

The West African Struggle for History: Izu Ojukwu's Attempt to Portray Hausa Queen Amina

Batı Afrika'nın Tarih Mücadelesi: Izu Ojukwu'nun Hausa Kraliçesi Amina'yı Betimleme Çabası

Ojukwu, I. (Director). (2021). *Amina* [Film]. BlackScreen Entertainment, Netflix, Videosonic Studios.

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The movie *Amina* (dir. Izu Ojukwu, 2021) is a recent example of the impressive productivity of Nigeria's film industry. This review aims to analyse this addition to the colourful mosaic of African cinema by delving into various aspects of the film, including its narrative coherence, historical accuracy, portrayal of characters and culture, and visual aesthetics. This analysis evaluates the film's success or failure in delivering an authentic representation of African history while also addressing the controversies and criticisms surrounding it.

Few other regions of the earth have to endure a discussion about their past as long and enduring as Africa, and the continent's history continues to be a matter of contention to this day. The question of whether Ancient Egypt should be considered a part of Africa's history or not has led generations of scholars to produce a multitude of treatises, with Hegel's infamous statement as discussed by Kimmerle (1993, p. 303) that Africa had no history and that Egypt would thus have to be alien to such an unchanging part of the earth on one end and the

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Submitted/Başvuru: 05.04.2024

Accepted/Kabul tarihi: 30.05.2024

Citation/Atıf: Schwabe, M. K. (2024).
The West African struggle for history: Izu
Ojukwu's attempt to portray Hausa Queen
Amina. *Filmvisio*, 3, 195-198.
<https://doi.org/10.26650/Filmvisio.2024.0009>

hypothesis that the ancient Egyptians were Sub-Saharan Africans made by Diop (1981, p. 27) on the other. The dispute over the race of the actress Cleopatra in a recent Netflix adaptation of the life of Egypt's last queen proves that this age-old discussion is still important.

Given this background, it is unsurprising that any movie touching on African history will face criticism, and *Amina* is no exception. Ojukwu, an influential Nollywood director often called the "Nigerian Spielberg", attempts to portray the legendary Queen Amina of Zazzau. The screenplay was researched by Okey Ogunjiofor, whose masterpiece *Living in Bondage* (dir. Chris Obi Rapu, 1992) is often considered the starting point of Nollywood, the Nigerian film industry.



Figure 1: Still from *Amina* (2021)

The film, set in ancient Nigeria, follows the life of Queen Amina, a renowned warrior queen. Her legacy is so important that even Muhammadu Bello, the second Sultan of Sokoto and successor to Usman dan Fodio, wrote about her achievements (Hogben & Kirk-Greene, 1966, p. 217). However, the plot needs coherence and arguably should provide a gripping narrative. The storytelling is disjointed, with weak transitions between key events, making it difficult for the audience to engage with the character or the historical context or even understand what is happening and why.

While the film attempts to capture the historical essence of ancient Nigeria, its depiction of Amina and her time is inaccurate, as discussed further below. Ojukwu defended his work by claiming that he could not execute the movie correctly because of the alleged absence of written history in Nigeria. While it is common for even the higher-budget movies to diverge from historical facts, insinuating that the Hausa people have only little recorded history is inaccurate.

Historians researching West Africa must work with oral narratives. One famous example is the “Epic of Sundiata”, a piece of oral literature that contained the constitution of the Mali Empire, the so-called Kurukan Fuga, dating back to 1235. Since 2009, UNESCO has considered it an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Ojukwu made use of these sources. However, it seems that, to his eyes, they were insufficient. Furera Bagel (2021), a lecturer at Bauchi State University, points out several historical flaws in the movie that could have been avoided had the available material been thoroughly used. For example, Amina had in fact not been the first Queen of Zazzau: Her mother, Bakwa Turunku, preceded her in that matter. Danjuma, who is supposed to be an Igala prince, holds a Hausa name completely foreign to the Igala language, which is not related to Hausa at all. This is especially interesting because Ojukwu speaks Hausa and thus should have noticed this problem.

The most striking aspect of the movie, opening it to criticism, is the depiction of the Hausa people. The Hausa language is only occasionally spoken, with almost all dialog being in English. Furthermore, the film features a substantial amount of (female) nudity, which is generally considered taboo in Hausa culture. No Kannywood film (a Hausa movie produced in Kano) would ever portray women as this movie does. With the current legislation in Northern Nigeria, it is doubtful whether such a depiction would be legal. Nonetheless, the fact that Amina, to this day, is held in high esteem among Hausa people is proof that depicting a strong woman is not against Hausa culture.

However, showing her only barely clad and touching men with no restraint is not native to Hausa culture but rather a southern imagination of Zaria’s past. It should be debated whether such depictions fundamentally differ from European efforts to portray Africa and its people during colonial times. Other examples can be readily found in the 2018 Netflix movie *Up North* (dir. Tope Oshin, 2018), which also portrays Northerners very contemptuously.

The visuals in the movie in the movie are highly developed and prove the sophistication with which modern Nigerian movies are being produced. The set design and costumes demonstrated outstanding effort and love for detail, showcasing the movie's great potential. However, its visual appeal does not compensate for its historical inaccuracies. Only 14 years separate *Amina* from another film directed by Ojukwu: *Laviva*. The problems surrounding the production of this movie, including the temporary lack of food for the actors, are documented in Jamie Meltzer's *Welcome to Nollywood*. It is astonishing how fast the industry has developed. Today, many Nollywood films are available internationally on Netflix and Amazon Prime.

Amina, as a historical drama, disappoints. The film's shortcomings in plot development, historical accuracy, and character portrayal hinder its ability to engage and captivate the audience. While the subject holds immense potential, the film fails to do justice to Queen Amina's legacy. Given the social media reactions and several critical reviews that followed its release, *Amina* leaves many viewers longing for a more compelling and authentic representation of this fascinating period in African history.

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