1. Introduction

This paper attempts to interpret what was probably intended to be achieved through the film and to what extent such goals were realised or not. “Invasion 1897”, a Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen film released in 2014, is an epic/historical tragedy showcasing the fall of the “last African Empire” – the Benin kingdom. Oba Ovonramwen was seen as the last stumbling block between the British colonialists and the total subjugation of sub-Saharan Africa. Ola Rotimi’s play, Ovonramwen Nogbaisi, and the Trials of Oba Ovonramwen by Ahmed Yerima are probably the first two attempts at artistically documenting history. The film “Invasion 1897” seems to have received greater global acclaim than the previous efforts by Ola Rotimi, and Yerima. This may not be unconnected with the global attention the Nigerian film industry - Nollywood is commanding currently. Views are divers as to how successful the director was in his conception, treatment and delivery through the cinematic medium, the events that led to the dethronement and subsequent banishing of Oba Ovonramwen. While some consider the film a poor reflection of the true historical events of 1897, others focus on the inadequacies inherent in the directing, acting and visual aesthetics in the film. Equally, an assessment of the film, also throws up a number of commendable high points for which the entire cast and crew receive a big pat on the back. However, what is undeniable is the fact that as a work of art, the film is subject to various forms of interpretation and appreciation by the audience. The bottom-line therefore remains that Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen, has attempted to present his point of view on the historic events of 1897 in Benin with the hope that the society and the artistic world would become the better for it.
telling the great history of the Benin kingdom under Oba Ovonramwen. Both are stage plays and Imasuen’s cinematic documentation of the Ovonramwen tragedy is probably also the first in that genre.

The Benin Empire in the first half of the 19th century had experienced a lot of economic and political difficulties. The arrival and subsequent incursions of the British into the Niger Coast area further compounded the turbulent condition and therefore set the stage for the eventual clash between Oba Ovonramwen and the British leading to his eventual deposition and exiling to Calabar Ugwu, I. & Orjinta, A.I. (2013).

1.1 Plot

The film opens in London with the discovery by a young Nigerian student (Igie Ehanire) played by Charles “Chucky” Venn, about the invasion, destruction and looting of the ancient Benin Kingdom by the British in 1897. The exiling of Oba Ovonramwen to Calabar and the brazen looting of the legendary Benin bronze artefacts and other art pieces which are now seen in various museums across Europe and America set the young Ehanire thinking. Being a Benin man by ancestry, he set out to retrieve some of the art pieces and was apprehended in the process and subsequently put on trial. In trying to justify his action, during the court session in London, Igie narrates the events that led to the capture of Oba Ovoramwen in 1897.

1.2 Characterization

This is usually exposed by the characters themselves through their actions, by their words and what others say or may think about them. Oba Ovoramwen (Mike Omoregbee) manifests the attributes of a ruthless emperor beaming with royalty, whose every word is law and must be obeyed. The initial sequences before the opening credits show this. Ovonramwen orders the execution of two men whose offence was not explained. The consequences of the curse they placed on the land did not receive further attention all through the film.

Ovonramwen’s character in the film was built around the impending invasion and was not allowed to freely give expression to what could be locked within the character of an Oba seen as not just human, but also a spirit as indicated in this conversation between Consul Galway and the Oba:

**Galway:** Your Majesty, the protection of Great Britain will be

**Oba:** Look at me! What do you see? I am Spirit!

Spirits don’t need protection. Spirits protect others.

The character of Ovonramwen was not fully developed in the film beyond that of a king expecting some calamity to befall him and his kingdom at any moment. Wilfred Okiche, underscores this assertion in his review of the film thus:

A good portion of the film consists of Omoregbe’s Oba shouting out orders and making a big show of himself that there is a wilful neglect of important relationships with his family and cabinet members which could have been translated into an engaging, thrilling endeavour. What makes this man great. What characters make him endure long enough to become subject of a biopic? What are his flaws? The film doesn’t bother itself with such consideration.

The greatest dimension of the character of Oba Ovonramwen highlighted all through the film is his obvious disposition to anger which left him exhibiting the traits of a highly disturbed and almost demented king. The characters of the various colonial officials were deliberately left weak and less imposing for reasons best known to the writer and director. The characters of the Benin Chiefs such as Ezomo, Obaseki, Okavbiogbe, Iyase e.t.c. (Paul Obazele, Favian Okojie, Segun Arinze respectively) were instrumental in driving the story to its tragic end. Chief Obaseki who was assigned the critical role of coordinating the trade relations with the British proved to be the gap that facilitated the eventual capitulation of the kingdom.

2. Directing

2.1 Directing

Lancelot Imasuen, in directing invasion 1897, had to bring back to the present, a piece of historical phenomenon dear to the heart of the Benin people.
“Lancelot brought a historically inspired character to life in a way I haven’t seen in our Nigerian productions. There was a good synergy between the script and the director…..”

Though the script has been argued to have made the character of the Oba less influential, against the backdrop of the magnitude of the personality of an Oba, yet the director was able to breathe life into the script as he drove the actors in an attempt to realise the thrust of the production. The flavour of the Benin language and culture were fully explored in the film through the extensive use of proverbs and praise singing for the Oba both in his presence and when absent. Indeed the lines were powerful, the language, ceremonies and behaviour of Benin people were well portrayed in “Invasion 1897”.

2.2. Acting

The level of acting in the film could be rated as fairly high largely because of the performances of highly experienced actors such as Segun Arinze, Paul Obazele, Justus Esiri and Charles (Chucky) Veen who interpreted their roles quite well. The casting of Mike Omoregbee (a relatively unknown face in the industry) appears to be a great disservice to the film. His inability to sustain the tempo and intensity required to fully recreate Oba Ovonramwen was very glaring. Omoregbee’s uninspiring acting most times forced Obazele and Arinze to “over-act” in some scenes. A number of the palace Chiefs intermittently injected unnecessary comic exhibitions which never served the serious nature of their roles and the subject of the film well. The choice of amateurish actors for the roles of the British colonial officials was another low point for the film. They were mostly “mouthing” their lines without making the characters they were portraying to come alive. The war scenes on the other hand could have been convincingly realised with more accurately choreographed movements and military drills in precision and sequence. The extras used as war casualties were also not creatively managed to show believable chaotic war scenes. The gun fires and bombs were used to good effect in the war scenes as well as the shooting of arrows.

2.3. Location/ Setting

A lot of work and resources apparently went into creating the close to natural setting at the palace. A lot of commendations go to Iyen Agbonifo for a fantastic job on the set. The amount of attention paid to the reconstruction of the “looted art pieces” is also commendable. However, other locations were a very poor attempt at depicting the Benin Kingdom of the late 19th century to which European explorers had glowingly written about its splendidly designed and organized layout. The very poor depiction of crowds in the entire film makes it look like a big joke against the backdrop of the fact that the Oba ruled over a large kingdom. The several crowd scenes were poorly handled as one could count the number of extras in such scenes.

2.4. Costumes/ Props

The use of traditional costumes among the royalty was appropriate. But the costumes of the commoners particularly children and even some adults, could not have been representative of the 19th century Benin Empire. Some of the talents were seen putting on shorts. The British colonialist actors wore costumes that were more applicable to the fashion code of the 1950s and 1960s than that of 1897. The unsuccessful attempt to put beards on some of the white actors was a great minus to the overall intention of using make-up in the film. The traditional props used accentuated the time of the story and added depth to the film.

3. Cinematography

3.1. Cinematography Techniques:

The director of photography (DOP) used well the equipment at his disposal to shoot a great film. It is important to note that the picture quality is high with perfect lighting. The camera angles were used to good effect for purposes of emphasis, clarity, depth and emotions.

3.2. Editing

The editors carried out a thorough job of putting the pictures, sound and special effects together in one meaningful structure. The very quick transitions in sequence and scenes makes the film interesting and challenging unlike most Nigerian films. The special effects in particular are quite
believable especially the execution and war scenes. But the editors were very careless with the sub-titles. There are many wrongly spelt words as well as names. There is the need to revisit the sub-titles in “Invasion 1897”.

3.3. Music and Sound

Mike Nliam’s effort with the sound track is commendable. The use of Benin songs in the appropriate scenes evoke a lot of emotions especially as Ovoramnwen was being led to the boat for onward “shipment” to Calabar. All through the film, sound was effectively used to depict tempo and mood. Sound was equally used for the relevant effects where necessary. But the use of hip hop music at the end of the film leaves one wondering whether it was still the same film whose storyline is deeply rooted in the culture of the ancient Benin Empire or some 21st century film of some young urban professionals.

4. Discussion & Conclusion

4.1. Discussion

This paper has attempted to interpret what Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen, intended to communicate in this feature film, “Invasion 1897”. An assessment of this nature is based on the writers view point supported by standard rules especially as they apply to the film genre in communication. History remains a very rich source from which the artiste draws inspiration and the substance of for his creativity. Apart from the practise of abstract art, the artiste builds all his artistic creativity around his society. The activities of man in any society are recorded in history. To this end, the artiste reflects his society through his imaginative thinking as well as borrowing heavily from that which that same society had experienced in the past. Justifiably, it has been argued that history is represented artistically by the artiste in order to remind society about where it is coming from with the view to helping it learn valuable lesson from its past. Many films have been produced based on real life or historical accounts. The filmmaker in such cases treats the sequence of real life/historical events with creative ingenuity and puts before the audience what they had read or had been informed about or even witnessed before. While the film lasts, the audience is transported back in time to once more experience the near-reality of yesterday.

Imasuen, in “Invasion 1897” set out to represent a slice of the history of ancient Benin Kingdom. In as much as history remains what it is i.e. a record of past events, the artiste is at liberty to treat it with imagination, embellishments etc. but most times does not forget to injecting a dose of his own bias or point of view. The film under review provided the audience, especially non-Africans, the opportunity to peep into the rich culture of the Benin Kingdom. The artistry and aesthetics embedded in the indigenous technology and art forms of the ancient people of Benin were strongly projected in the film. The conflicts that provided the impetus for the eventual fall of the kingdom as exemplified by the intrigues and betrayal of Chief Obaseki, the totalitarian ruler ship style of Ovonramwen, and the near total dependence on spirituality, portrayed the Benin Kingdom as another typical African society of the 19th century. In his quest to represent history, Imasuen, in “Invasion 1897” employed acting and other cinematographic technology to resurrect a piece of humanity that had been long laid to rest.

However, how well the use of acting and filmic techniques served his purpose seem to have raised both commendations and strong disagreements. Some of the actors particularly, the whites, were below par in terms of performance. Another minus in the acting scorecard is the inability of the protagonist to have brought “real life” to the character of Ovonramwen in the film. Imasuen, should have used a more established actor in the industry for that role as against an almost “unknown face”. It was such a big gamble. The Nigerian film industry also made a bold statement through “Invasion 1897”. Nollywood was able to strongly say that it is getting better by the day or simply put, by every new production. It is worth mentioning that through the film, Nigeria and indeed Africa has made a very big statement about telling the world the story of colonisation from its own perspective. The film establishes unequivocally, the fact that most of Africa had a well-structured governance system before Europe came into Africa. At the end of the court session in the film, another strong statement in respect of the return of the stolen artefacts from Benin Kingdom was vehemently put before the audience. “Invasion 1897” could be a tool for cultural diplomacy. It could serve as a springboard to the
reopening of global discussion on such matters as reparation arising from slave trade and colonialism and indeed the return of stolen art pieces from Africa or financial compensations for them.

4.2. Conclusion

No doubt Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen, has made a great attempt at documenting part of the history of the great Benin Empire through “Inversion 1897”. Once again, the very rich cultural heritage of Africa, now the ancient Benin kingdom was fully represented. The very place of women in the traditional African society which most times tend towards docility was fully amplified in the film. Apart from when the Queen appeared to plead with the protagonist over some of his hardliner position on matters of governance, and when the princess also came to narrate her worrisome dream, women had no more significant part in the entire film.

Scholars believe that the film industry in Nigeria is yet to develop along ideological lines. The extent to which this assertion is true remains a difficult subject to connect with the film under review. The story of the tragedy of Oba Ovoramwnen and the Benin Kingdom may be captured in the words of a Nigerian film critic, Amarachukwu Iwuala, when he posited that;

“Inversion 1897”, above everything else, demonstrates the futility of bloody human conflicts and the sad fact that there are people, who will always join forces with the enemy to undo their kinsmen.

The Cinematic medium as a tool or vehicle of mass communication remains a veritable means of not only mediating the experiences of humanity, but will equally continue to be a tool for keeping yesterday and today in reasonable alignment for the smooth navigation of the turbulent waters of the future.

5. References

