstretched in a public or general sphere result to identity politics and unnecessary strife over minor issues” (37).

This fidelity to the ethnic 'self', results in all manners of criticism at the effort of others especially in matters of national interest but tend to elevate ethnocentrism over patriotism. Most times, it raises unnecessary cynicism and cast baseless doubts at people's effort, especially when it is glaring enough that a particular thing should be said, done or handled in a particular way. Apart from the negative aspect, there is equally some positive outcome that promotes variety in this attitude. For instance, the making of *suya* and the spicing is peculiar to Hausas, the cooking of *edikang-ikong* to public cognizance and appreciation is peculiar to Ibibio, Efik, Annang (Akwa Ibom and Cross River) labeled “Calabar”. The independent management of even a futile project to an industrious venture is peculiar to the Igbos. All these bring a sense of cultural identification and politics; even in dressing, the identity is showcased. According to Anthony Olaoye:

Cultural dress of the Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and other ethnic groups in Nigeria are the quintessence of a true Nigerian culture. The Hausa *caftan*, the Igbo trousers and long silk top, and the Yoruba *Dansiki*, *Buba* and *Soro*, and *Agbada* are really identity markers.... This dress code,... however, accommodate people's religion, ethnicity, taste, sex, climatic conditions and modernity (115).

Beyond Olaoye comment on denotation of ethnicity in dressing, Umoh further adds that “naturally, makeup designs can present various cultures enhance cultural aesthetics, artistic style and tradition... (as) articulate value concept and relative experience in nature, arts and human experience” (204). Another instance is in language, which Jo Okome mentions that “there are many metaphoric expressions used in Nigeria to make reference to both good manners and bad ones... along tribal decent” (119). Various dramatic components can be combined to code a piece of information in a movie.

Recent Nollywood films have been trying to portray this diversity by dramatizing the various metaphors used to denote certain ethnic undertones in Nigeria, and how these undertones have been used to update and consolidate ethnic politics in the nation. This paper is a critical evaluation of this factor, using *My House Help*, as paradigm.

Theoretical Framework

This work is based on Howard Becker's Labeling Theory which came to global focus in the early 1960s. The theory focuses on the way people are stereotyped based on what is conspicuous in their cultural dispositions to others, which Umoh *et al* call circumstance of appeal to a general than a personal one”

(98). Nonetheless, it is usually the negative attitudes that sustain the pitch of label in the society (Sjostrom 15). To this effect, there are distinguishable attitude people put up to impress which the crescendo of its ovation last longer or even transcends another generation and there those ones that were too sarcastic to escape the mind whenever issues bothering on them are highlighted. In this context, good qualities seldom last but bad ones regenerate after the persons who do them. In Elijah John's view, labeling theory emphasizes the debase human nature over the impressive, paying attention to what a person or group may like doing. It is the stereotype leveled at persons whom their deeds may have raised some absurd or negativity in the society (77). The theory holds that the society attaches labels to certain people following the way they behave and present their attitudes to the views of all.

It is possible to see one person or group of persons constantly doing a similar thing in a similar manner. According to Stefan Sjostrom, "labeling theory takes an interest in the social process where certain people are defined as deviant by society. This often involves certain power dynamics, and the labeling is often understood as a form of social control" (15). The theory is practically applied in the determination of the deviant and orderly in the society. Therefore, as Stephen Umoh, acknowledges, labeling may garner from numerous social indicators (104) According to Becker:

... Every society is subject to a specific volume of norms and convention.... The citizens model in them as the society progress and spreads to social groups with sub-cultures... Social groups create deviance by making the rules whose interaction constitute deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsider..., one to whom the label has been applied; deviant behaviour is behaviour that people so label..., and are, in most cases, unfavourable (39).

By way of evaluating Becker's opinion, every act that human beings do in the society is assessed as good or bad based on the society's standard drawn from the laid down norms. However, the society acts as a watch-dog to the activities people do in every facet of life. Labeling theory elaborates the basis persons, people, or ethnic groups are stereotyped. Labeling can affect people's self-esteem, can temper with their reputation, can smear their repute with filth, and may even stimulate the consciousness of inadequacy in a race for fortune which hyped-personality, undaunted confidence and serenity of temperance among others define. That is to say "a label defines an individual as a particular kind of person. A label is not neutral. It contains an evaluation of the person to whom it is applied" (Haralambos, Holborn and Heald 335). Therefore, "labeling undermines a person's moral integrity and diminishes his status as a moral being.... what a society frowns at together with the prohibitive attitude is conceptualized" (Williams 44). As Dipo Irele intones, for this purpose, the theory functions as a social concept on one hand and as a moral speculation on the other "by creating a split between belief and character on the one hand and conduct on the other" (10).

The relevance of this theory to the research is that metaphors identified in the film are mere social labeling on the tribes portrayed. The theory gives some insight to the social conception of human activities of persons that condemnation or appraisal may stigmatize a people or promote them in the society.

Synopsis of *My House Help*

The film was written by Andy Nnadi, directed by Kenneth Nwabueze and distributed by Andy Best to the public in 2019. The characters spread across significant ethnic groups in Nigeria highlighting the names other people use either derogatorily or specifically based on an antecedence to address each tribe. The film focuses on domestic issue.

Chief Amadi is an Igbo Business Mogul. His anger with the wife over a minor fracas results in his sending her away. She leaves young Klint under the care of Edafe, a randy Warri youth, who is addicted to alcoholism. Klint is gradually fed with all sort of alcoholic drinks. He grows to be addicted to drinking, and he drinks to stupor, which every member of the family understands.

Paddy, a Calabar young graduate, is directed to Madam, Chief Amadi's new wife, for a house help job. The bike-man that rides him to search for the needed location bumps into Klint, a drunk. They exchange words of abuse at each other. Klint mentions that one day, Paddy would become a boy while he would be the master. They depart. Paddy is interrogated at the gate by James as Madam appears to concur that she actually needed a house help. As the interrogation goes on, Madam discloses that it is Chief or his son, Klint, that will endorse his working in the house as a house help. Instantly, Klint saunters in and approves Paddy's employment after subjecting him to a series of humiliation in response to the antecedence of their meeting.

On the other hand, James, seeks to visit his family. His first son, among numerous children, obstructs his making love to his wife by refusing to sleep and openly questioning what they want to do. In the morning, James pawns him to a Mallam by tricking both of them for bread and garri. Mallam indoctrinates him and converts him to Muslim. The boy practically buys more choice-food to inflate his father's bill. Paddy's jovial attitude and insight in human nature endears him to all the family members. Mr. Amadi sees the possibility of his only son, Klint, becoming responsible from the advice and management of Paddy. He wishes Paddy is his son. However, the visit of Paddy's mother from the States unfolds that she is Chief Amadi's wife who was sent packing some years back; and that she is the mother to Paddy and Klint. She explains that she was pregnant while leaving; and that Paddy is the child from the pregnancy. This causes the family to reunite.

Ethnic Metaphor in *My House Help*

A metaphor is a name directly given to something in an indirect reference. According to Rumanus Egudu, a metaphor is “an indirect comparison. It operates on the principle of equation... to suggest an idea of life” (17). As Dennis Maquail puts it, “our thought processes are structured along metaphoric lines” (98). A metaphor is a way of saying that something is something else, which elicits a referent of indirectness in a direct expression. It deepens the depth of a riddle expressing that life itself is a riddle. Actually:

Metaphors give the thing the name that belongs to something else,... create verbal images to create pictures in our minds ... a thing used for something else. Connections are made between concepts that we might not even consider as related... (a) Metaphor is the omnipresent principle of thought (Gross 92).

In describing people of the world, some are presented as people to emulate while some are not. Some races have historical experience that their situations stereotype them. All these assumptions are wrapped in figures of speech. The most commonly used figure to make reference to a people based on how they are prejudiced is calling them a name that is suggested than direct. This gives the clue to racial metaphor, and in the view of Umoh, “it is conveyed through the use of codes” (282).

Ethnic metaphor is a nomenclature used in describing people from other ethnic group or race. It conveys the idea of stereotyping the human race to behavioural pattern and idiosyncrasies of either strengths or weakness. Such metaphor, according to Seema Hasan, “is a prejudice evolving stereotypical thinking about minority group. A stereotype is a rigid image of the nature and characteristics of a group and its members, one that is bad is held more or less without regards to facts” (55). This means, “all races (ethnicity) have their geniuses and their idiots” (Henslim 199).

Every ethnic group in Nigeria engages in so many forms of business and activities to make money, but Igbo tribe is specifically labeled as people who are extremely engrossed and obsessed with the acquisition of money. Chief Amadi is into business. He makes much money but barely gives time and consideration to other issues in his house. Through the excessive desire to own money, he sends his wife out of his home and entrusted his tender son in the hands of a wayward servant. Chief Amadi is addressed as *Ogwu-ego* (money monger) by someone whom he does some business with. This metaphor is peculiar to the Igbo people.



Plate 1: Igbo = Money Mongers (*My House Help*)

The tribe in Nigeria primarily referred to as beggars are the Hausas. Other tribes may seek help or stay on the way side begging for alms, they hardly get stereotyped as “beg-beg”. The metaphor for Hausas beggars overtly acknowledged in Nigeria is “Hausa-Beg-Beg”. It may not mean that all Hausas are beggars, it is a metaphor that, once spoken, the person decodes that it is the Hausa person it is being referred to. This is portrayed in James' son whom Malam has turned to a Muslim. The metaphor further suggests that beggars from North/Hausa are the displaced people



Plate 3: Akwa-cross = House Help (*My House Help*)

Out of curiosity or fact that people from old Cross River State used to be hired as house maids, gateman, nannies or such help-persons, virtually every house-help in contemporary Nigerian film is an Ekaette, an Akpan or on Etuk. “Boi-boi” is used to identify people from both Akwa Ibom State and Cross River State currently.



Plate 4: Fulani = Head-nodders (*My House Help*)

Other people worship their God still bowing down at all times, but the tribe identified as head-nodders are the Fulanis. This is portrayed in the film in Malam. All the attributes of the Fulanis are incorporated in Malam. The people dwelling in Northern Nigeria are predominantly Muslims. The Fulani, the Habe (Hausa), the Kanuri, the Ffulde, the Idoma, the Igala, the Nupe, the Ejagam etc., were all conquered and subjected to Islamic faith. Upon their zeal and devote adherence to the faith, the Fulanis are metaphorically referred to as the head-nodders.



Plate 5: Kalabari = Basket Nyash (*My House Help*)

My House Help also features the ethnic group metaphorically addressed as the basket-nyash. This bends the metaphor to only women. *Nyash* is a pidgin English word for buttocks. This metaphor is usually used to denote people from Kalabari of River State. James wife is addressed as the basket and she expresses the quality in her production of many children.



Plate 6: Warri/ Wafi (*My House Help*)

The subtext of the film is on clever repartee and the beauty of extempore. Mr. James (John Okafor) was naturally a standup comedian, while Klint (Klint Igwemba) is a renowned comedian. There is much display of the Warri Creole by the three characters but the typical grandiloquence of the Warri person is portrayed in Paddy. He dazzles everyone with sweet sounding rush of speech which are often biting enough to nail him some times.



Plate 8: Igbo = Wayo (*My House Help*)

The metaphor is always said: “Igbo-plays-wayo”. The Igbo people are always conceived as being deceitful, dubious, cunning and unreliable in terms of money and trust for deals that require sincerity. *Wayo* means deceit. This metaphor is portrayed in Mr. James who deceives Malam and systematically pawns his son to him, only for Malam to end up losing his money and losing the child. Igbo-plays-wayo is captured in the film through that sub-plot.

Labeling is a socially projected identity, which may evolve from what Anietie Udofia christens the series of acting (pretentious attitudes) people put up in different occasions” (648), or from the set David Myers discusses to have been “exhibited in one's beliefs, or intended behavior” (130). Whichever side, a negative labeling in Nigeria paints a group of persons a permanent stain, while the positive one elevates person to a superlative ethnic frontier. It raises the undertone of identity politics in the nation.

Conclusion

Using a recent Nigerian film, *My House Help*, this paper unravels the various ethnic metaphors and their import to the socio-political outlook of the current Nigerian society. There is an indication that the various problems emanating from ethnic differences, politics, religion down to revenue appropriation seem to spring from labeling of, maybe, a particular person that pervades an entire tribe. This attitude has, for decades, entered the centre stage of Nigeria's economy, and has been stumbling block, bedeviling the collective thrusts for national unity and development.

However, some of the labeling seems to be negative while some hold some positive motivation to those ethnic groups linked with it. *My House Help* portrays Nigerians labeled as house-helps, the materialists, the beggars, there are the gatemen, and cooks and baby sitters, the garrulous and the tricksters – All, wound in costume, makeup, action and space which the society, appearance and mindset encode in symbols. This is an indication that mankind is made or destroyed by symbolic interaction and aspersions cast upon persons over time, down to negative social labels on people, can be addressed through creative arts.

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