

Nigerian Comics: A Critical Overview

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Abstract: This critical overview explores the significant rise of comics in Nigeria, highlighting the factors contributing to their growing popularity and the impact they have had on the country's cultural landscape. Given the remarkable surge in the production, consumption, and recognition of comics as a form of entertainment and artistic expression in Nigeria, I hold that the key drivers behind the rise of comics in Nigeria is the increasing accessibility and affordability of technology which has democratized the comic industry, allowing aspiring Nigerian artists and storytellers to showcase their talent and reach a wider audience. Comics have become a platform for exploring Nigeria's rich cultural heritage, and fostering dialogue on pressing societal matters. Comic conventions and exhibitions have emerged across the country, providing a space for artists, writers, and fans to come together, exchange ideas, and showcase their work. These events have not only fostered a sense of community but have also attracted local and international attention, leading to collaborations, partnerships, and increased exposure for Nigerian comics. The success of Nigerian comics has transcended national boundaries. With a diaspora spread across the globe, Nigerian comic creators have been able to reach a global audience, gaining recognition and acclaim beyond the borders of the country. I conclude that the rise of comics in Nigeria signifies a vibrant and dynamic creative movement that is shaping the country's cultural landscape. Through their engaging narratives, diverse characters, and thought-provoking themes, Nigerian comics are captivating audiences, amplifying local voices, and making significant contributions to the ever-evolving world of comics.

Keywords: Comics; Nigeria; Cultural heritage; Technology; Storytelling; Global audience.

Preamble

Nigerian superheroes emerge as captivating figures within the realm of heroic oral tales, narrated from an African standpoint, and seamlessly integrated into a global context through the medium of comic books and augmented reality. These extraordinary characters bear a remarkable resemblance to their European counterparts, especially in costume, yet their essence is deeply rooted in the vibrancy of Nigerian culture. Fueling this phenomenon is the burgeoning comics industry, spearheaded by dynamic and young Nigerians with a penchant for popular culture. Motivated not only by contemporary events in Nigerian society but also by the rich tapestry of historical figures, myths, legends, and folklore spanning Nigeria's diverse cultural backgrounds.

In a conversation with the author, the conveners of the Lagos ComicCon¹, through their representative, Raymond Anyasi, remarked, in their justification of the importance of the comic conference that:

The aim is to harness the numerous talents in this nation into one productive industry that aside bringing fulfillment to the creative individual, would also be a source of income generation for the individual, investors and the nation at large and this cannot happen if we don't create a platform, a sort of market for creative contents where skills are developed, networks are built and talents are encouraged and harnessed to start yielding income, that's the reason for this convention and as you can see, we seem to have achieved that, like, we have already created the industry, hence this particular ComicCon and subsequent ones would be aimed at reinforcing that which we have created. (2019:n.p)

Anyasi firmly believes in the immense economic potential of the Nigerian comics industry, asserting that with proper enforcement and development, it has the capacity to generate billions of naira for the Nigerian government, akin to the thriving Nigerian music, film and literature industries. To this end, his company, Spoof Animations, is expanding the convention to encompass prominent figures from the Literature and Movie industries, fostering collaborative platforms to facilitate the growth of the Comics Industry. He affirms that the market for Nigerian comics is ripe, necessitating the creation of more platforms where creators can showcase their works and attract patrons. Anyasi points to the groundbreaking contract between Marvel Studios and Nnedi Okoroafor, a Nigerian American Writer, as evidence of the industry's potential, highlighting Africa, particularly Nigeria, as the new frontier for an abundant harvest of comics creations. "The stories are already here, and the talented individuals who will create them are present," he emphasizes. He notes the remarkable collaborations between artists, scriptwriters, and graphic designers who are pushing the boundaries of 2D animation, which, in his opinion, is reason enough to attract a global array of investors and marketers to take notice of Nigeria's comics industry.

During a 2019 interview with BBC, Hamid Ibrahim, an animator from Uganda, along with his Nigerian partners Ziki Nelson and Tolu Olowofoyeku, boldly declared that his team's work would "kick Disney's ass." The statement caught Disney's attention, and in a surprising turn of events, Disney announced a collaboration with Kugali, to create an animated series called *Iwaju*². Set in a futuristic Lagos, Nigeria, *Iwaju* is described by Disney as a long-form series immersed in science fiction. The word "Iwaju" translates to "the future" in Yoruba, and Disney's Chief Creative Officer's revelation that she was "intrigued by Ibrahim's "ass-kicking" comment" indicates a glimmer of hope for the future of comics in Nigeria and Africa in general. With more comics creators embracing the vibrancy of Afrofuturism, they are delving into African history and traditions, using their findings to address the absence of Africa in mainstream science fiction. This development signifies a significant step forward, as African creators are carving their space in the industry and challenging the existing narrative by infusing it with rich African perspectives.

The Nigerian comics scene boasts a host of remarkable creators who are pushing the boundaries of storytelling, not only through their participation and exhibitions at events like the Lagos ComicCon but also through their innovative works that resonate globally. Prominent among these creators are Spoof Animations, Kugali, and Magic Carpet Studios, whose remaking of Cyprian Ekwensi's *The Passport of Mallam Ilia* (1960) into a 2D animation³ is gaining widespread acclaim. Other notable creators include Linebug Studios, Shadowblack Comics, Epoch Studios, Vortex Corp, and Youneek Studios. Although Youneek Studios operates from the United States, it is owned by Nigeria's Roye Okupe, who has gained recognition for works like *Malika*, which premiered as a major animated film at the 2019 ComicCon, and "E.X.O.," which has been featured in prominent media outlets such as CNN, The New York Times, BBC, and The Huffington Post. There are several other creators making significant contributions to the Nigerian comics landscape, such as Manic Rush Works, Peda Comics, Revolutionary Comics, ComicWox, Alkebulania, Panaramic Comics, Ainavation, and ComicsDi. These creators captivate audiences with their fascinating comics, animations, games, and artworks, which prominently feature African heritage. As Pijnaker and Spronk (2017:331) noted "since the early 2000s, African history and culture have increasingly been figuring in popular culture and various media across the continent and in the diaspora. Particularly, African heritage is being refashioned into styles and brands that are circulating amongst young middle-class Africans." De Witte and Meyer support this view by arguing that "these new mediatized forms of heritage fit well into the identities and globalized consumer lifestyles of younger generations" (2012:60). The diversity of Nigerian comics creators and their captivating works reflect the dynamism and vibrancy of the industry, capturing the attention of both local and international audiences, while also redefining narratives and contributing to the rich tapestry of African storytelling.

Onitsha Market Literature, Nollywood, and the Rise of Comics Industry in Nigeria

The current flourishing of comic productions in Nigeria is not a sudden phenomenon but the culmination of years of dedication and perseverance by many of the creators mentioned earlier. Despite being underground and unrecognized for much of the late 90s and early 2000s, these creators were tirelessly honing their craft. Martin Okonkwo of Epoch Studio, for instance, reveals in the endnote of his work, *Barikisu*, that "... this work has been more than a decade coming. *Barikisu* was created in the year 1999, when we (The creators) were fresh out of high school." This indicates that the comics industry in Nigeria operated in the shadows, largely unnoticed and unappreciated, until around 2012⁴. It was during this pivotal year that the very first edition of ComicCon was held in Nigeria. This event played a significant role in bringing creators together, creating a platform for them to announce their presence to fans and consumers. The introduction of ComicCon provided a much-needed spotlight for the industry, facilitating extensive visibility and recognition for Nigerian comics creators. The journey of Nigerian comics has been marked by determination, persistence, and a gradual rise from obscurity to a burgeoning industry that is now capturing the attention of local and international audiences. The efforts of these underground creators, who toiled for years in pursuit of their artistic visions, have laid the foundation for the current explosion of comics productions in Nigeria.

Similar to the development of Nigerian literature and the film industry (Nollywood), the growth of Nigerian comics mirrors the historical trajectory of these creative fields. On the one hand is Onitsha Market Literature which emerged in the 20th century as a prominent form of literary expression and played a significant role in shaping Nigeria's literary and publishing tradition. It consisted of pamphlets, novellas, and chapbooks that were sold at the bustling Onitsha Market in Southeast Nigeria during the 1950s and 60s. Notably, many of these literary works were written in Pidgin English and were characterized by their captivating and often provocative plotlines. The driving force behind this era of literature were primarily Igbo soldiers who had returned from serving in the Second World War. Having experienced life outside their region and having received some exposure to the English language, albeit non-standard, these soldiers, in collaboration with local publishers, flooded the market with stories and teachings about love, sex, marriage, money management, as well as local history, folktales, and proverbs.

Emmanuel Obiechina, a preeminent scholar of the rise of Onitsha Market Literature, observes that the most devoted readers were “grammar and elementary school boys and girls, lower-level office workers and journalists, primary school teachers, traders, mechanics, taxi-drivers, farmers and new literates.” The themes and subject matters may be “simplistic or amusing, but they represent cultural attitudes and the interest of youthful (evidently mostly male) readership in mid-twentieth century Nigeria”. Titles like *Miss Cordelia in the Romance of Destiny*, *Miss Rosy in the Romance of True Love*, *No Condition is Permanent*, *Why Boys Never Trust Money Monger Girls*, *Boys and Girls of Nowadays*, *The Way to Make Friends with Girls*, *Money is Hard to Get but Easy to Spend*, *Drunkards Believe Bar is Heaven*, etc., were such publications that attempted to reflect on the “social problems of a somewhat mixed-up but dynamic, even brash, modernizing community” (Chinua Achebe, in the foreword to Emmanuel Obiechina’s study of the phenomenon of Onitsha Market Literature.) Emmanuel Obiechina (1973) refers to it as “an integral, if not unique and startling, part of the West African creative scene.” Notice that they mostly do not bear publication dates, a style Donatus Nwoga (1965) attributed to a “lack of sense of continuity.” He remarks that the reason for such practice was explained to him thus: “... if the date indicated that a book was up to a year old nobody would buy it.” Consequently, this practice posed a challenge for researchers interested in tracing its historical progression due to the lack of dated cataloguing.

However, it is worth noting that significant efforts have been made to preserve and digitize these literary works, making them more accessible for scholarly study. Many libraries and research institutions, such as the Kenneth Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas (KU), have undertaken initiatives to collect, preserve, and provide access to these materials. By digitizing the works, these libraries have ensured that researchers and enthusiasts can explore and analyze them without the limitations posed by physical availability and aging print materials.

On the other hand is Nollywood and its historical rise to the position of one of the successful stories ever told in the contemporary times. Onyekwere and Onyerionwu (2007:140) opine that “it has achieved its status of accomplishment out of nothing and has defied all odds to establish its own peculiar production, promotion, marketing schema, and indeed its own poetics on its own terms.” From its humble beginnings, Nollywood has evolved into a thriving film industry that has garnered international recognition. Today, it stands as one of the three most prolific and outstanding film industries alongside Bollywood and Hollywood. Nollywood has carved out its own niche in the global film landscape, contributing significantly to discussions on the globalized agenda. Its films tackle a wide range of themes, including social issues, cultural dynamics, and contemporary challenges faced by Nigerian society and beyond. Through its rapid growth and influence, Nollywood continues to showcase the creative spirit, entrepreneurial drive, and cultural richness of Nigeria and has become a source of pride and inspiration for filmmakers across the continent.

In tracing the origin of Nollywood, Jonathan Haynes, expatriate Nollywood scholar, positions *Living in Bondage* (1992) as foundational (alongside *Glamour Girls*) to the film industry that would come to be recognized as Nollywood. Femi Shaka (2007) provides insights into the history of the video film industry in Nigeria, attributing its emergence to the influence of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) introduced by General Ibrahim Babangida in the 1980s. The SAP had a detrimental impact on the Nigerian economy, particularly through the devaluation of the naira (Shaka, “Introduction to Film” 134). As a result of the economic challenges caused by SAP, traditional celluloid film production became unviable in Nigeria. However, this opened the door for the rise “of crude video film producers in Onitsha and Lagos” (135) in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Notably, individuals like Solomon Eze (known as Mike Orihedimma) from Onitsha and Babatunde Adelusi from Lagos played crucial roles during this period, engaging in experimental and resourceful approaches to filmmaking which eventually paid off by paving the way for the establishment of a vibrant and economically sustainable home video industry in Nigeria.

The parallel between the development of Onitsha Market Literature, Nollywood and the growth of the Nigerian comics industry evinces the innovative and resilient spirit of Nigerian creative. Including the Nigerian music industry, all the fields emerged from humble beginnings, driven by passionate individuals who sought to express themselves through storytelling and captivate the hearts and minds of their audience.

The above submissions suggest that the comics industry in Nigeria has ample opportunity for significant advancements. There is potential for comics to exceed current norms, particularly due to the surge in platforms facilitated by technology. This increase in platforms has resulted in a higher demand for content, as more consumers now have unrestricted access to expanding social media and numerous marketing avenues. Against this backdrop, Raymond Anyasi (2019:28) holds that:

Every month that goes by, the African market for multi-media contents broadens further. This decade has seen an unprecedented proliferation of digital content distribution platforms ranging from books and comics platforms to video on demand platforms which are pushing hard to win as much market shares as foreign brands also playing in the African market like Netflix. More and more cable TV channels are opening up, even the oldies and regulars like YouTube and Facebook

are broadening their businesses to be more content based, if not for anything else but for the sake of keeping users longer online. All these channels live and breathe on only one thing, contents. The business of content creation will grow to become the chief GDP contributor for many smart African economies in the coming decade.

Anyasi's submission highlights the potential commercial appeal of comics in Nigeria and Africa, indicating its capability to develop into a thriving industry akin to Nollywood. This growth can be achieved through the creators' sustained production of high-quality content, especially considering the current global attention on Africa for its music, film, fashion, and literary works. The success of Black Panther and the subsequent surge in Afrofuturism has instilled greater confidence in African contents, making it relatively easier to pitch and sell African-themed content to international television networks compared to a decade or more ago.

According to Worldometers' May 2023 the estimations⁵, the population of Africa stands at approximately 1.4 billion, with a middle class of over 400 million. This indicates that there are nearly a billion mobile phone users in Africa, equivalent to a billion mobile broadband connections, creating vast opportunities for advertising revenue in the region. Currently, there are over 50 million Pay TV subscribers in Africa, and industry experts predict this number could reach nearly 70 million by the end of 2023, underscoring the favorable market conditions for content-based businesses.

It is noteworthy that the comics industry in Nigeria is centered in Lagos, Southwest Nigeria, which is renowned for its abundance of business opportunities. Lagos is a melting pot of cultures and serves as the commercial hub of Nigeria, attracting entrepreneurs from various Nigerian tribes and foreign investors due to its potential for trade and commerce. This concentration of creators, immediate consumers, and local investors within one city lays the foundation for a promising future for the comics industry. The creators now have the responsibility to consistently produce compelling content while exploring ways to maximize the marketability of their craft.

The popular saying, "wetin no blow for Lagos no go fit blow for another place" (what didn't succeed in Lagos cannot succeed anywhere else), emphasizes the significant commercial value that Lagos holds for any thriving business. Driven by the desire for financial success and recognition, comic creators have taken decisive steps to establish their presence in Lagos, knowing that it offers ample opportunities for their trade.

Thematising Africa: Image and Identity Reconstruction in Selected Nigerian Comics

In a keynote address presented at the 38th International Convention of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), on 1st November 2019 in Enugu State, Nigeria, E. E. Sule decried the dearth of Nationalism in Nigerian literature. He attributed this deficiency to Postmodernism whose "centralising factor" is "globalization." According to him:

The effect of universalism (under the postmodern reason that ironically claims to fight universalism) on Nigerian literature, especially at home, is, in my view, alarming. Besides the increasing neutralisation of distinct native lore in emerging writing, younger writers have groomed themselves on the diet of Westernism or globalism. Local traditional idioms melt away under the crushing effect of the postmodern gospel that brags about writing for the world, for "humanity", not for a local audience. (19)

Within this context, a profound sense of nationalistic pride emerges among Nigerian comic creators, who heavily draw inspiration from Nigeria's cultural, political, and historical realms to fuel their creative endeavors. These makers predominantly utilize Nigerian historical figures and cultural icons as the foundation for crafting modern superheroes, resulting in a distinctly hybridized aesthetic within Nigerian comics. This fusion entails the blending of locally sourced elements with a globally recognized medium, ultimately giving rise to narratives that authentically depict the Nigerian and African experience. Ute Fendler (2018:86) agrees that "the influence of the imaginary created by Marvel and other US productions is omnipresent," as "the artists confirm that they use local imaginaries and fragments of local mythology to feed the stories with superheroes, while the figures remain inspired by the American genres." Pijnaker and Spronk (2017), in their study of the intersections of aesthetics, cultural heritage, digital technologies, and social class of the work of the team of Leti Arts, based in Ghana, emphasize that the aesthetics are close to the Western model to compete and create a new image of African (popular) arts:

The digitally produced "new African" style... was inspired by, and meant to be competitive with, the style of DC and Marvel Comics. This new style and the use of digital technologies was thus a means for the tech entrepreneurs to seize control over the creation of African aesthetics and to show that these aesthetics could be of the appropriate caliber to be globally competitive and, moreover, that African designers are players in the global arena. (339)

The above submissions by Pijnaker and Spronk (2017) and Ute Fendler (2018), find elaborate corroboration in E.E. Sule's (2019) thesis that

... art is local before being universal. Universality should be understood as the zone where all local voices gather, its beauty is seen in the diversity of the voices. Rather than reach the universal zone to assume a borrowed voice, it is more rewarding to develop your voice in your local idiom and then approach the universal with something unique to offer. In other words, do not bring something from the globe to us; take something from us to the globe. (22-23)

Building on Sule's compelling argument, the CEO of Leti Arts, Eyram Tawia, articulates the driving force behind his team's initiative to create *Africa's Legends*: "Africa has so much history to tell from our views. [...] We want to tell these stories in interactive ways, so they [the superheroes] will grow as big as Batman, as big as Superman, for even Superman to invite Ananse to feature in a DC movie episode. We at Leti Arts make games from Africa, not for Africa. [...] We want to serve Africans and the world." (Innovation Ghana 2013; Pijnaker and Spronk, 2017).

Consequently, it becomes crucial to explore a selection of diverse Nigerian comics, analyzing themes to gather supporting evidence and draw meaningful conclusions.

Ayodele Elegba's Spoof Comics shines as a prominent force in Nigeria's comic scene, actively engaging in the patriotic endeavor of reshaping the nation's image through the exploration of human stories deeply rooted in the fabric of the country. One of Elegba's notable works is *Boxsa*. *Boxsa* is the journey of an aspiring boxer struggling to attain success in the bustling streets of Lagos. After failing to secure a spot on Nigeria's Olympic team and being subsequently removed, he plunges into a world of underground crime, resorting to robbery and instigating trouble wherever he goes. Seeking a solution, he acquires a charm from a witch doctor that grants him extraordinary strength when worn on his arm. However, the charm often proves difficult to control, spiraling out of hand during his criminal activities. In a sudden surge of conscience, he resolves to redirect his newfound superhuman abilities towards serving the public good, transforming into an unexpected hero revered in the ghetto as Boxsa.

Note that this hero deviates from the traditional literary conventions that often draw inspiration from Shakespearean archetypes. By defying these conventions, *Boxsa* offers a fresh perspective and narrative approach that resonates with contemporary audiences, presenting a departure from the familiar tropes and archetypes found in classical literature. We are in the era where a "nobody" could metamorphose to become what Udentia (2018:25) calls "the positive hero" – a "diametrical overhauling of the *status quo*" (Adeoti 2010:50). The hero in *Boxsa* embodies the alter-ego of numerous Nigerian youths who yearn to transcend their impoverished circumstances, armed with supernatural powers, to drown the discord caused by ineffective leaders. Consequently, *Boxsa* serves as an ideological response to the developmental crisis prevalent in postcolonial Nigeria and Africa as a whole. It symbolizes the aspirations and hopes of the younger generation, who seek to address and overcome the societal issues that hinder the realization of their potentials.

Jinx is the story of a female superhero character, also from the stables of Spoof Comics. She is the result of a tragic incident involving a god and a village girl who was sacrificed to satisfy the deity's desires. In a particular village in eastern Nigeria, it is customary for the villagers to offer young virgins to fulfill the god's sexual rituals. However, during one such ritual, the son of the chief priest secretly engages in an encounter with the chosen virgin shortly before the arrival of the deity. The girl is then sent back to society, injured and expected to die within seven days, following the customary belief. Surprisingly, she survives the seven-day period and it is discovered that she is pregnant. Confused and unsure how to handle this unprecedented situation, the villagers abandon her to her fate. She escapes and gives birth to a girl named Eno in an orphanage. Eno grows up feeling cursed, as she possesses unexplained powers that set her apart from others. Enduring repeated bullying, especially from boys at school, she eventually decides to take a stand not only for herself but also for other girls facing similar challenges from bullies. Embracing her newfound strength, she becomes a feminist hero known as Jinx.

Similar to other strong female characters in contemporary African fiction and comics, Eno strives to assert herself and make a positive impact on her society, despite facing numerous obstacles. She confronts the oppressive forces of silence, which Irene D'Almeida regards as "the historical muting of women under the formidable institution known as patriarchy" (qtd. in Onukaogu and Onyerionwu 2010:196). By defying silence, Eno confronts societal norms and expectations that seek to stifle the agency of women. In *Jinx*, as in *Barikisu* by Epoch Comics, Elegba has created a strong female character, though with supernatural powers, that represents their "picture of what Nigerian and African women were, are and should be" (Onukaogu and Onyerionwu 2010:196). Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo tells Stephanie Newell that "I create strong women characters, not just as role models alone, but because many of them exist now and in the past. They are real!" (Newell, 1997).

In *Barikisu, The War Princess*, Epoch Comics delves into the emerging tradition of female heroes in the realm of comics. Weaved into the history of the great Queen Amina of Zaria, the story explores the bloodline of

this remarkable warrior queen that left an indelible mark on the heritage and history of Nigeri. The narrative highlights the existence of strong women throughout history, both in the present (such as Eno and Barikisu) and in the past (like Queen Amina and Princess Moremi), emphasizing their authenticity and significance as inferred by Akachi Adimora. Barikisu, the titular character, transcends being merely a superhero; she represents an ongoing historical narrative and serves as a symbol of justice and hope. Throughout the series, she confronts formidable foes, including the Yaki Zealots and the warrior Mayakinyaki, who happens to be a descendant of her grandmother's archrival. This rivalry harkens back to the intense battles fought by her ancestors to safeguard their kingdom from infiltration and secure its safety. In this way, Barikisu's journey becomes a testament to both her personal growth and her ongoing commitment to protect her kingdom's legacy.

Roye Okupe's Youneek Studios endeavors to establish a fresh template through the female superhero character, *Malika*, who represents a contemporary, modernized version of Queen Amina rather than being her direct descendant like Barikisu. Although the story of *Malika* shares significant similarities with Queen Amina's, it offers a distinct and updated portrayal, akin to an alter ego. The comic was initially published in 2017 by Roye Okupe and later adapted into a 2D animation in 2019. *Malika* is the story of a prodigy who inherits a crown from her father in the most unusual of circumstances, resulting in the division of the kingdom of Azzaz into two equal halves. Following years of civil war, *Malika* successfully unites all of Azzaz, transforming it into one of the largest empires in West Africa. However, challenges arise as enemies emerge from within her council. As *Malika* engages in a covert battle within the walls of her empire, she must also confront an indomitable and treacherous adversary with intentions to annihilate her people.

In essence, *Barikisu* and *Malika* draw inspiration from Queen Amina, the warrior queen who ruled a portion of northwest Nigeria in the 16th century. The names of the kingdoms, Zazzau (in *Barikisu*) and Azzaz (in *Malika*), phonologically resemble each other and retain the prominent consonant "z" and vowel "a," reminiscent of Zaria, the historic empire of Queen Amina. One significant take away from these comics, therefore, would be that in distilling strength from their female superheroes in a seemingly improbable environment, the comics creators are redefining the identity of the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial African woman. This narrative shift occurs against the backdrop of discussions in African literature regarding the representation of women's bodies, identities, and voices, particularly in early African literature predominantly authored by men. It is worth noting that some of the creators of these comics, Ayodele Elegba (*Jinx*), Martin Okonkwo (*Barikisu*), and Roye Okupe (*Malika*), are men who have expressed their commitment to creating more African female superheroes.

From the creative team at Manic Rush Works, two notable comics, *Escape* and *Black Angel*, exhibit similarities in their plot structures and a resounding theme of selfless sacrifice. *Escape* narrates the story of Captain Smith, a soldier determined to rescue his comrades held captive by a group of enigmatic creatures known as the Black Liens. While Captain Smith successfully saves his team, he tragically loses his own life in the process, receiving a heroic burial that honors his sacrifice. On the other hand is *Black Angel*, an action-packed and adventurous superhero comic series featuring Kamal, a young African protagonist who, like Captain Smith in *Escape*, is a soldier undergoing training. Kamal hopes to address the multi-dimensional crisis unfolding in the universe, starting with his own city, Quasi. He is driven by a singular objective: to bring justice and positive change by thwarting the crime lords responsible for his father's death and his mother's abduction. These storylines may resemble those found in Western comics, but their uniqueness lie in their domestication within the African context. This signifies that similar issues of insecurity and organized crime exist within African spaces and that unexpected heroes can emerge to challenge the status quo and bring about positive transformation. The underlying message of these comics extends beyond the narratives themselves. It emphasizes that colonized spaces have the capacity to overcome postcolonial traumas from within, without external interference, thereby asserting their sovereignty over their territories.

Indeed, the emergence of these black superheroes in Nigerian comics can be seen as a deliberate and well-calibrated writing back to the centre – a renegotiation of colonial worldview of heroism, which traditionally centered on privileged whites or royal characters. Through the retelling and reimagining of these narratives, a shift is occurring, declaring that black individuals can also be superheroes. Characters like Boxsa, Barikisu, Captain Smith, Kamal, Eno, Malika, and others challenge the conventional notions of heroism by highlighting the existence of diverse and original black superheroes. They may appear, to say the least, experimental, given their similarities with American prototypes, especially in costumes, their true originality, however, lies in their distinctive personalities deeply rooted in local traditions and cultural contexts. These creations contribute to a cultural revolution in Africa, particularly in Nigeria.

Whether it is *Vantage*, *Boxsa*, *Jinx* from Spoof Comics, or *Aegis*, *Seraph*, *Prophecy*, *Barikisu* from Epoch Comics, or *Escape*, *Black Angel*, *Zahrah* from Manic Rush Works, or any other black superhero comic made in Nigeria, one common thread among them is their fascination with the concept of the "positive hero." Through

the battle between good and evil, these stories emphasize the agency required to bring about positive change, with the protagonist standing as a beacon of hope and righteousness.

To this end, Udentia O. Udentia (2018: 25) argues that “the positive hero, the hero of labour, did not just emerge in literature from the blue, as it were, but rather embodies the features and traits of a long succession of other heroic types since the dawn of human history.” “Other heroic types since the dawn of human history,” here, is a pointer to the presence of a cultural material, a communal manifesto any writer or comics maker in any cultural background would consciously or unconsciously rely on. Every society has a shared aspiration for a better way of life, and this serves as a foundation for storytelling. Nigerian comics creators, who draw inspiration from their rich culture and folklore, naturally incorporate these ideals into their storylines, reflecting the collective pursuit of a utopian vision. Ute Fendler (2010: 91), in her explication of the archetypal hero observes that:

The hero is the embodiment of a fundamental moral value, which usually can be summarized in the narrative pattern of a fight between good and evil forces during which the hero overcomes the evil and therewith guarantees the survival of the good characters, the prevailing moral values, and the established system.

Mariam Konate Deme extends the boundaries of the above assertion, from an African conception, by positing that:

Indeed, most African epics deal with heroes who fight in order to transcend their political, social, and material instability and precariousness in the world. . . . Accordingly, the hero, whether mortal or not, symbolizes the elevation of man to the level of the supernatural. Seen in this light, heroism should be understood as the hero’s desire to always go beyond his own limitations by acquiring the secret of immortality. By surpassing his shortcomings, the hero of the African epic is able to accomplish one of the most fundamental spiritual exaltations, transcendence. (2010:44)

There is a sense in which the comics from Nigeria portray multifaceted trends in the creation of their own heroes, thus:

They link local mythology with contemporary epochs, highlighting urgent questions and problems. Doing so, they create a counter-discourse to the dominant representations of Africa and Africans, showing characters who accept their responsibilities in solving problems. Comics with superheroes from Nigeria build on a double counter-discourse: they rely on local mythologies and regionally bound narratives, stirring images of self-determined action. The story lines combine cyclical and linear narrative structures highlighting the interdependence of past, present, and future, as well as diverse regional and cultural entanglements. It opens up a vision for a self-determined life. (Ute Fendler, 2018:94)

Conclusion

Indeed, the Nigerian comics creators demonstrate a deliberate and conscious effort to reshape the narrative and establish African aesthetics within the global order. Their thematic choices reflect their commitment to nation-building and identity reconstruction, even if not explicitly stated. What is particularly impressive is that the quality of their works is on par with that of their Western counterparts, allowing them to compete effectively in the global market. Social media platforms have played a significant role in facilitating the creators’ access to global trends in aesthetics. As a result, Nigerian comics feature the latest techniques and technologies, such as digital color separation in printed comics and 2D animation equipment. While there may be occasional challenges due to the relative newness of the industry in Nigeria, the creators are swiftly addressing these gaps. Their dedication to continuous improvement suggests that they are determined to achieve excellence, and it is likely that in the near future, there will be minimal disparities in production standards between Nigerian comics and those from the West, aside from differences in worldview. The creators’ commitment to pushing boundaries, embracing new technologies, and aligning with global standards is helping to position African aesthetics and narratives on a more equal footing within the global comic industry. As this progress continues, Nigerian comics have the potential to make a significant impact, not only in terms of storytelling but also in shaping perceptions and challenging stereotypes.

Acknowledgement

My sincere gratitude to Professor Nduka Otiono of the Institute of African Studies, Carleton University, Ottawa-Canada, for providing the fund that aided my registration and participation in the 2019 Lagos Comic Convention.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

- [1]. The Annual Lagos Comic Convention by Spoof Animations holds yearly at the Mike Adenuga Centre, Lagos. The first draft of this essay was written in 2019 following the author's participation in that year's ComicCon. This is the updated version.
- [2]. "Disney announces landmark African collaboration with Kugali" in <https://www.bbc.com/world-africa-55278034>
- [3]. Cyprian Ekwensi's *The Passport of Mallam Ilia*, written in 1948 and published in 1960 by Cambridge University Press. It was made into an animation by Magic Carpet Studios and screened at the 2019 ComicCon.
- [4]. Prior to the inaugural ComicCon in 2012, SupaStrika and Indomitables were the only notable comics within Nigeria.
- [5]. [Http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/africa-population](http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/africa-population)

Primary Texts

- [1]. Akaba, Bala. *Escape*. Lagos: Manic Rush Works, 2019.
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