



## **Branding Nigeria: Nollywood films as sustainable tools**

**Edmund Chukwuma Onwuliri**

Faculty of Arts, University of Abuja, FCT, Nigeria

Email: eddyonwuliri@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

In the last two decades, the subject of nation branding has attracted immense scholarly attention. However, the concept remains in its formative stage. This study examines the possibility of achieving nation branding for Nigeria through the Nollywood film enterprise. With the quantum of films produced by the industry and the ever-increasing distribution and consumption profile of its content, Nollywood represents the most significant single national export of Nigeria apart from oil and gas while maintaining a solid domestic audience base with significant commercial viability. Considering that the Nigerian nation had made some attempts previously at branding the country, the current study argues that the rising profile of Nollywood, if strategically managed and applied, presents an effective platform towards sustainable nation branding for Nigeria. The study further argues that the controversies surrounding the concept of brand, branding and nation branding may be easily addressed through the application of nation image management or perception engineering, which the Nollywood film culture, through its diversity and flexible creativity potentials, can provide on a sustainable basis.

**Keywords:** brand, branding, nation-branding, Nigeria, film, nollywood

## **Introduction**

The concept of nation branding is often approached from the prism of advertising and marketing communication. Despite scholarly and consultancy efforts in the field, researchers and practitioners seem not to have made significant progress in arriving at unified conceptual framework(s) towards understanding the subject (Fan, 2004, 2006, Dinnie, 2007, Fan, 2010). Handayani and Rashid (2014) argue that the concept is still at the infancy stage in its development. The term nation branding is credited to Simon Anholt, who coined it in 1998. In recent times, Anholt has struggled to convince the world that the word “brand” used in nation branding is not related to its implications in marketing, advertising and public relations (Fan, 2010). Natusch (2019 p. 41) reinforces Anholt’s position by submitting that:

....Simon Anholt, who popularised the concept of “nation branding”, has a “be careful what you wish for” warning. ...nation branding is much more difficult than corporate branding, and... is not something which is achieved simply through advertising campaigns and catchy slogans. Rather, it is something that requires careful study of a culture, listening to the opinions of citizens of a country and people outside it, and then fine-tuning the cultural essence of the nation.

In other words, from the beginning, nation branding as a term appears to have solid links/connections to advertising, marketing and public relations, but as it continued to evolve, it began to present several complex variables. The evolutionary trajectory of nation branding could be traced to the practice of banding in the corporate setting, which is driven by a product, service or personality. Brand creation, growth, management/maintenance of any product or service is wrapped around the conventions of advertising, public relations and marketing.

This study, therefore, looks at how the film medium could

be applied as a sustainable tool for nation branding for Nigeria. Previous studies such as Omoera and Bardi (2020), Ojo and Aghedo (2013) have placed the task of nation branding squarely as it concerns Nigeria on the shoulders of international public relations, marketing communication and advertising. The film medium's potentials, to which Nigeria boasts of comparative advantage over many other countries, need to be positively and strategically exploited for its good since Nollywood ranks among the most prominent three globally. This becomes expedient against the backdrop that the film medium is a powerful tool of communication, information, and entertainment that can positively or negatively influence the audience. Over time, governments, communicators, corporate entities and artists have used the film medium for propaganda, brand/image creation and promotion, education, entertainment and the attainment of many other commercial and socio-political interests. Equally, in recent times, it has been argued that the cinematic medium presents as a very "serious vector of cultural globalisation" (Endong, 2018 p. 76). This notion though strongly linked to the exploits of Hollywood, the Nigerian film industry (Nollywood) has grown into a transnational phenomenon (Jedlowski, 2013, Endong, 2018) and therefore may have developed the potentials to serve as a tool/platform for nation branding.

### **Conceptual Clarifications: Brand**

Historically speaking, the word brand has its roots in the "Old Norse" word "brandr", which means to burn a mark of identity on livestock using a heated metal (Maurya and Mishra 2012 p. 122). They submit that as long as formal trade has been in existence, brand has been in practice but has received increased attention among scholars and the business community from around the 1980s. From a corporate or commercial prism, brand refers to a product, service, person, thing, an idea, a process, a country, an organisation or almost anything that a seller and a buyer can identify for which some form of exchange agreement can be established which results

in the creation of value for both parties (Schultz, and Schultz, 2004 p.14). They submit that a brand is technically a legal entity that could be bought, sold, and even re-sold, thereby leading to the owner's financial benefits (s). Further, they argue that brand means many things to many people depending on the context. The brand practitioner is all about money for the brand owner while the consumer receives exclusive value from the product or service. From a more broad perspective, brand speaks to more variables. Kotler and Armstrong opine that a brand relates to a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a conglomeration of these, that identifies the maker or seller of a product or service (2012 p.255). Furthermore, Foley and Kendrick (2006 p. 3) define brand as "a set of promises, associations, images, and emotions that companies create to build loyalty with their customers". According to the American Marketing Association (1960) cited in Ermann (2018 p. 3), "a brand is any name, design, style, words or symbols used singularly or in combination that separates a particular product from another in the reckoning of the consumer. Sammut-Bonnici (2015) further states that a brand refers to a set of tangible and intangible attributes aimed at creating awareness and identity to build the reputation of a product, service, person, place, or organisation. Brand, from the foregoing, appears to be characterised by 1) Signs (visuals) such as logos, symbols etc. 2) Designs, styles 3) Words, philosophies and reputations 4) Tangible and intangible variables. It is also deducible that the purpose of creating a brand is simply to make ordinary products and services unique and outstandingly distinct from a host of similar products and services. This idea agrees with what Ermann describes as "unique selling propositions (USP), which is aimed at "singularising" a product in order to make it different from others.

Another purpose of a brand is to guarantee customer/consumer satisfaction and fulfilment of expectations for choosing or believing in the brand. In the last ten years, brands have become compelling instruments in the valuation of corporate/business entities. Since brands can be bought, sold, and re-sold, a good brand

is now considered an intangible asset that is a critical consideration in the valuation techniques applied in reputational benchmarking and ranking systems in the current globalised business environment (Aronczyk, 2013). This paradigm shift in corporate valuation and ranking, Aronczyk further argues, has elevated corporate brands as one of the variables to be considered in establishing both the value of a business and its corporate identity. Concerning products, brands carry a measure of what Ermann (2018) describes as a brand's geographical implications. He argues that certain geographical locations (country/nation) are synonymous with some quality products achieved over time. For instance, Italy is well known for good quality clothes and shoes while Switzerland is easily linked with high-quality watches. Brands from the preceding line of thought have become critical indices for determining the value, perception, acceptance, patronage and identity of a corporate entity, its product(s) and service(s) and probably a nation.

### **Branding**

Having examined the concept of brand, it has become imperative to discuss what branding is. It refers to all the activities or the whole process of giving a unique image or identity to a product or service and, possibly, a place, country or nation. This line of thought is in tandem with Nworah (2006 p.3), which defines branding as the dynamic and strategic process involved in creating and managing associated brand elements, values and attributes. He further argues that branding remains a marketing and management function/process designed to give a product, service, person or organisation, a positive, unique identity or attributes that make them stand out among many others.

Furthermore, Ekemezie, Odigbo and Aniuga (2017 p. 8) underscore this position in asserting that branding is a symbolic embodiment of all the knowledge linked with a product or service. Therefore, this study argues that branding appears to point to the mechanism that creates, grows, manages, and maintains the several variables that make a brand either in the form of a

product, service, personality, corporate body, place or nation. This process or mechanism is usually designed, implemented and controlled by experts who are answerable to the brand owner(s). Branding has developed beyond products, services, persons and corporate entities. Place branding essentially deals with the process whereby a specific geographical location consciously develops and transmits a “competitive” but unique identity to attract patronage domestically and externally in the areas of tourism and other investments (Nworah, 2006). The success recorded with the concept of place branding may have strongly encouraged the emergence of nation branding, which has continued to evolve. Good examples of memorable attempts at place branding include those of New York City with the slogan, *“I Love NY”* and United Kingdom’s *“UK OK”*.

### **Nation Branding**

As a prelude to conceptualising nation branding, it is necessary to put in proper perspective the idea of a nation or country. Fan (2005 p. 5) submits that “a nation refers to a large group of people with the same race and language, while a country means an area of land occupied by a nation” even though both terms are used interchangeably by scholars and practitioners in the study of nation branding. However, the current study focuses on the concept of the nation as an embodiment of geographical space, race, language, and other cultural variables around a given people/society. In defining nation branding, Fan (2009), cited in Jojin (n.d), presents the concept as a process by which the image of a given nation is “created, monitored, evaluated and proactively managed” (p. 7) to improve the nation’s reputation while targeting especially the international community.

Scholars have, over time, approached the subject of nation branding from five different but slightly related perspectives. Olins (1999) sees it as an attempt at remoulding the identity of a nation, while Anholt (2007) as well as Lee (2009) capture nation branding as a strategic effort to enhance a nation’s competitiveness. Further, Jaffe and Nebenzhl (2001) argue that nation branding seeks to use

political, cultural, business and sporting activities to the advantage of any nation. Rendon (2003) and Szondi (2007) present the concept of nation branding as a means of promoting economic as well as the political interest of a nation at home and abroad while Fan, (2006) and Gudjosson (2005) are of the view that nation branding seeks to alter (change) or enhance the image or reputation of any nation. From all the various perspectives highlighted, it is clear that the scholars are more concerned with the rewards or expected outcomes of nation branding. In other words, the benefits accruable from the process are of utmost importance.

### **Branding Nigeria: Previous Attempts**

In the past, successive governments in Nigeria had made attempts to launder Nigeria's image as a nation. These efforts were severally tagged "Rebranding Nigeria." For instance, during the military era, General Sani Abacha's government came up with the campaign of "Not In Our Character", designed to mitigate the image of endemic corruption in Nigeria. Indeed a television documentary was one of the most significant steps at achieving the goals of that campaign. With the attainment of democracy in 1999, the Obasanjo regime floated some efforts that could pass for attempts at rebranding the nation. Slogans such as "Say Well, Act Well, and Nigeria Will Go Well" and the "Nigeria: Heart of Africa" campaign came up. The Umaru Yar'Adua Presidency also made a bold attempt at rebranding Nigeria under the "Good People Great Nation" rebranding campaign. The effectiveness or otherwise of these aforementioned efforts/campaigns is not the focus of this study, but it is essential to state that none of the campaigns engaged the cinematic medium as one of the initiatives' drivers. Those efforts were primarily driven by advertising, public relations (local and external) and media (print and electronic) campaigns. Even though *Nigeria: Heart of Africa* campaign attempted to enlist the organised private sector's support, Nigeria's federal government had contributed about \$3 million. Simultaneously, business entities pledged handsome amounts in cash and materials at the campaign's



formal launch in 2004 (Nworah 2006), but most of the pledges were never redeemed. According to Vanguard newspaper, as cited in Nworah (2006), corporate organisations, state governments, and wealthy individuals found it more rewarding instead of donating to the Obasanjo, Presidential library project incorporated into the campaign framework. Over N3 billion was realised for that component of the nation branding project.

It is on record that the informal sector drives the Nollywood cinematic enterprise with little or no involvement by the government and the organised private sector. Azeez (2019) notes that the production budgets of high-quality Nollywood films averaged between N40 million (\$250,000) and N120 million (\$750,000) between 2000 and 2013 from a meagre average of \$20,000 production budget at inception. These figures attest that incorporating Nollywood films into the nation branding campaign would have been cost-effective with a more long-lasting impact. The success or failure of these efforts notwithstanding, Nigeria as a nation today no doubt is in great need of a new image. Creating this new image requires a very sustainable approach that the film medium can provide on a long-term basis. Similarly, such an attempt calls for other stakeholders' involvement to partner with the government towards ensuring its success. This approach has become necessary because the previous attempts were perceived as deliberate attempts by the government at propaganda to save face and not an effort at nation-building.

### **The Role of Nollywood Films in Nation Branding**

Cinematic practices globally are considered "not only an international political issue but suitable instruments for international public relations and nation branding (Endong 2018 p. 77). Further, Endong submits that the power of all global and transnational cinemas in constructing cultural values, influencing and shaping international perception has increased tremendously in recent times to the extent that nations deliberately strive to harness it for nation branding and even rebranding. Nollywood has become a



robust transnational cinema and commanding significant presence in all other continents from all available evidence. In other words, the potentials to function as a nation branding tool are inherent in its practices and contents. There are examples of nations that have effectively adopted the cinematic approach to nation branding. America is believed to have created significant soft power through its cultural performance mode/industry, otherwise known as Hollywood, over the years. Critics have severally accused America of perpetuating cultural imperialism through its film culture, which has gained acceptance worldwide. Hollywood films serve to extol the qualities of the American vision of the world (p.79) while promoting products, constructing and or reinforcing all positive and favourable image(s) of the nation. Thus, Yantao (2012) argues that American films strongly support the American foreign policy and propaganda mechanism. On the other hand, Endong (2018) described Hollywood as the United States' advertising department ever pushing the American dream concept.

Similarly, Bollywood has significantly reversed India's stereotypical perceptions of the world's poverty capital, a country steep in human rights abuses, religious intolerance, and many other negative image indices (Endong, 2018). New Zealand, for instance, changed the narrative through the production of the global box office hit *The Lord of the Rings*, which marketed the country extensively and opened the doors for the inflow of tourist. According to Natusch (2019 p. 41), New Zealand turned its national image to that of "a clean, green adventure playground for tourists, and ultimately invigorated the national economy" through the promotional film, *This Is New Zealand* (1970). Furthermore, Natusch argues that the city of Tokyo won the bid to host the 2020 Olympics over two other contenders (Madrid and Istanbul) through the significant role played by a promotional video film produced to summarise what each city had to offer the world.

The Nigerian film industry - Nollywood began on an informal scale where players with or without industry experience funded the production of films on the video technology format.

After about two decades, Nollywood has attained a transnational status, thereby establishing itself in the words of Ude as cited in Abodurin and Akinola (2019 p. 98) as: “perhaps the best thing to come out of Africa since the Pyramids, the Pharaohs, Queen’s Obelisks”. Apart from its contents, a corps of Nigerian filmmakers ply their trade in Europe and North America. Fruitful collaborations have been forged by such filmmakers and their counterparts at home. Such collaborations have resulted in globally consumed and rated films. Endong (2018), while tracing the trajectory of the development of Nollywood into a transnational and global phenomenon, highlighted the following notable trends: 1) the large volume of films produced and distributed annually. 2) Creation of a broader market through improved local and global distribution. 3) Improved production standards. 4) Influencing film practices in other countries on the African continent and 5) contributing to Nigeria’s image crises. The last point is heavily linked to images of corruption, ritual/fetish practices, cultism and fake religiosity that have received enormous attention in Nollywood films over the years.

With the above-listed attributes inherent in the film industry’s content and practices in Nigeria, the question to ask is how Nollywood could serve as a veritable tool or platform for branding Nigeria? The solution may be found in a deliberate and strategic partnership between the government and the industry, which is 100% informal. During the Jonathan, administration efforts to provide funding for the creative industry with a particular focus on Nollywood were birthed. However, bureaucracy and negative political considerations may have scuttled the initiative at the end of that administration. Such government support would provide the much-needed impetus for Nollywood to develop further and equally serve as an effective instrument to enable Nigeria to acquire “soft power” such as is possible through films. The branding of Nigeria through films is every stakeholder’s responsibility. However, the government has to deliberately and strategically engage Nollywood for maximum effect.

Nollywood possesses the human capital required to put Nigeria before the whole world as a brand. The cultural diversity of the country provides a bottomless reservoir from which endless and potent content can emerge. Nevertheless, Nollywood needs to ensure that the “image crises” so far conferred on the country through films that promote harmful socio-political ideals like cultism, ritual money practices, and fake religions are addressed through productions that can sell the country and attract appreciable local and foreign interests. Some of the practical steps towards attaining influential nation branding for Nigeria via the cinematic medium could be realised by producing both feature and documentary films to showcasing the good sides of the various sectors of our national life. For example, documentary and feature films that project the tourism potentials of Nigeria are desirable. The advantage of promotional films (feature, documentary, animation, T.V. dramas, social media and amateur videography) will have other methods of achieving nation branding in the films’ longevity. Other forms of media campaigns may soon be forgotten, but any time a film produced to promote Nigeria’s image is screened, the message comes alive. The James Bond series will always showcase the British culture of excellence in security and international diplomacy. Nollywood, in collaboration with the government and other stakeholders, could do the same for Nigeria.

However, it needs to be clearly stated that such films’ production will not automatically translate to a perfect image for Nigeria. According to Fan (2005), a nation needs more than film and other media campaign efforts to be branded appropriately. He argues that nation branding is not a “magic wand” but requires other socio-political and economic shifts to achieve the desired results. This position is further supported by Endong (2018) in referring to leadership failures, poverty and crime as perception indices that can affect negatively any attempt at nation branding.

As nation branding continues to evolve as a concept and in its practice, it becomes imperative for this study to note that film remains a potent tool for nation branding; it may require a

periodic re-examination of methods and results. Fan (2010 p. 97) describes it as a “shift from branding the nation to nation image management”. The film medium will prove most effective as films can be deployed at various times to vigorously address issues that will work effectively in managing the nation’s image, thus leading to perception engineering.

## **Conclusion**

Nollywood remains the best performance mode Nigeria has exported to Africa and indeed the world in recent times. Just as cinema keeps its place as a powerful conveyor of cultural globalisation, the potentials inherent in the Nollywood performance mode to serve as both a national brand and a platform for sustainable nation branding for Nigeria remains almost unassailable. A strategic partnership between the government, the organised private sector, and Nollywood should aim to deploy film deliberately to project the country’s positive image. This approach presents the advantage of continuity and long term campaign since the message in any film remains new and fresh each time it is screened. The cost of producing world-class films to place Nigeria at a comparative advantage over other nations remains affordably justifiably affordable compared to the enormous amounts spent on previous attempts, which yielded insignificant results. The film medium also offers the unique opportunity to adjust, improve, and revisit a single or group of issues presented through films as films are deployed in nation branding. Nollywood content and practices, distributed and exhibited through digital and online platforms, will provide the best and sustainable means of nation image management and perception engineering.

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