

Giving Women Pride of Place in Nigerian Films: A Critical Reading of Andy Amenechi's *Egg of Life***Barclays Foubiri Ayakoroma**

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Website: <http://www.nico.gov.ng>Email: dr.barclays@gmail.com**Abstract**

*The Nigerian video film industry, popularly called Nollywood, has become a phenomenon, so much so that it has been adjudged the second largest in the world, after Bollywood. The industry has succeeded in projecting the Nigerian culture, and indeed, the African continent, to the outside world. What the Western world see on screen as reflections of our cultural heritage are no more warped impressions hurriedly presented by foreigners, but those projected by Nigerians. But then the question has been whether producers are actually telling such stories to project the image of the country positively, or otherwise. There have been concerns as to the contents of the films. These include projecting ritual elements, violence, sex, flashy cars and houses, portrayal of women as objects to decorate the house, and telling history in hurry, among others. But then, the production context has, to a large extent, influenced the way the industry has been operating. For a privately driven industry which has emerged through the personal experiments of Igbo traders, it is not surprising that the overriding element is maximisation of profit. In this study, it would be argued that the epic, *Egg of Life* (Amenechi, 2003), which was produced more or less as the feminine version of *Igodo* (Amenechi/Obaseki, 1998), is an attempt to give the Nigerian woman a pride of place in films. The film posits that the feminine gender could assume leadership positions and move the country forward.*

Key words: Women, Pride of Place, Nigerian Films, Nollywood Critical Reading.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian video film industry, popularly called Nollywood, has become a phenomenon, so much so that it has been adjudged the second largest in the world, after Bollywood. The industry has succeeded in projecting the Nigerian culture, and indeed, the African continent, to the outside world. What the Western world see on screen as reflections of our cultural heritage are no more warped impressions hurriedly presented by foreigners, but those projected by Nigerians. But then, the question has been whether producers are actually telling such stories to project the image of the country positively, or otherwise.

Incidentally, there had been concerns as to the contents of the films. These include, projecting ritual elements, violence, sex, flashy cars and houses, portrayal of women as objects to “decorate” the house, and telling history in hurry, among others. But then, the production context had, to a large extent, influenced the way the industry had been operating. For a privately driven industry, which had emerged through the personal experiments of a few Igbo traders, it is not surprising that the overriding element had been maximisation of profit. This could be seen from the generic development in the industry, beginning from the language genre.

As it were, conscious attempts at producing contemporary Nigerian video films, in line with dominant genres, were intensified with the epic/historical genre. The epic films were produced with fairly big budgets, comparatively, in the sense that while earlier films were shot on budgets of less than one million naira (₦1m), epics gulped well over three

million naira (₦3m) on the average. It is understandable then that the mercantilist orientation in the industry did not see such ventures as propitious to business interests. The paramount objective of any trader is maximising profit, and the average Igbo trader who had veered into the industry, though not schooled in modern business management, is not an exception. In other words, Nigerian video film producers did not see the wisdom in spending about five million naira (₦5m) to shoot an epic when he could use about one million naira to produce a low budget film (with a manageable cast) and make good profit. This informed the generic movement to family, religious, love, comedy, and so on.

However, there had always been the feeling among film scholars that women do not play significant roles in Nigerian video films, especially in the epics. They are reflected more as decorative objects in the palace. This is also the case with films that reflect traditional village settings. The women are rather there to welcome their husbands or grown-up sons from the farm or from long journeys; they are just there to wail and cry upon their husbands or children when calamities befall the community. They are never part of the decision-making process in the community; and they are not meant to argue, even if such decisions are not in their best interest. This, of course, is co-terminous with the thinking of the typical Nigerian in a rural community that women are there just to satisfy the sexual desires of their husbands, procreate, tend the children, and take care of their men.

In this study, which adopts a narrative approach, it would be argued that the epic film, *Egg of Life* (Amenechi, 2003), was produced more or less as the feminine version of *Igodo* (Amenechi/Obaseki, 1998), in an attempt to give the Nigerian woman a pride of place in films. The film posits that the feminine gender could assume leadership positions and move the country forward, and put smiles on the faces of Nigerians.

2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF EPIC VIDEO FILMS IN NIGERIA

The word, *epic*, in recent years, has become synonymous with *big budget 'B' pictures*. The definition has been broadened over the years to include films that, in general, have a large scope of history, time, or events, even when not venturing out to epic adventures. Predominantly, the stories of epics centre on quests that the characters embark on over the course of the film and, to a large extent, also comprise of large casts, although not always ensemble casts (Ayakoroma, 2007, p.105).

Nigerian epic video films are those narrative film texts whose screenplays are derived from legends, myths, folklores/tales, and mores/lore of the people (Ayakoroma, 2007, p.155). Though most of the screenplays are derived from oral narratives, they are adapted to the specific possibilities offered by the video film medium. In most cases, they try to recapture the pre-historic or pre-civilisation eras in the life of the people. Thus, the visual interpretations are tailored to achieve these objectives through the costumes, props, make-up, and the settings. In other words, they present fantasies of by-gone eras that serve as historical reference points in their outlook (Asiegbu, 2007, p. 6).

The first epic video film in the Nigerian video film industry we have identified is *Missing Mask* (Okoh, 1994). Though not a commercial success, *Missing Mask* told the story of pre-Christianity era in a hinterland Igbo community. The film shows the ordeal of a woman who attempts to save her twin babies from being killed as the custom demanded. Other epic video films include, *Battle of Musanga* (Dawodu, 1996), *Sango: The Legendary King* (Lasode, 1997), *Ngene* (Okoh, 1998), *Igodo* (Amenechi/Obaseki, 1999), *Ijele* (Amenechi, 2000), *Ojadike* (Amenechi, 2000), *Eye of the Gods* (Amenechi, 2002), *Lion King* (Amenechi, 2003), *Egg of Life* (Amenechi, 2003), *Eagle's Bride* (Onyeka, 2005), to mention a few.

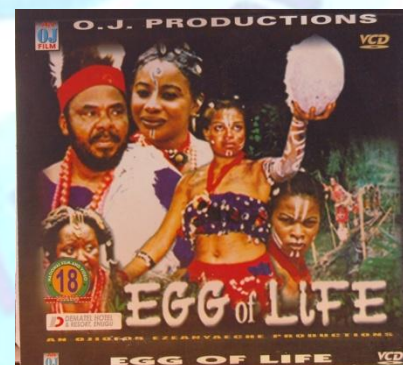
However, some subgenres appear to have emerged among these epics. Thus, the epic genre in the Nigerian video film industry could be categorised into three main subgenres,

namely, historical epics, legendary epics, and fantasy epics. But suffice to note that this categorisation is based on the themes of the epic video film texts. Though the subgenres share the epic characteristics, they differ in themes and purposes. The historical epics, for example, are mostly dramatisations or recreations of identifiable histories of the people, which are often spiced because filmmakers take advantage of *dramatic license*. The implication of this is that directors embellish history with fiction in such video films. The historical epics are also very relevant especially in providing opportunities for viewers to have contact with our cultures and our past. Films like *Maitatsine*, *Amazing Grace*, *Battle of Musanga*, and *Aba Women Riot*, fall into this category.

The legendary epics, on the other hand, are dramatisations of legends and legendary figures. Epic video films in this category, deal with known stories of the people or individual heroes of history. Asiegbu also notes the fact that legendary and historical epics are interrelated and that a video film can also straddle the two subgenres. The reason is that legends are history and a legendary story can only be told in the context of history. The legends of a people tell the story of the people from ancient times. It may be about their heroes, wars, mystic occurrences, myths, or victories and defeats (Asiegbu, 2007, p. 45-46). Productions like *Amina*, *King Jaja of Opobo*, *Emotan*, and *Sango* are some Nigerian video films in this category. It is worth emphasising that to successfully recreate a historical event or legends, filmmakers rely on sets, props, costumes, make-up, and locations to recreate spectacles that can match the splendours of the olden days. This explains why Asiegbu avers that the combination of these elements add extra-cultural dimension to the films and the stories themselves; and that in most cases, the subject matters treated in these films are facts from oral traditions (Asiegbu, 2007, p. 47).

Finally, the fantasy epic genre deals with such subject matters that exist in folktales/lores. In the real sense, fantasy is a product of the creative imagination of an artist (or writer), who creates situations that may or may not have existed. This explains why the fantasy subgenre in epic video films is mostly impressionistic and surrealistic in its representations. In it, there is great dependence on folktale/lore, myths, and legends. The intention may be to inculcate morals in society based on the theme of the story or to eulogise and stamp a notion about the valour and the strength of the community or legend to society. The scope of this form is normally larger than life and it traverses vast areas in worlds, nations, towns, as well as natural and human orders (Asiegbu, 2007, p. 49). Video films, which could be classified here, include, *Igodo*, *Ngene*, *Ijele*, *Ojadike*, *Ebube*, *Eye of the Gods*, and *Egg of Life*.

Let us state here that the success of *Igodo* in the market, as well as its popularity among the viewing public, drew the attention of producers to the epic as a form of narrative that could be profitably explored in film productions. This explains why *Igodo* had remained a paradigm for epics in Nollywood, because other films in this generic convention derived mostly from what *Igodo* offered in terms of visual interpretation.



Screen Shot 1: Cover Design of *Egg of Life*

3. A CRITICAL READING OF ANDY AMENECHI'S *EGG OF LIFE*

It could be argued that the two-part video film, *Egg of Life*, is more of a quick economic response to the epic pacesetter, *Igodo*. This is in the sense that it is more of a feminine version of *Igodo*, probably in the bid to display gender sensitivity. It is apparently in pursuance of the need to portray women as heroines, capable of saving the community in times of need. Interestingly, the film is also from the stable of OJ Productions. Again, it is

directed by Andy Amenechi, who co-directed *Igodo* with Don Pedro Obaseki. Furthermore, the screenplay is by Kabat Esosa Egbon, who also co-scripted *Igodo* with Obaseki. There is no gainsaying the fact that the film establishes OJ Productions as an outfit that has made immense contributions towards giving the epic/historical genre a pride of place in the annals of film history in Nigeria. It also confirms the respect Amenechi had garnered in the industry as an accomplished director who had started his career in Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) as a Producer/Director.

Egg of Life is basically a story revolving around the metaphysics of the *ogbanje* child in Ibo land. Basically, an *ogbanje* is a child who had entered into some kind of allegiance with his spirit mates before coming into the world, to be born into a family. Somehow, *ogbanje* children are supposed to go back after a time to re-unite with their spirit mates. In the film, the royal house in the kingdom of Umuagu is, for many years, without an heir to the throne because the Queen, Lolo (Ebele Okaro-Onyuike), has not given the Igwe (Pete Edochie) a child. The sorrow of the royal household is however turned to joy when Lolo becomes pregnant and gives birth to a baby boy. The Igwe calls for celebration since the “birth of royalty is always heralded by the gods.” The Priestess of Efuru (Clarion Chukwura-Abiola) blesses the baby; and the *Igwe* also prophesies that he is destined to be great. Shortly after the earthly celebration, there is also celebration in the land of the unborn as Ikemefuna (Ifeanyi Ezeokeke), the heir to the throne, plays with spirit children in the world of the unborn, while he is sleeping. His mother tries to wake him up but he looks as if he is dead. There is panic but when he wakes up, he wears a wicked smile, behaving as if nothing has happened. This is followed by bizarre incidents of Ikemefuna playing or eating with the spirit children whom nobody sees. The maid (Frances Nsonwu) is worried and concludes that something has to be done before it is too late.

Eight years later, the spirit children tell Ikemefuna (now played by Williams Uchemba) that his time on earth is up and that it is time for him to join them. Ikemefuna pleads for more time, insisting that he is not ready to die yet; but the spirit children are persistent as they come for him even in the day time. Somehow, this is noticed by his mother and the maid. Their neighbour, who appears to know more about such supernatural happenings, tells them that Ikemefuna may well be an *ogbanje*. Unfortunately, this revelation does not go down well with the Igwe. The woman who had the temerity to insinuate that Ikemefuna could be an *ogbanje* is banished from the community. To the Igwe, it was an insult on the royal family; it is a sacrilege that had to be dealt with squarely.



Screen Shot 2: The Priestess of Efuru (Clarion Chukwurah)

In another sequence, Ikemefuna has an encounter with the spirit children, hallucinates and falls into a coma, thus bringing sorrow to the royal household. The Igwe feels the gods are being unkind to him, as he laments the legacy he would leave for posterity. However, the Priestess of Efuru comes in to proffer solution to the problem, disclosing that Ikemefuna is not the *Igwe's* son and that he is, indeed, an *ogbanje* who does not have much time on earth. According to the Priestess, the spirit that inhabits the ocean is shrouded in mystery; and that the oath that the spirit children take cannot be broken. The solution to the problem is that the “life force” with his kindred spirit has to be brought back by seven maidens, and that it is a very dangerous journey.

The seven girls selected for the journey are Buchi (Georgina Onuoha), Omalechi (Nkiru Sylvanus), Nkem (Padita Agu), Amaka (Sabina Mole), Chioma (Ihuoma Nnadi),

Isioma (Funke Akindele), and Segbello (Gazza Anderson). As they prepare for the journey, all parents and guardians encourage their daughters; but Oma's uncle chides her instead:

UNCLE: Omalechi, so you were chosen for the journey too? When I told you, you were a cursed child, you didn't believe me. Now look at you! Chosen to go and die in the land of the dead! ... It is better for you to die in the evil forest than for me to soil my hands on you; because I know that one day, I might just kill you in anger.

One of the maidens, Nkem, is afraid of taking part in the journey; and it takes the old widow to encourage Oma to realise that it is a great honour to fight for one's fatherland. On the other hand, Buchi's father (Major Okolo) is more emotional and sympathetic to the cause, when he bids his daughter farewell.

The Priestess sanctifies them for the journey in the shrine. There is unease among the maidens; more worrisome is the fact that they have seven days to accomplish the journey or Ikem would die. They are told that it is a journey where they will come across obstacles both in the forest and in the land of a thousand demons. The injunction is that they should follow their hearts, knowing that what the heart feels is more than whatever the eyes could ever see. Eventually, the girls are taken to the stream, the waters of Efuru, for the final preparations before taken to the palace, where the Igwe gives them a farewell message. He decrees that whoever brings the "egg of life" to restore life to the prince, will not only be a royal bride, but will have a large portion of the wealth of the community. They leave the palace to embark on the journey, but not without a warning from the Priestess:

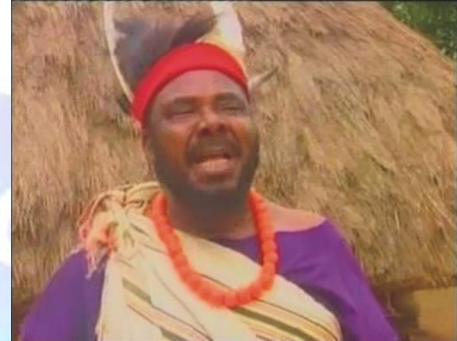
PRIESTESS: Whatever ill befalls the prince, spells doom in the land. Yours is a difficult task; a task that has never been embarked upon for centuries. But I know that Efuru... she will protect you; she will guide you, just as the mother hen protects her chicks... some of you might never see this land again!

In the course of the journey, the girls encounter many obstacles and five of them die. When Buchi and Oma, the surviving two, finally succeed in taking the egg of life, some spirit-children appear and confront them. They eventually run out and are faced with the challenge of returning to the village with the egg. They restate the fact that they need courage, which explains why Buchi says the "egg is our destiny and the destiny of the land." Unfortunately, on their way back, Buchi is fatally wounded when they are attacked by some savages. In spite of all the odds, they get back to the village and Buchi hands over the egg of life to the priestess before collapsing. In her death throes, she manages to send word to her father, saying that she had made him proud by fulfilling her promise. Eventually, the priestess restores life to Ikem with the egg of life and the Igwe fulfils his promise by betrothing Oma to Ikemefuna. He also promises to immortalise the seven maidens by naming the seven quarters of the community after them.

In terms of thematic emphasis, the film explores the ogbanje myth in traditional African society. We have observed earlier that an ogbanje, in traditional African society, is a child that is destined to die. J. P. Clark and Wole Soyinka have graphically portrayed this phenomenon in their poems, *Abiku* and *The Reign of Abiku*, respectively, the term the Yoruba call such children. In the film, Ikemefuna is portrayed as an ogbanje, who had taken an oath in the world of the unborn, as to when he would return. Unknown to his parents, his time is up and his friends want him back, against his will. It is his unwillingness to join them that

throws the royal household into grief as he falls into a coma. For him to regain consciousness, his “life force,” which is what the egg of life represents, must be brought.

From the above, we can surmise that as an epic, *Egg of Life* examines the African world view as espoused by Soyinka in *Myth and the African World View*. Put succinctly, the African believes in three realms of existence: the world of the living, the world of the dead and the spirit beings, and the world of the unborn. It is believed that the interplay of these three worlds determines the daily existence of man. While modern religious practices emphasise the authority of the Supreme Being (God) in the control of the spiritual realm and have thus reduced the influence of the gods and ancestors, the existence of this world and its place in the affairs of men is acknowledged secretly by most Africans. This explains why many people in leadership positions hold the Holy Bible on one hand to go to church on Sundays, only to secretly visit spiritualists the remaining days of the week.



Screen Shot 3: Pete Edochie as Igwe

On another level, *Egg of Life* portrays the eagerness of the royalty in traditional African societies to have a worthy successor. The Igwe is childless and he could not bear the agony of living without an heir to the throne. It is thus a thing of joy when his wife becomes pregnant and bears him a male child. The Igwe’s joy is however short-lived as the boy’s behaviour soon becomes suspect and a neighbour opines that he may be an ogbanje. Angered by such effrontery, the Igwe banishes her without hesitation.

The film also examines the essence of collective sacrifice, suggesting that women could play very vital role in saving their society. In other words, the film posits that women could be heroines, capable of being remembered by posterity for sacrificing their lives for the well-being of their community. It is instructive that while there are young men in the community, the gods decree that the egg of life can only to be brought by seven virgins. In the end, while the community mourns the death of six of the girls, it is realised that the sacrifice is not in vain, as the life force is brought back and Ikemefuna is brought back to life. In other words, the seven girls are called to sacrifice their lives to ensure continuity in the kingdom.

On yet another level, the film looks at the attitude of foster parents to orphans. Oma is an orphan, who craves for parental love and care. Fortunately, she finds this in the old widow, who is branded a witch in the community. It is an irony that Oma’s uncle sees her as a big liability to him and his family; but in the end, she is the one that brings the egg of life to save the life of the prince and indeed the community. Thus, she becomes the spouse of the heir to the throne, which apparently changes her fortunes in life. Though it is not suggested in the film, it is probable that her cantankerous uncle would in fact go and embrace her, professing that he had always been proud of her exploits in life. This is understandable, more so, because in life, everybody wants to identify with success in whatever form it comes.

Finally, the film examines the question of leadership. Buchi is chosen to lead the group but somehow, her leadership role is questioned. To Oma, Buchi is insensitive to the plight of others, especially Nkem who gets tired and hungry, and needs some rest. The underlying factor as to the acceptability, or otherwise, of the leadership of Buchi is that she is not elected by members of the group. In other words, the others feel she is foisted on the group; her choice as the leader is not through democratic process. The lesson here is that if everyone forgets about his/her ego in a group and be united, group aims and objectives would be easily achieved. The girls realise that the mission and destiny of the land are paramount; and that the task ahead is greater than any of them.

The film is presented from the perspective of an African moonlight tale. As it is the tradition, children are gathered for a night of entertainment, and they entreat an old man to tell them a story. The old man, who eventually assumes the role of the narrator, tells the children a story, which according to him, dates back to, “the times of our great grand fathers, a time when men were men, and when men were recognized by their deeds and actions.” This tale, retold in the context of traditional African setting in Ibo land, takes the children back to the old kingdom of Umuagu and the royal house of Ebubechi, where the king has some kind of delay in producing an heir to the throne. The birth of Ikemefuna comes at a time when he (the Igwe) is almost giving up, and the birth itself is heralded by the Priestess of Efuru, who foretells that the kingdom and his (the child’s) reign are going to be blessed. Somewhere along the line, because of the allegiance, which Ikemefuna had entered into with his spirit mates, he is called back; and that is where the crisis sets in.



Screen Shot 4: Ikemefuna (Ifeanyi Ezeokeke) sleeping

Significantly, at the end of the journey, the girls succeed in bringing back the “egg of life.” Just like the perils, which the men in *Igodo* undergo when they go in search of the knife, the girls also suffer all kinds of perils. Coincidentally, most of the girls die in the course of the quest because of foolhardiness. They had been advised to heed the voice of reason; but most of them did not obey this injunction to the letter. Specifically, they had been told, from the onset, not to look back; or not to help each other. But the reality is that they did not heed these warnings. As a result, Chioma is taken by *ebube*, the evil whirlwind because she allows fear to overtake her and screams, allowing the protective leaf in her lips to fall down. Secondly, Amaka drowns as they are crossing a stream, due to fear also. Thirdly, at the river of death, where they are not supposed to look into the water or turn back, Isioma looks into the river, falls into it and drowns. Fourthly, on a bush path, they see a little boy (a spirit child), who says he is hungry and begs them to give him food. Ello ignores the injunction and goes to meet the boy, and the spirit child turns into a monster and kills her. Fifthly, they encounter dead bodies coming out of graves; one of the caskets opens and the apparition of Chioma beckons to them and Nkem foolishly goes to her, and she is killed. One argument here is that these are cases of foolhardiness from which people could learn from and listen to the voice of reason.

In the final analysis, the consolation is that the girls succeed in bringing the egg back to prolong the life of the prince, Ikemefuna. As a reward, of course, Oma, the orphan who survives the whole epic journey, is made to marry the prince, as promised by the Igwe. But that is not the point that is of major interest to us here. What interests us is that, there are lots of symbolic elements in the quest for the egg of life. For the life of the prince, who is like a cord linking the ancestral world of that community, the maidens are made to sacrifice their lives. This is informed by the fact that the ancestral cord can only be sustained by the life of the prince because for the king to die without an heir, is to leave the community without a leader, the kind of leadership, which is preservative of the moral fabric of that community. That is why the Igwe promises that whoever comes back with the egg will have a share in the wealth of the community. It is no longer going to be a male-dominated leadership, but an equal share between the king and the queen. It is like giving hope to the feminine gender as prospective leaders of tomorrow.

The king symbolises the authority and spiritual well-being of the community. So, the girls see it as self-sacrifice intended to bring about equilibrium and the continuity of the peace and harmony in the community. That is why the king tells the son that the royal

throne is a sacred one; and that whoever sits there is not himself, since he is divinely placed there to rule on behalf of the community. It is believed that whatever he utters, while on the throne, is believed to have been pronounced by the gods. Furthermore, whoever occupies the throne is doing so on behalf of the gods of the land. That is how the maidens also perceive the quest: they believe that they are making the sacrifice, not for the king *per se*, but for the entire community because the king symbolises the spiritual godhead of the community. Little wonder then that the Igwe says that as the throne is sacred, whoever that abuses the throne is abusing the sacredness of the community, not the person occupying the throne.



Screen Shot 5: The Seven Maidens chosen for the Journey

There is also the fact of the symbolism of the egg itself. It is common knowledge that an egg is a very fragile object, which needs protection. This is because if it falls down, it breaks and spills its content. In other words, if we do not handle an egg with care, it breaks; and when it breaks, the yoke spills out; and when the yoke spills out, life is lost. This explains why after getting the egg from the sacred grove, Buchi and Oma are concerned as to how they would get it back to the village to revive the prince. To encourage themselves, they say that it is, “forward ever; backward never!” The fact also remains that life itself is comparable to an egg. It is much more so if that life belongs to the royal house. That is why in the bid for the community to save the life of a royal blood, the lives of six maidens are sacrificed.

In the area of characterisation, apart from the Igwe, the other male characters hardly deserve any serious analysis. The Igwe is a man who is desirous of an heir to the throne. Thus, his happiness knows no bounds when the queen delivers a son. He orders that all the palm wine tappers should bring all their wine to the palace, saying that the birth of a royal son calls for celebrations. The Igwe is a very strict person, who does not condone any intransigence. For daring to call Ikem an *ogbanje*, he banishes Obiageli, Lolo’s friend. He tells the prince that the throne is sacred, and that anyone who insults his heir, insults the throne. Nevertheless, the Igwe is also human, in the sense that he becomes helpless in the face of danger. When Ikem collapses and the Priestess of Efuru pushes it down his throat, as it were, that Ikem is an *ogbanje*, he becomes speechless. He realises that the gods had been unfair to him by giving him an *ogbanje* for an heir. In the sequence where the maidens go for the quest, we see a leader torn between the devil and the deep blue sea. His emotions are torn between the sacrifice of the seven maidens and the life of the prince which is hanging on a balance. And when the egg is brought back, he is also sorrowful because of the anguish that parents go through for the loss of their loved ones.

There is no gainsaying the fact that the female characters, especially, the Priestess, Buchi, Oma, Nkem, and probably Lolo, need special attention in the area of characterisation. In the first place, the Priestess of Efuru is the symbol of hope of the community, in the sense that she gives a sense of direction to the Igwe and the community. In the sequence where the child is born, she prophesies that the boy is going to be great, and that his reign would be memorable. This is exactly what happens in the course of the story, as a serious sacrifice is demanded of the community to save his life.



Screen Shot 6: Buchi (Georgina Onuoha) in the farewell scene

The priestess is very blunt and tells the Igwe that Ikem is an ogbanje, and that he does not have much time to live, except the life-force is brought to save his life. Apart from being a spirit medium, she is a teacher who prepares the seven maidens for the quest.

Buchi is the leader of the team, who right from beginning displays exceptional courage. She promises her father that she will make him proud by coming back. She is a disciplined and courageous leader, who does not give room for dissenting views. She expects obedience from all, being the leader of the group. She also believes that a leader has to be accepted, whether he/she is chosen or duly elected. In other words, it is the performance of the leader that is paramount in the aspirations of a group. Buchi is very brave and encourages the team throughout the quest. She is also very realistic and knows that the fatal wound she sustained in the encounter with the savages will stop her from delivering the egg of life. Consequently, she hands over the egg to Oma, which symbolises the formal hand over of leadership and authority. It also parodies, to a large extent, the unwillingness of African leaders to hand over power, even when they are past their prime. Put succinctly, the propensity for contemporary African leaders to perpetuate themselves in office for life is one of the banes of leadership in the African continent. In death, Buchi feels a sense of fulfilment, in that she hands over the egg to Oma, a worthy successor. She is also happy to have made her father proud, though she does not live to reap the fruits of her labour. Pathetically, the only promise from the Igwe is that quarters in the community would be named after the maidens who sacrificed their lives.



Screen Shot 7: Oma (Nkiru Sylvanus) with Old Woman

Oma, the homely and domesticated village girl, is an orphan, who is despised by her uncle. She is humane and tender hearted, and helps the old widow, whom she sees as a mother-figure. She is very loving and understanding, which explains why she sympathises with Nkem when the latter complains of being hungry and tired. She has a very strong personality, and stands up to Buchi when she (Buchi) drives them too hard. She challenges Buchi, basically because her choice as the leader was not at the instance of the team. In other words, she sees the leadership of Buchi as an imposition on the group because it was not through due democratic process. Oma also serves as a check on the excesses of the leadership style of Buchi in the film. Subsequently, she mourns the death of Buchi, whom she had come to admire in the course of the quest. Though she is betrothed to the prince, and she is to inherit a large chunk of the wealth of the royal house, in line with the Igwe's decree, she is not happy because she sees the whole thing as a pyrrhic victory.

Nkem, on the other hand, is more or less the crying baby of the group. She is represented as being always fearful, and as somebody who never hides her feelings. She tells her father that she does not want to die, and when the old man encourages her, she is unsuccessful in her attempts at showing that she has conquered that fear. We can say that Nkem is a reflection of the flipside of the female gender. She is always scared and feels hungry regularly. She causes most of the quarrels between Buchi and Oma, as she complains of being hungry and tired. In one of the sequences, when only three of them are left, she starts complaining, thus drawing the ire of Buchi. Somehow, she is the one that ends up arbitrating between Buchi and Oma, reminding them of the essence of unity. Predictably, she does not make it back because she does not heed the advice of the Priestess that they should always trust their hearts.

Lolo is the queen, who had been barren for many years. It is common knowledge that barrenness is something that is taken seriously in African society, because it is believed that

procreation is the major reason why a man marries a woman. If a woman does not give her man a child on time, there is likely to be expressions of concern in his family. Where this condition is prolonged, the woman could be sent packing; or the husband could be compelled by his family members to marry other wives to procreate. It is thus a thing of joy that Lolo gets pregnant and gives the king, not only a child, but an heir. Unfortunately, the joy of the royal household is chattered by the abnormal behaviour of Ikemefuna. Incidentally, Lolo is not knowledgeable about the ogbanje myth, probably because Ikemefuna is her first and only child. It is not surprising then that she does not see anything wrong with the behaviour of the boy at first, even when the maid complains about it. She is a loving and doting mother, especially as Ikemefuna is an only son. But she becomes worried when she discovers the strange behaviour of the boy. She is unhappy that Obiageli, her friend, is banished by the Igwe, for having the effrontery to call Ikemefuna an ogbanje; but she is helpless as the word of the Igwe is law in the community. She attempts to intercede for Obiageli by pleading with the Igwe for forgiveness. Evidently, she is a docile and obedient woman, and does not want to counter the orders of the king. When Ikemefuna falls into a coma, she is heartbroken as she sees her entire world falling into pieces.

4. GIVING WOMEN PRIDE OF PLACE IN *EGG OF LIFE*

As a gendered story, it is necessary for us to highlight the portrayal of the role of women as leaders in society. The Priestess of Efuru is the person around whom the whole story is anchored. Apart from anchoring the narrative action, as a story teller of some sort, she is a leader and a vital source of inspiration in the community. For instance, in the early sequences in the film, we see the Igwe as an arrogant king, but by the second half of the film, he is totally broken, looking towards the Priestess for inspiration. Here was a man who banishes a woman for having the effrontery to call the heir to the throne an *ogbanje*; and he asks his wife to keep quiet and not plead on behalf of her friend. But when the Priestess calls his son, “that thing,” and that his son is an ogbanje, he is helpless.



Screen Shot 7: Priestess of Efuru cleansing the maidens

Thus, by the second half of the film, he is totally finished as his confidence is totally drained. The implication here is that the leadership position has shifted from the Igwe to the Priestess of Efuru as everybody now looks upon her to safeguard the life of the community. But it is not necessarily the life of the young man that is at stake; rather, it is the life of the community because the boy is the symbolism of the continuity of that community. So, if we look at the film at that level, we can argue that it is on the shoulder of the Priestess of Efuru that the survival of the community depends.

From the foregoing, there is need for us to also look at the various kinds of personalities reflected in the seven maidens. For instance, when one of the girls says that, “I do not even know why the priestess chose me,” the other responds that, “It is because I know how to cook.” The responses that follow reveal the individuality of each of the maidens. They all have their good points, and their weak points; and they are supposed to serve as helpers to each other. They are also supposed to help and encourage each other, thus serving as a moral anchor for the story itself. This underpins the view that it is the weaknesses in each of their personalities that make them to be susceptible to temptation. The weaknesses in each of them also make them not to survive the perilous trip. We can recall that it is temptation that makes one of the girls to sing and dance with the female spirits. She is so carried away by the action

and she would have gone if not that she is yanked back by Oma. Furthermore, even after they have convinced Oma that the child of the forest is a demon, Chioma runs back to comfort the boy; and of course, the boy turns out to be a monster, pretending to be a hungry and helpless boy lost in the forest.

In looking at the moral weaknesses of each of these female characters, we realize that they are meant to serve as moral lessons for us. In other words, there is need for us to continuously question ourselves thus: What kind of lessons can we learn from these moral weaknesses, which make six people not to survive the story? What kind of strength have we gained from the characters of Buchi and Oma? For example, Buchi tells her father: "I am going... and I am going to come back." This is self-conviction, which is an essential for one who is in leadership position. This is to say that in whatever we do, we must be convinced that we will be able to accomplish something; and that self-conviction sees people through. Sadly enough, she (Buchi) is fatally injured and so she dies. But then, before she dies, she sends word to her father, saying, "Tell my father... I made him proud... I fulfilled my promise... I came back." There is no gainsaying the fact that every person that aspires to leadership position needs self-conviction and determination to accomplish whatever vision he/she has for his/her community.

However, it is pertinent to note that in *Igodo*, the quest is an all-male affair; in *Egg of Life*, it is an all-female affair. Whereas *Igodo* is essentially a male-oriented story, *Egg of Life* is a female gender related story in the sense that the Priestess of Efuru, the most powerful person in the story, is a lady. Efuru is also represented as the goddess that protects the community. Though the quest here is female-oriented, the girls go through the same terrain; and they all give the same leadership: the sacrificial leadership, which we have discussed. Furthermore, they go through and face all the challenges of the epic story: the challenges of crossing terrains, facing dangers, covering distances, and going to the land of the dead to retrieve the symbolic "egg of life".



Screen Shot 8: Buchi and Oma with the "egg of life."

Let us note that the redeeming aspect of the story is that instead of the women sitting with their hands between their legs, waiting for their husbands or sons to return from a journey of redemption, they undertake the epic quest. It is more or less a fulfilment of the popular dictum by women that, "what a man can do, a woman can do it, better." Unlike *Igodo*, the seven maidens go out on the quest, while the men wait expectantly. And at the end of the day, the women are the sacrificial lambs, making a bold statement that given the opportunity, our women can indeed be leading lights in the nation. It is not surprising then that in the sporting arena, the Under-20 National Football Team, the Falconets, seemed to wipe away the shame inflicted on the country by the lacklustre performance of the Super Eagles at the FIFA 2010 World Cup in South Africa. This is in the sense that against all permutations, the female team squeezed past much favoured teams like the United States of America, who are the defending champions, and Columbia, to have a final berth with the hosts, Germany. Though they fell 2-0 to Germany, Nigerians were full of praises that they indeed displayed that hard-fighting spirit we saw in our national teams in USA '94 and Atlanta '96. As if to continue the winning streak in female soccer, the Super Falcons also overran their Equatorial Guinea opponents in the African Women Football Championship, to make up for the humiliation they received from the latter in 2008.

5. CONCLUSION

In this study, we argued that the epic, *Egg of Life* (Amenechi, 2003), which was produced more or less as the feminine version of *Igodo* (Amenechi/Obaseki, 1998), is an attempt to give the Nigerian woman a pride of place in video films. The film also examines the essence of collective sacrifice, suggesting that women could play very vital role in saving their society. In other words, the film posits that women could be heroines, capable of being remembered by posterity for sacrificing their lives for the well-being of their community.

It is instructive that while there are young men in the community, the gods decree that the egg of life can only to be brought by seven virgins. In the end, while the community mourns the death of six of the girls, it is realised that the sacrifice is not in vain, as the life force is brought back and Ikemefuna is revived. The film posits that the feminine gender could assume leadership positions and move the country forward, just as the Under-20 Falcons and Super Falcons, through their outings a few years ago put smiles on the faces of Nigerians.

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