Original Research Article

Cultural Representation and Policy in Nigerian Animation: A Case Study of Dawn of Thunder: Origins of Sango and Ajaka: Lost in Rome

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ABSTRACT

Animation, which could be said to be the missing half of the broader Nollywood film industry, has been growing underground and quietly emerging through solo interest amongst Nigerian media entrepreneurs. The industry has been undeterred by the harsh environment and non-existent funding structures and has ultimately broken through to the international networking scene for collaboration with local storylines. This study examines how Nigerian cultural representation operates as a form of policy within the Nigerian animation industry, using Dawn of Thunder: Origins of Sango and Ajaka: Lost in Rome as case studies. As Nigerian animators increasingly engage with indigenous mythology and historical narratives in their stories, their creative choices serve not only as artistic expression but also as cultural policy, shaping identity, heritage preservation, and global perception. Through the films' textual analysis and contextual interpretation, this paper examines how these two animations reimagine Yoruba deities and historical figures, incorporating cultural values, aesthetics, and political subtexts into their narratives and visual styles. The analysis highlights how the deliberate inclusion of traditional motifs, languages, and mythologies in these films serves as both a form of cultural reclamation and as a means of exerting soft power on the global stage, situating animation as the dwarfed half of a healthy Nollywood film industry. This complementary half of the industry also adequately situates animated films as a tool for nation-building and international cultural diplomacy. The findings suggest that in the absence of robust state-led cultural frameworks, Nigerian animators are assuming the role of cultural policymakers, asserting control over representation and narrative ownership in the digital age.

Keywords: Nigerian Animation, Cultural Policy, Cultural Representation, Nollywood, Film Industry

1.0   INTRODUCTION

Historically, African cinema has always served the purpose of reclaiming African identity and cultural autonomy from every form of colonial influences and Western domination. Pioneering African filmmakers, such as Ousmane Sembène and others, consciously positioned film as a "night school," and used film, according to Diawara (1987), as a medium whereby African audiences could re-encounter, re-imagine, and re-enact their histories and cultural values. While the Nollywood film industry has become a central force in popular culture in Nigeria and parts of Africa, the way filmmakers in Nollywood engage with indigenous mythology and cultural representation in their materials has, according to Haynes (2016), been

inconsistent sometimes, often prioritising commercial melodrama over nuanced and meaningful cultural storytelling. Other scholars, such as Barber (2000) and Jedlowski (2012), have also come up with the argument that that cultural representation in Nigerian film is vital not only for identity construction but also for the noble purpose of preserving heritage in a world that is rapidly becoming a global village. This underscores the importance and value of cultural representation in media content, especially films consumed by a particular group of people.

The Nigerian film industry, which is known the world over as Nollywood, has established itself as one of the most vibrant film industries in the world, characterised by its high-volume output and its capacity to reflect everyday Nigerian realities on screen. However, while Nollywood's live-action films are the major products on the market both locally and even internationally, the field of animation has remained relatively unknown, often overshadowed by the sheer scale of live-action cinema. In recent years, however, the animation medium of filmmaking has gradually emerged and taken its place as an alternative art form through which Nigerian creators are experimenting with storytelling, creating materials rooted in their cultural identity, and worthy of international attention. Therefore, animation in Nigeria has become more than just a technical element of storytelling; it has become a medium for reimagining indigenous history, folklore, and mythology, as well as for exploring contemporary issues such as gender, politics, and social values.

As an example, a small part of the many critical issues facing Nollywood live-action cinema is that it is sometimes inconsistent in the representation of women. In an act of cliché, it most often represents women as shallow, lesser beings. Scholars such as Abah (2008) and Olayiwola (2003) have also critiqued the Nollywood industry for consistently returning to stereotypes of women as submissive wives or diabolical manipulators, thereby reinforcing patriarchal ideologies, or doing it just for cheap laughs. In contrast, the younger Nigerian animated films appear to be pushing boundaries of gender representation by creating stories with themes of female heroism, resilience and moral values born out of African culture, and also celebrating female empowerment. Animated films like *Lady Buckit and Motley Mopsters (2020), Malika: Warrior Queen (2019), Iyanu (2024), and Iwaju (2023)* are vivid examples of this.

Nigerian animators are also making a conscious effort to reclaim the country's cultural identity by incorporating African historical elements, legends and mythology into their animated films. This is a conscious attempt by Nigerian animators to reclaim cultural identity and reposition it within the global animation industry, which is why this study is concerned with the cultural representation embedded in Nigerian animated films and the role the country's cultural policy plays in shaping their production, reception, and eventual consumption. Also, while scholarly attention and spotlight that has been on Nollywood live-action cinema has been extensive in the past decade, the animation

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sector still remains under-researched, especially when it comes to its cultural importance and relevance to creative industry policy.

2.0 Design and Methodology

In order to address this obvious gap, two case studies were analysed in this article. They are: *"Dawn of Thunder: Origins of Sango",* a film by Komotion Studios, and *"Ajaka: Lost in Rome",* an animated series by Spoof Animation. Employing a qualitative textual and content analysis, this study investigates how Nigerian animated films articulate, negotiate, and rework the Nigerian cultural-policy objectives, indigenous identity promotion, and pressures from global creative markets. Both of the case studies demonstrate how Nigerian animation not only preserves and projects Yoruba mythology but also navigates the complexities of production management, funding constraints, and audience engagement in an industry with limited institutional support, even though they are ultimately carrying out an important cultural policy mandate.

During analysis, this study applies two complementary approaches, which are representation theory and cultural policy analysis. Representation theory, as discussed by Hall (1997), helps us to examine how the selected films construct and communicate ideas about Yoruba identity, mythology, and cultural heritage. This approach is used to focus on how meaning is produced through the visual style of a film, its narrative choices, and in this case, the symbolic references within an animated film. By analysing what is shown, the symbolic meaning behind it, and how it is shown, this approach

helps to reveal the way local filmmakers interpret and recreate indigenous culture, and how it is communicated to their audiences. Cultural policy analysis, on the other hand, helps to provide the institutional and economic context to how these representations are able to moe to life. It analyses and explores how government policies, funding structures, and creative industry structural frameworks influence animation production, content, and distribution (Ebewo & Sirayi, 2009a; Hesmondhalgh, 2013). This perspective also considers how animation, as a developing art form in Nigeria, responds to the limited government policy support and other industry challenges while seeking recognition within the national and international stage. By using these two theoretical frameworks together, through this study, we are able to connect the symbolic work of cultural representation with the structural realities of policy and production. The analysis, therefore, examines both the creative choices within the films and the broader systems that enable or restrict such expressions of cultural identity.

Primary data for this study were obtained from audiovisual materials, semi-structured interviews, and other supporting documents. The two selected films were analysed alongside other production materials, such as directors' notes from online press materials, festival documents, and box office records. Personal interviews with key industry practitioners provided insights into production realities, creative intent, production management and policy awareness. This, we hoped, has helped in enriching and validating the textual analysis.

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Secondary data in this study comprises of the Nigeria's cultural policy documents, its subsequent review drafts, creative industry reports, and other scholarly works on African cinema studies and cultural production. These materials were examined alongside the films and interviews to connect national policy goals with actual production practices.

In many ways, most animation films that have emerged from Nigeria function as cultural reclamation projects. This is because many elements of cultural influence and identity are recognised in their production design. Scholars such as Okome (2019) and Adenekan (2021) also highlight that Nigerian digital creators are increasingly using animation to counter Western dominance and influence in animated storytelling, which has historically framed African cultures as either exotic or inferior, depending on which part of the world or thought process one leans on. With the continued advancements and development of animation technology, many African stories, especially Nigerian Yoruba folklore, can now be easily and effectively told through animation. Stories with depth and meaning, featuring strong lessons in morals and virtues that could not be represented or produced in live action, can now be designed and produced in an aesthetically pleasing way for people to experience. By adapting Yoruba mythology, such as the stories of Sango and Ajaka, into visual narratives, Nigerian animation also serves as a bridge between oral traditions and contemporary media technology.

Case studies such as *Dawn of Thunder: Origins of Sango* demonstrate how animation serves as an archive of Yoruba indigenous belief systems, visualising deities, cosmologies, and oral traditions for new generations in Nigeria and globally. Similarly, *Ajaka: Lost in Rome* blends Yoruba history with Roman gladiatorial mythology, positioning African narratives within a transcontinental cinematic universe. These works not only entertain but also preserve endangered cultural oral heritage and traditions, offering diasporic audiences a channel through which to reconnect with African heritage. Nigerian animation thus has the potential to reposition African myths at the centre of global narrative discourse, offering counter-histories that challenge the dominance of Hollywood and Japanese anime in shaping global animated culture.

3.0 Cultural Policy and the Nigerian Animation Industry

The definition of culture is an interesting process because it is likely that no two definitions of "culture" would be precisely the same if one were to gather various people to define it. According to McGuigan, the "term culture is now used in so many different ways that its analytical utility is in doubt. For policy-oriented cultural studies, Ebewo & Sirayi (2009b) observed that it is wisest to concentrate on practices that are first and foremost about signification, identity, and pleasure. The Nigerian government introduced the National Cultural Policy in September 1988. Culture, according to this policy document, is

"…the entirety of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempt to meet the challenges in their environment, which gives order and

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meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic, and religious norms and modes of organisation, thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours. (Fasuyi 1973)."

Cultural policy serves as the framework through which Nigeria defines, preserves, and promotes its cultural identity. Since the formalisation of the National Cultural Policy in 1988, and subsequent updates in the Quadrennial Periodic Report (QPR) to UNESCO in 2012, the Nigerian state has sought to balance heritage preservation with some economic growth in the cultural industries. While traditional performance, artefacts, literature, and the film industry of Nollywood have benefitted from this recognition, animation has largely remained invisible within these frameworks. However, animation, by its capacity to visualise mythology, folklore, and history, offers a unique avenue for cultural preservation, presentation and representation.

One of the aims of Nigeria's Cultural Policy, launched in 1988, is to promote creativity, ensure the continuity of traditional skills, and their progressive updating to serve modern developmental needs, as well as Nigeria's contribution to the global growth of culture and ideas. Cultural preservation is to be aided by research and documentation. This is achieved through the establishment of administrative structures and the provision of funds for their implementation, as well as the establishment of seven cultural parastatals, each with its statutory responsibilities. These responsibilities, among other things, aim to promote and preserve the diversity of cultural expressions. They are involved in various stages of creation, production, distribution/dissemination, and participatory enjoyment of Nigeria's diverse cultures. The government agencies are as follows:

National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC): this agency takes care of crafts, festivals, traditional medicine, sports, cuisine, fashion and textiles.

The National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM): is responsible for caring for Nigeria's numerous artefacts, antiquities, and heritage sites. In Nigeria, numerous artefacts have been included in the prohibited export list, and as a rule, crafts and artworks to be exported must be certified by the National Commission for Museums and Monuments as being excluded from the list. This is being done to prevent illicit exportation of cultural items.

National Troupe of Nigeria (NTN): this agency defines and monitors policies relating to operations of the troupe; operates and artistically develops the troupe as a performing body whose repertoire shall embrace dance, music and drama; guides and gives leadership to local efforts in artistic experimentation and strives to ensure that the troupe is a centre of excellence.

National Gallery of Art (NGA): This is the repository of artistic creations since the country's inception as a nation. The gallery also promotes research on arts education and appreciation.

The Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilisation (CBAAC): This centre was established after the Festival of All African Arts (FESTAC), which took place in 1977. To this day,

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the centre serves as a repository for numerous Nigerian arts and crafts that were showcased at the festival, as well as materials from the festival's colloquium.

The National Institute for Cultural Orientation (NICO): This is a cultural reorientation institute. This agency is at the forefront of safeguarding Nigerian culture through education, training and workshops. The institution, for instance, organises courses and training for people who are interested in Nigerian languages. This adult education programme is aimed at protecting Nigerian languages.

National Theatre (NT): This organisation takes care of the national symbol of art, the national theatre, which was built and used for Festival 77; it is a rallying point for Nigerian performing artists.

The Federal Government took further steps by establishing the Federal Ministry of Culture and Tourism to oversee all the other parastatals. By mid-2006, the ministry had renamed itself the Federal Ministry of Tourism, Culture, and National Orientation. Most recently, in 2023, it was renamed the Federal Ministry of Arts, Culture, Tourism, and the Creative Economy. Its mission was to promote the country's rich cultural heritage by identifying, developing, and marketing its diverse cultural and tourism potential. In addition to these cultural agencies, the federal Ministry of Culture collaborates with other ministries to protect various aspects of cultural expression. For example, in partnership with the federal Ministry of Education, the teaching of Nigeria's three major languages - Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba - has been institutionalised at both primary and secondary school levels. Every student is expected to learn at least one of these major languages. To ensure that artists benefit from and reap the rewards of their labour, the government has supported the fight against piracy through the establishment of the Nigerian Copyright Commission (NCC) to provide better copyright protection. Furthermore, the federal government has begun establishing cultural industries across the states; seven such industries have been set up. These centres are built reflecting the architecture of the local society, with each emphasising the predominant trade and handicraft of the people in that state. The centres are to be commissioned and handed over to local communities to manage. Workshops and training sessions are organised for artisans at each centre, and there are plans to form a cooperative society to improve access to funds and develop joint marketing strategies. This framework can be perfectly extended to the developing animation industry.

While Nollywood has benefitted from some government recognition as part of Nigeria's creative economy, animation remains largely absent from the benefits of Nigeria's cultural policy frameworks. Nigerian cultural policy, historically shaped by documents such as the 1988 National Cultural Policy and subsequent revisions, emphasises the preservation of heritage and the promotion of creative industries, but never specifies or recognises animation as a distinct sector, despite its relevance in heritage preservation, youth employment, and digital innovation, a

phenomenon that boomed in the last decade. This lack of formal recognition has invariably resulted in limited funding, weak institutional support, and inadequate training infrastructure for animators.

The size of the global 3D animation market, estimated at USD 13.75 billion in 2018, is expected to grow, as observed by Amogh et al. (2022), at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 11.0% from 2019 to 2027. Thousands of people need to work in animation, multimedia, advertising, gaming, filmmaking, and web design studios and businesses, as the industry is both large and rapidly expanding. Globally, the animation industry is supported by formal training institutions, research and development in software tools, unions, guilds, and government policies tailored for the creative economy. However, the low number of training studios in the country, all of which are owned by private individuals, and the high cost of learning any 3D package in most of these studios do not seem to help matters. They may struggle to accommodate the high number of artists required to sustain the animation industry if Nigeria is to compete on the global stage. Some studios and training centres charge as much as one hundred thousand to four hundred thousand naira(100,000-400,000) for four to eight weeks of training, in just one 3D package. Training studios like Earlybell, Leinad Studios, Ai Multimedia Academy, Sky Vfx Studios, Torilo Academy, 32ad Animation Studios, Orange Vfx Academy, Etc, although advertise training in animation, also only train one package like character modelling, rigging, texturing, at a time, meaning prospective

trainees will have to pay for each package every time. It is no surprise that many people cannot afford this, given the high inflation and poverty levels in Nigeria. This is the gap created by the lack of government structure and policy frameworks.

The capitalistic attitude of training studios in Nigeria, which operate outside of government oversight, coupled with the high cost of learning 3D packages, has invariably contributed to the impediment to animation growth in Nigeria. Specialised knowledge and technical abilities are required in the field of animation. Therefore, the lack of formal animation education and training programs in Nigeria, which can only happen with government intervention and recognition, and subsequent inclusion in the country's cultural policy, has led to a talent scarcity among animators and other industry experts, which would make it more challenging to create high-calibre animated films that will compete on the world stage, despite the potential.

Globally, major animation projects rely on diversified financing models that include public funding, like government grants and tax incentives. Hollywood productions also benefit from well-developed tax rebate programs, while Japanese studios leverage long-term franchise models, supported by strong merchandising and cross-media adaptations. In Nigeria, the source of funding remains primarily through self-finance or sourced from private investors. *Lady Buckit and the Motley Mopsters* was able to secure millions of Naira in funding through private equity, but had limited or no access infact, to tax incentives or international co-production

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arrangements, which would have aided the producers to recoup some money back. In the case of Komotion Studios, *Dawn of Thunder* was largely self-financed through a cross-subsidisation from commercial advertising projects done by the studio, and an eventual Angel Investor. Nigeria currently lacks official government-supported animation funds, reliable tax incentives, or established investor frameworks. Instead, Nigerian animation studios often depend on alternative methods such as self-financing, support from the diaspora, international co-productions, and, if fortunate, crowdfunding, like the *Ajaka: Lost in Rome's* Kickstarter campaign.

Scholars like Asemah and Edegoh (2012) and Adesokan (2011) have noted that the absence of a coherent policy framework for emerging media and creative industries usually hampers their development, despite their potential to contribute to the nation's cultural diplomacy, aiding in its visibility and competition on the global stage. A cursory analysis of Nigeria's small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and the start-up ecosystem will highlight the fact that inconsistent government support and commitment in the space, and limited structural and institutional support particularly for creative and technology driven business like animation studios has continued to hinder access to sustainable funding for entrepreneurs. As a result of this setback, Nigeria's Nollywood faces the challenge of finding sustainable funding sources for a thriving entertainment and hospitality industry, as financial resources, which is needed to fuel the efforts of independent filmmakers, Ojieson (2017) asserts, are scarce. Ultimately, owners of independent production companies often face constraints that limit their ability to fully express their ideas, particularly in terms of artistic vitality and technical verve, due to an inadequate internal funding base. The animation industry in Nigeria is specifically experiencing this issue because, unlike live-action productions, it requires a significant number of resources, including software, power, technology, and professional animators, to develop and maintain an animation studio. The benefits of a government-supported creative industry can be clearly seen if one were to compare insights from Japan, South Korea, and the USA's Hollywood.

If similar strategies from these other countries and industries were to be adopted by the Nigerian government for the animation industry, animation could become a cultural and economic force in both domestic and international markets. To unlock this potential, Nigeria's cultural policy must ultimately recognise animation as a distinct industry, and of course provide it with sustainable funding mechanisms, help create and enforce systems that will strengthen IP protections, and ultimately leverage animation as a tool for cultural diplomacy.

Ajaka: Lost in Rome – Spoof Animation Studio

Ajaka: Lost in Rome follows the story of Ajaka, the deposed third king and Alafin of Oyo, who was betrayed by his younger brother, Sango, in order to come king, and then sent into exile. Ajaka While in exile, Ajaka was captured by the legendary Amazons of Dahomey. He was sold

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into slavery and transported to ancient Rome. There, he is forced to fight as a gladiator in the deadly arenas of the empire, for a Dominus who promised him his freedom after a certain number of victories had been met. The film shifts between the present Rome and ancient Oyo through a series of flashbacks. With vivid visuals, the film contrasts the world of Yoruba spirituality and political history with the brutality of Roman imperial and gladiatorial scene. The film opens with a montage, introducing us to the world of Ife and the ancient Oyo Empire, with cinematic visuals depicting the everyday lives of the kingdom, accompanied by Yoruba chants and the rhythms of the bata and gangan drums. The voice-over of Ajaka serves as a narrator/guide to the dual worlds we witnessed.

With the way the story is set up, the Yoruba identity is depicted as a global entity, rather than something confined to a specific time or place. It shows that the Yoruba culture can exist anywhere, and evolve, not just in Yorubaland. The film, in a symbolic way, expands Yoruba cosmology beyond Africa by placing Ajaka in ancient Rome, giving its history and storytelling relevance on the global stage. Reflecting post-colonial realities on the continent, our African identities can sometimes travel and still survive amidst other cultural spaces. This has has given allowed for the enforcement of the theory of decolonization, reclaiming the authority to retell and reinterpret African stories from the African perspective, and not giving that priviledge to outsiders. This way, even when telling a gladiatorial story from ancient Rome, Yoruba cultural visual elements can still shine through.

Ayodele Elegba founded the Spoof Animation Studio in 2015. Since then, the studio has quickly positioned itself as a leader in creating high-quality 2D animated content in Nigeria, as evidenced by its ability to produce the Series. The studio is especially known for its heavy use of culturally rich materials in their storytelling and are known to adapt popular Nigerian stories into comic book formats, adapting oral traditions and folkore to a modern acceptable format. Examples of these are evident in their works like *StrikeGuard* and *Voyager,* both popular comic book series. Spoof's commitment to innovation in storytelling and cultural creativity earned it the *2016 Digital Lab Africa Competition* award and recognition from both local and international animation communities.

The production studio utilises a lean, in-house production pipeline, all created with a balance of both creative artistry and strategic planning, under Ayodele's creative leadership. The small core team goes through the process of conceptualisation, narrative development, visuals, animation, and also post-production, with little to no opportunity to outsource. Ayodele observed that each project the studio created, especially that of *Ajaka: Lost in Rome*, is done with a careful balance of cultural fidelity and technical proficiency, ensuring quality output as much as possible. With the aim to attracting investors from the onset of a project, each pilot episodes of their series is creatively developed to serve the purpose of proof of concept for another larger-scale production

In terms of funding, *Ajaka: Lost in Rome* was financed using a mixture of internal studio

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generated funds, brand collaborations, and a successful Kickstarter campaign that raised over Twenty Thousand United States Dollars ($20,000). This crowdfunding initiative functioned not only as financial purpose, but also as a huge marketing and publicity campaign.The stunt helped in generating early press coverage, secured the studio features in both Nigerian and African entertainment media outlets, and created a community of early supporters from around the globe. Spoof also used the Kickstarter platform's update function to keep backers engaged with behind-the-scenes footage, concept art, and teaser clips. This strategy helped to foster a sense of co-ownership in those who donated, and eager anticipation among viewers and potential audience members, even long before the pilot's release.

Recognising the Africans in diaspora's appetite for stories based on their heritage, Spoof Animation deliberately positioned *Ajaka: Lost in Rome* as a bridge between entertainment and a sort of cultural reclamation. The studio targeted, as part of its audience demography, African American, Afro-Caribbean, and Afro-European audiences. This was done through social media marketing campaigns that emphasized the Yoruba history and influence present in the film, depicting African warrior traditions, and the intersection of indigenous folklore with epic historical fiction. Spoof used visual elements like snippets from the environment and world of the film, character profiles, and some short videos explaining the cultural references used in the development of the work. Spoof was able to tap into a niche, but yet loyal audiences whose interest in African cultural heritage aligned perfectly with the film's central plot and themes. Even though the details of the financial figures and expenditure remain private and confidential, the ability to utilise the mix of funding structures used on the project signifies that independent animation projects in Nigeria are viable and a vital part of the Nigerian creative economy.

The pilot episode of the series, *Ajaka: Lost in Rome,* premiered on 30 May 2023 at Ebonylife Place, Lagos, an industry high-profile screening event. The occasion served a dual purpose. It could be said to be an industry milestone and a national cultural showcase. The premiere was also used by Spoof Animation as a business development opportunity, using the event to target and promote buy-in from industry stakeholders and potential investors. The event also attracted distribution executives, media representatives, and some cultural influencers present in the county. The studio also leveraged and marketed the premiere as an immersive and exclusive event, which ultimately positioned *Ajaka* as a flagship Nigerian animation intellectual property with great international potential. *Ajaka: Lost in Rome* is also culturally significant to the cultural identity promotion of the nation, because it employs and reimagines African history in an epic, international context. By drawing from actual Yoruba history, particularly the reign of Ajaka, the second Alafin of Oyo, and blending it with Ancient Greco-Roman gladiatorial accounts, which is also an actual world history, Spoof Animation presented a fresh alternative to Western-dominated epic storytelling. This fusion also introduces a fresh

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narrative lens for African storytelling, with the goal of appealing to both local and diaspora audiences.

The film ultimately challenged the wide misconception that using animation as a form of storytelling is strictly a foreign medium and helped to show the Nigerian audiences, both locally and those in the diaspora, that their own myths, histories, and heroes is acceptable, and can be expressed in a format that is widely recognised globally. The series also helped in contributing to the Afrofuturist and African historical fantasy movements internationally, positioning Nigerian animation as a serious creative force. This is because, artistically, the film demonstrates that Nigerian studios can produce animation with high production values, using very intricate and detailed character design and compelling story arcs comparable to international standards.

In creative economic terms, the success of the project demonstrates that Nigerian intellectual property (IP) development in the animation medium can serve as a viable export commodity, thereby helping to diversify Nigeria's entertainment industry beyond live-action Nollywood films. This means that if you have an idea that resonates with people, regardless of the medium, it is an easy sell if done right. Therefore, *Ajaka: Lost in Rome* represents a critical emerging model for independent animation in Nigeria, that is, producing short, high-quality pieces as prototypes to secure funding for larger projects, and also the possibility of growing the industry by bypassing all the institutional challenges and structural frameworks present in the industry.

Although still in the early stages of its distribution life cycle, *Ajaka: Lost in Rome* has been actively positioned for entry into international film and animation festivals, particularly those with a focus on African cinema, historical epics, and animation as a cultural art form. Just like the crowdfunding approach, the use of film festivals also serves multiple purposes. The film is marketed to a broad international audience, but also as a way to attract international buyers, and to position the film for acquisition or co-distribution deals with various international streaming platforms, the possibility of securing a Co-Production Partnership, and the potential to connect with foreign studios and funding bodies that are interested in African stories with a market potential globally.

4.0 Dawn of Thunder; Origins of Sango-Komotion Studios

The opening of the film *Dawn of Thunder: The Origins of Sango* begins with a 2D watercolor sequence that traces the lineage of the Yorubas from the myth of creation by Oduduwa all the way to the establishment of the old Oyo Empire by his youngest child, Oranmiyan. The sequence uses a watercolor painting as a visual style to narrate the story. With the accompaniments of Yoruba chants and the Bata drums, the opening montage firmly grounds the audience in the world of the story set in Yoruba cosmology and provides them with a spiritual and historical foundation for the film. Morphing into a 3D style of animation, the next sequence shows us the

birth of Arabambi (later Sango), in a circumstantial event that can only be divine in nature. His birth was accompanied by lightning and thunderstorms rocking the palace, earning him the name *Arabamibi,* key symbols of his spiritual destiny. With these spiritual circumstances around his birth foreshadowing his eventual transformation into a god-king, Arabambi grew up in the course of the film, gifted, bold and exhibiting a certain curiosity about everything spiritual, as evident in his special friendship with Orere, the palace chief priest and medicine man.

In the rest of the palace, personal intrigues, politics, and rivalry manifest themselves, especially amongst the two queens, Ladun and Torosi, with the effect of their rivalry trickling down to their sons, Ajaka and Arabambi, shaping the dynamics of their relationship. This domestic struggle is a reflection of the broader struggle for power and legitimacy within the four walls of the palace, as Ladun, manipulated by the war general Ajagbo, engineered a series of events that led to the exile of Torosi and Arabambi into Nupe land. This banishment triggered a circle of treachery in the palace of Oyo, but also propels Arabambi on his Hero's journey. While in the land of Nupe, he became friends with Oya, also a gifted young woman, who helped him on his quest to awaken his spiritual powers, as he encountered Obatala and the imprisoned god Sango. Back in the palace, Ajagbo, ruling as proxy through the weak Ajaka, brought chaos and tyranny into the empire. The kingdom was in dire need of a saviour so much that the council of elders, Oyomesi, had to secretly recall Arabambi to restore order. This act triggered a tragic face-off between the two overpowered warriors, so much so that the film, in its climactic final act, transforms from mythological storytelling into a cosmic final battle. Arabambi merges with the god Sango, embodying his spiritual nature of thunder and lightning, bringing down divine justice in his noble quest to reclaim Oyo from corruption. However, his wrath also destroys what he seeks to save, totally destroying the place and his people in the final battle. This end rendered the tale both tragic but also emphasised a redemption arc.

Reanimating and reimagining the legend of the famed god of thunder Sango, the film *Dawn of Thunder: Origins of Sango* functions as an ideological reconstruction of Yoruba cosmology. The presented mythology, not as a distant or forgotten folklore, but as a living system of knowledge that helps in shaping the identity and moral values of the people. By reviving the legend of Sango through digital animation, the film, just like *Ajaka: Lost in Rome*, interprets oral traditions and cultural storytelling heritage into a visual form that fits the modern age. Also, it demonstrates how intangible indigenous assets can coexist with modern technology. Just like the series Ajaka, it also serves as a cultural policy tool that is used to preserve cultural heritage, teach values and morals, and also aid in promoting indigenous identity through a medium often overlooked by government institutions. Through this, the film shows how independent artists use animation to sustain and modernise Yoruba culture, enforcing decolonisation theory by reclaiming the power and ability to tell Yoruba

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stories through using local materials rather than foreign models.

Komotion Studios, the creators of the animated film, based in Lagos, is among the pioneering service animation companies in Nigeria that deliberately employ animation as a medium for storytelling and media productions. The studio's mission reflects a conscious attempt to retell indigenous myths and folklore through modern visual techniques. *Dawn of Thunder* is often considered the first high-profile animated feature-length attempt centred on a Yoruba deity, Sango, the god of thunder, based on its use of motion capture technology.

Although the entire production of Dawn of Thunder was slow and tedious due to low human and financial resources, Komotion pivoted to a streamlined management structure. With Yoruba Iconography a big influence in the project, the small artistic team focused their attention on character design and environmental modelling, trying to get close to reality as much as possible. A hybrid production pipeline was also used, which combined local digital artists with some post-production services outsourced to international vendors. This production decision signifies that, even with limited financial and technological resources, Nigerian animators still find ways to produce their stories and are persistent in showcasing culturally relevant stories. Funding of the project was largely done personally by the studio founder, funnelling proceeds of service animation into the project. During the post-production phase, the project and the studio was lucky enough to have benefited from an angel investor, who helped propel the film to the finish line. This is a privilege not many Nigerian studios get to enjoy, with many shutting down in their infancy. This problem could have easily been rectified, but with the absence of government grants or state funding mechanisms, which is a direct result of the policy vacuum present for Nigerian animation industry, many studios are doomed to fail. Despite these structural issues, Komotion studios still positioned the film as a cultural project, aimed at Nigerian cultural and heritage preservation, rather than producing it purely as a commercial product.

The film draws inspiration from a popular Yoruba legend to drive its plot. This also makes the film popular among Nigerian animators, who have been anticipating the film since the proof of concept was unveiled. Like *Lady Buckit*, the film *"Dawn of Thunder,"* which tells the origin story of Sango, has helped immensely in the preservation of cultural heritage, this time around that of the Yoruba people of southwestern Nigeria. Showcasing traditional stories, myths, and legends in a visually stunning and engaging format can help educate younger generations about their cultural roots and inspire them to appreciate and celebrate Nigerian culture. Just like the case of *Ajaka: Lost in Rome*, the use of costumes and props heavily relies on the indigenous Yoruba fashion concept of agbada and Sokoto for the male characters, and Iro and Gele for the female characters. Employing traditional hairstyles for women, the film sets out to promote heavily the beauty and aesthetics present in the indigenous way of life.

Using the Yoruba culture as a focal point, the film celebrates the Nigerian culture and way of life. It is also positioned to help promote cultural diversity and inclusivity by showcasing the richness and beauty of Nigerian culture to the rest of the world. From a cultural standpoint, *Dawn of Thunder* represents a landmark in reclaiming Yoruba cosmology through animation. By visualising Sango's story, the film preserved a myth that is central to Yoruba identity while introducing it to a younger, digital-savvy audience. For the audience in the diaspora, the film provided an entry point for them to navigate their Yoruba spiritual heritage, filling a cultural void that has been dominated by Western fantasy and superhero narratives for a very long time.

On the economic side of things, the film also represents an important potential for the Nigerian entertainment industry. Upon its eventual release, the movie is expected to generate significant revenue through box office sales and product or character merchandising, which is already in development, according to the Producer and Director of the project. For the investors, there is a potential return on investments to be made through international licensing deals and viewing rights that would be made. In the broader animation industry, skilled animators, artists, and technicians would find employment on the project if and whenever there is an expansion of the franchise. This boom will spark industry growth and the creative economy, as the more animators are engaged, the greater the need for new sets of trained individuals to take their place, thereby directly increasing the manpower and human potential of the Nigerian animation industry. Coupled with the film medium itself, the success of the movie will help grow the local animation industry by attracting more investment and creating a demand for animation-related services and products.

Conclusion

This study argues that the cultural and historical representations in these two case studies, *Ajaka: Lost in Rome* and *Dawn of Thunder; The origins of Sango,* depicts the length Nigerian animators go to in their effort to create digital products and creative materials that challenges the dominance of stereotypes present in Nollywood cinema, while also engaging with global audiences who are hungry for diverse stories. Furthermore, the study highlights how the absence of a clear cultural policy framework for animation production in Nigeria has forced many production studios to depend entirely on international collaborations, crowdfunding, and diaspora audiences to ensure their survival. This is a double-edged sword, as this arrangement is detrimental sometimes to the type of cultural representations and influences that emerge in the finished products, a clear case of 'he who pays the piper dictates the tune'.

Thus, the trajectory of Nigerian animation shows us both the resilience of creative practitioners making things work in the industry despite all odds and the urgent need for more inclusive state-backed cultural policies. Effective structural frameworks could ensure sustainable financing, intellectual property protection, and the

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development of local distribution networks, thereby enabling Nigerian animation to flourish as both an economic and cultural force. Animation presents a new opportunity. Unlike live-action cinema, where location, props, and a proper mastery of special effects creation often restrict adequate or realistic representation, animation allows for a more expansive and imaginative engagement with mythology, history, and folklore. It provides Nigerian filmmakers with tools to visualise the supernatural, helps to retell or recreate oral traditions, and to create immersive worlds that resonate with audiences both locally and globally.

The objectives of this study are therefore threefold. First of all, this study explores how Nigerian animated films engage with cultural representation, particularly Yoruba mythology. Secondly, the study analyses the influence (or lack thereof) of cultural policy on the management and distribution of these films. Finally, this study aims to situate Nigerian animation within broader discourses of cultural identity, globalisation, and creative economy. Through these three explorations, the study seeks to contribute to the growing body of scholarship on African media studies, cultural policy, and animation, while drawing attention to animation's role as an economically viable and culturally significant art form in Nigeria.

Data Availability Statement

All data generated or analysed during this study are included in the article.

Conflicts of Interest

All authors report no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Supporting Information

There are no additional files beyond what is presented in the main text.

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