

BENIN VIDEO-FILMS AS ARCHIVAL SOURCES OF HISTORY

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Abstract

This article dialectically considers how Benin video-films serve as archival sources of history in Nigeria. It uses historical, sociological and formalistic methods to interpret and interrogate some Benin video-films with a view to highlight how they serve as potent repositories of cultural history. Nigerian movies are increasingly being shot directly via digital cameras. This historically brought about Nollywood, which is now booming. McCall claims that Nollywood has become a primary catalyst in an emergent continent-wide popular discourse about what it means to be African. Ekwuazi has identified three schools of thought of Nollywood, namely Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba films. Omoera added the fourth, which is the Benin video-film. Today, the Nigerian film culture could be said to be the most variegated in the world with new frontiers in Urhobo, Ebira, Ibibio, Ijaw, Esan, among others. Having argued that films, particularly Nollywood films, are made with ethno-nation character in mind, this article uses some historical Benin films to underpin its argument and highlight the cultural capital as well as economic possibilities of paying close attention to indigenous Nigeria's history and cultural heritage through films in order to promote cultural identity and help to salvage some of the dying minority cultures and indigenous languages.

Parole chiave:

Benin video-film, Cultural history, Nollywood films, Nigeria, Indigenous languages

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1. Introduction

Film or cinematography has developed from mere display of scientific curiosity to a fantastic and formidable medium that could be used to establish identity and store information about peoples, cultures, ecologies and happenings. This is possible because of its audio-visual aesthetics. According to Foluke Ogunleye, from time immemorial human beings have sought to document their activities in realistic forms in order to pass across information about their lives to posterity. This implies that even before the advent of cinematography, human beings had attempted to show life, not as static, but as dynamic. The development of the arts of cinematography, therefore, brought about the emergence of a different medium of documenting happenings and events in the lives of the people.¹

In Nigeria like in every other human setting, films are channelled through language, and since language has intrinsic relationship with culture, films, therefore, reflect the culture of the people within the socio-physical and

¹ F. OGUNLEYE, *Television docudrama as alternative records of history*, «History in Africa», XXXII, 2005, pp. 479-484: 479.

socio-cultural contexts. Gloria Fafiolu is of the opinion that films are cultural artefacts created by specific cultures, which reflect those cultures and in turn affect them.² Agreeably, this is chiefly the reason for this conversation or study. The enormous functions of films can never be overstressed in Nigeria. The functions range from being a popular source of entertainment to a powerful medium of educating the citizenry and making them (the citizens) have a formidable sense of history. Exploring the latter, many issues including the urgency of strategic screening of films in our communities, and deployment of technology in archiving or curatorial practices that are aimed at posterity and historical purposes are readily thrown up. As a powerful medium of educating/detailing/archiving historical facts/experiences, film has the potentiality of re-concretising, reaffirming and transmitting peoples' values, philosophies and ethos across generations and epochs. It is this inherently enormous capacity of film to define national and ethnic cultures with particular reference to its role in the preservation and transmission of Benin history and cultural heritage in contemporary Nigerian society that constitutes the thrust of this article.

The Nigerian film has gone through many maturational phases, namely; the colonial, the post colonial, the indigenisation, the reversal film era, the Nollywood home video, the neo-Nollywood, and so on. The common denominator to all these phases is that they have all helped to document the evolutionary history of Nigeria. For instance, Frank Speed during the colonial phase shot cine films on Obaship in Benin, festivals in the Delta and the Calabar areas, among others, which are part of the Nigerian cultural artefacts in British museums today.³ Speed who interestingly worked in the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), did a lot with the likes of Mr. Bankole Bello, to document aspects of the multicultural and multi religious living of Nigerians with films. However, with the prohibitive cost of cine filmmaking and upswing of digitalization, cine filmmaking began to recede while digital methods grew in the Nigerian film ecology.

Nigerian movies are increasingly being shot directly via digital cameras. This historically brought about Nollywood, which is now booming. In fact, McCall⁴ claims that Nollywood has become a primary catalyst in an emergent continent-wide popular discourse about what it means to be African. Ekwuazi⁵ has identified three schools of thought of Nollywood, namely Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba films. Omoera⁶ added the fourth, which is the Benin video film. Today, the Nigerian film culture could be said to be the most variegated in the world with new frontiers in Urhobo,⁷ Epira, Ibibio, Ijaw, Esan, among others.⁸ Indeed, Bamidele posits that all art (and no less film) is a game played with ethnic rules.⁹ This presupposes that films are made with ethno-nation character in mind. It is in this sense of cross-cultural and cross-lingual vibrancy that has ricocheted in the Nigerian film ecology and elsewhere that this article examines how the Benin video-film is also an archival source of history. To do this, we shall adopt the historical, sociological and formalistic methods to interpret and interrogate some Benin video-films with a view to highlight how they serve as potent repositories of cultural history.

First, let's foreground our discussion with the universe of Benin video-film. The Benin video-film is an aspect of Nollywood wherein the Benin language, artefacts, history, folklores, and other tangible and intangible cultural resources and practices constitute the chief idioms of communicating audio-visual entertainment to the audience (viewers). Studies indicate that as a growing segment of the Nigerian film, with a filmographical corpus of over 400 movies, the Benin video film has steadily asserted itself in the Nigerian film space. Although, there

² G.O. FAFIOLU, *Nollywood: A viable vehicle of public diplomacy in Nigeria*, «New Media and Mass Communication», XI, 2013, pp. 21-24: 22.

³ L. ADEYANJU, *Frank Speed and the Ife film school*, paper presented at the *3rd Ife International Film Festival* held at the Pit Theatre, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, 29 Nov-2 Dec, 2012.

⁴ J.C. MCCALL, *The Pan-Africanism we have: Nollywood's invention of Africa*, «Film International», V, 4, 2007, pp. 92-97: 94.

⁵ H. EKWUAZI, *Film in Nigeria. 2nd edition*, Nigerian Film Corporation, Jos, 1991; ID., *Towards the decolonization of the African film*, «African Media Review», V, 2, 1991, pp. 95-105; ID., *Film industry and African cultural heritage*, «Daily Times», 8th November 2000, p. 15.

⁶ O.S. OMOERA, *Benin visual literature and the frontiers of Nollywood*, «International Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Scholarship» (Special Edition – Motion Picture in Nigeria), 3-5, 2008, pp. 234-248.

⁷ M. EVWIERHOMA, *The aesthetics of Akpogboku, an Urhobo video film: Issues and concerns*, «ARIDON: The International Journal of Urhobo Studies», September/October edition, 2014.

⁸ O.S. OMOERA, *Audience reception of the Benin video-film*, Ph.D. Thesis. University of Ibadan, Nigeria, 2014.

⁹ L. BAMIDELE, *The necessity of film*, «International Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Scholarship» (Special Edition – Motion Picture in Nigeria), 3-5, 2008, 126-132: 127.

are production sites in diasporic centres such as Lagos, Italy, Spain, Beninland constitutes the main production site of Benin video-film and a majority of its professionals operate from there (FIG. 1-2).

2. Benin Video-Films as Potent Sources of Cultural Preservation and Historical Repositories

Here, we shall randomly isolate some historically set Benin video-films and closely look at the Benin artefacts, folklore, language, worldview, cosmogony, and other socio-cultural practices in them in order to illustrate how they help to preserve and promote Benin cultural identity and heritage. I argue that the above attributes, among other aesthetic peculiarities and qualities, that are amply exhibited and portrayed in Benin movies reinforce their relevance as audio-visual cultural products which are capable of adding up to what Ekwuazi in another context, avidly refers to as «a visual cultural encyclopaedia» on Nigeria and its peoples.¹⁰ What is more, it has been asserted that the Benin video-film has two characteristics in relation to cultural identity: celebration of royalty, including Obaship, and ancestral rites. This assertion was drawn from an empirical study that affirmed that the Benin audience enjoy watching Benin video-films because they portray these cultural identities.¹¹

Many Benin films deal with the history of the Benin from different prisms. While a majority attempt to recapture, in filmic form, the heroic feats and activities of past Obas in Benin Kingdom, others dwell on the activities of great medicine men and women whose legendary feats have remained extant in the rich Benin adages, proverbs and folktales. For instance, *Ikoka* (2003), a three part epic tragedy, explores the crisis that engulfed Benin kingdom some three hundred years ago. Set in the 18th century Benin kingdom, the film relates the story of Oba Ewuakpe whose reign was synonymous with terror as he ruled with high handedness. The people reject him and the kingdom falls into deep crisis. But peace returns when the Oba's wife, Queen Iden gives herself as sacrifice to save her husband and her people from perdition and ruination. This singular act earned her the title 'Iden no mio vban fan', meaning, 'Iden the saviour'.¹²

In *Eyowo* (2003), another epic/historical film, Eyowo, the favourite wife of Nekhighide, the warrior, betrays her husband to maintain the invincibility of Oba Ozolua. Similarly, the movie, *Ebomisi 1&2* (2003) re-enacts the titanic clashes among some great medicine men in Benin history. Of particular interest is the haughty and boastful Ebomisi who is egregiously known for challenging his fellow medicine men to duels, which he always wins. But Obonayen, another medicine man of tremendous renown, as a way of helping the Oba check the excesses of overbearing citizens, puts a stop to Ebomisi's act of terrorism by neutralizing his charms. Today, the tale is one of the adages in Benin folklore and family circles.

Okpaniya (2006) is yet another video drama which explores the rich folkloric tradition of the Benin people. It tells of a woman, Imahe, who has become a laughing stock of her community because of her inability to bear her husband, Edeigbe, a child. But nature smiles on her one day on her way to the farm when she stumbles on a broken calabash. The broken calabash anthropomorphically acquires human qualities and promises to turn to a child for her to bear on the condition that no one calls him a broken calabash. On getting home, she relates the strange but interesting encounter to her husband, not knowing that their evilly rude houseboy/adopted son, Oteghekpen eavesdropped on them. After some time she gets pregnant to the amazement of her mockers and in due cause puts to bed a bouncing baby boy who they named Emieukpomoyako (a Benin loosely translated as «there is no seed with which children are planted»). About seven years later, Oteghekpen out of envy spoils the fun and joy of the family when he calls his younger brother, 'broken calabash'. This makes Emieukpomoyako to vanish into the thin air to the regret and pain of the parents.

Furthermore, Benin documentary films, especially those made by the iconic Benin documentarist, Onions Edionwe, could help in a very significant way, to apprehend the potency of films as archival sources of history. Some of his documentary video films include: *Echoes of a Kingdom: Great Benin* (2010), *The 7th Aken... of Benin Obaship: Oba Akenzua II 1933-1978* (n.d), *Arousa N'ohuan-ren [Holy Aruosa Cathedral]* (n.d), *Avbiana Masquerade and Priest* (n.d), *Aisiokuoba 1, 2, 3 & 4* (n.d), *The 38th Oba of Benin: Oba Erediauwa CFR*, *The Oba of Great Benin Kingdom* (n.d), *Witness to Survival: Kingdom vs. Kingdom* (2010), among others. These video works contain real experiences, real people, and real situations and settings within the Benin socio-cultural milieu.

¹⁰ EKWUAZI, *Film industry and African cultural heritage*, cit., p. 15.

¹¹ OMOERA, *Audience reception of the Benin video-film*, cit.

¹² O.S.B. OMOREGIE, *Personal communication in an interview at Benin City*, Edo State, 2009.

In the words of Daramola,¹³ they (films in the documentary genre) are all treated creatively by the director of the documentary, especially through editing. In the same vein, Hjort¹⁴ contends that «documentary films offer the possibility of encounters that help to make us a whole lot more capacious as human beings, by showing us the dignity of other ways of life». She further submits that «documentary films and their filmmakers have much to offer a world where cynicism, materialism, pragmatism, and narrow understandings of group belonging have gained a lot of ground».¹⁵

For instance, *Witness to Survival: Kingdom vs. Kingdom* (2010) tells of the British invasion of the Benin Kingdom in 1897 and the despoliation it occasioned and how the resilient Benin people waded through that dark era of their collective history. The British incursion into Benin is an actual event that occurred over a hundred years ago. It was a series of underhand dealings, intrigues, diplomatic rows, economic and military adventurism between the British and Benin, which culminated in the sacking of the Benin Kingdom and the looting of precious artefacts and other valuables from the palace of the Benin Oba. However, in the film, *Witness to Survival...*, these series of events were treated with certain videographic nuances such as editing and other studio operations, to factually and faithfully reflect on that memorable clash between the two kingdoms.

Interestingly, this same historical incident of British invasion of Benin forms the core of another Nollywood film, *Invasion 1897* (dir. Lancelot Imasuen 2014), and how it has helped us or can help us to reclaim the battered memory of the Benin people, whose bitter historical experiences constitute its edutainment diegesis or 'screenological' content. *Invasion 1897* opens in a university classroom in London where a professor is giving a lecture to some students. The professor notes that the Benin artefacts in London museum were not mere artworks but the Benin people's history, heritage and culture. While narrating the story after the lecture a great grandson of the then Oba of Benin who was in the class began to ponder on the lecture and what his grandfather told him about the artefacts and how British invaders invaded the Kingdom of Benin sometime in 1897. He then decides to return the artefacts to his ancestral home, his country but in an attempt to achieve this he is arrested at the London museum for trying to steal artworks. He is tried in the law court where he insists that he is not a thief but that he was taking what belongs to his people back to them. It is in the process of the trial he narrates the entire story to the judge in a flashback action technique and argued convincingly how the human rights of the Benin people were trampled upon by the British colonial authorities.

The film contains vivid reflections of how the British colonial authorities historically wanted the Benin Oba to sign treaties, which included, to wit, that, Britain will guard and protect Benin Kingdom, etc, which, in the instant film, irks the king who refuses to sign because in the words of the Oba Ovonramwen (the epic hero in the film): «He is a spirit and spirits protect others and do not need protection». The British authorities refuse to respect the rights of the Oba or accept his position. Consequently, they clandestinely sign a treaty with one of the Benin chiefs who has been corruptly influenced and coerced. The outcome of the subterfuge/machination/intrigue created by the British brought about a monumental cultural disruption in the Benin universe and indeed what is now known and called Nigeria as portrayed in the film's dramatic action.

The film, *Adesuwa* (dir. Lancelot Imasuen, 2012), is yet another historical movie drama that narrates the story of a beautiful Benin Princess (Adesuwa), a betrothed to the Benin Oba, and the machination of Prince of Ubulu Uku kingdom (Obi Oliseh) who does all kinds of magical cunning to get her. Set in Uzebu in Benin, Prince Obi and Princess Adesuwa meet on the *Ede Ugie* festival celebration, a fête where the Benin people as well as all her vassal states show their loyalty to Benin. Obi Oliseh, along with his chiefs comes in to pay obeisance to Benin and then retires to the house of his good friend, Chief Ezomo (Adesuwa's father). He loses his royal composure at the appealing sight of Adesuwa. Ezomo and his council of advisers advised him to abandon his intentions. However, his ego, obsessive desire and ambition to own Adesuwa, who he lured to Ubulu Uku through his cunning and magical powers, lead him to behead Adesuwa resulting into a war between Benin and Ubulu Uku. Although Ihidero¹⁶ has tried to closely look at the dense psychosexual rationalization for understanding a woman's desire to

¹³ I. DARAMOLA, *Introduction to mass communication*, Lagos, Rotham Press 2001, p. 173.

¹⁴ M. HJORT, *On the interest of documentary film. Inaugural lecture*, Hong Kong, Lingnan University, 2012, p. 43.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ V.O. IHIDERO, *Clitoral meditation and Freudian slips in Lancelot Oduwa. Imasuen's Adesuwa: A psychoanalytic discourse*, «Iroro: A Journal of Arts», XVIII, forthcoming.

assert her gender in a largely patriarchal society in the film, the iconic historicity and cultural current of *Adesuwa* as an archival source of history is not in doubt.

Benin landmarks, dress sense, historical events, commemorative places, myths and legends form the mise en scene of *Emotan 1&2* (2003), *Ekuse* (2004), *Imaguero* (2004), *Uru N'eronmwon* (2005), *Agbono Ma Uwangué* (2006), *Akuobisi* (2006), *Avanukhun* (2007), and many others Benin video-films. These films tell of great betrayals, heroic feats and the enduring spirit exhibited by the past Obas and other men and women of prominence as well as the lowly persons in the Benin of yore. These films rely heavily on Benin oral history and folklore for plot materials and subject matter. Reiteratively, the traditional stories in such films could be actual, known or dated historical events, myths, legends or folktales but what is unmistakable is that they are always rooted in some distant idyllic Benin world. Benin video films, therefore, provide vital links and insights into the cosmology and worldview of the Benin people. Dapio¹⁷ points out that 'although set in a particular context, and meant to cater for domestic needs, Benin video film (as a sub-culture of the Nigerian film) has become popular diet in the living rooms of many Benin people and other Nigerians residing in various African countries and beyond. It has traversed national borders to become a money making business. From the above, the cultural capital, the historical or folkloric context and economic benefits of Benin video film are indubitable. This is why there is need to continually re-examine the potential of Benin video films, and indeed, Nollywood as 'interpreters' and cultural avatars in curating or archiving history. This is made stronger by Benin videographers' increasing reliance on Benin repertory of music, history, imageries, dances, proverbs, anecdotes and maxims, especially as they pertain to the Oba who embodies the customs and traditions of the race.

Benin video-film has steadily carved a niche in the pantheon of indigenous films in Nigeria. In a sense, the Benin film has been culturally resilient. The Benin video-film has helped to give Benin culture a form of resilience in terms of linguistic, ethical and material manifestation of Benin culture and its oral and written history in the indigenous film ecology. Neill¹⁸ opines that cultural resilience refers to a culture's ability to maintain and develop ethnic and cultural identity, as well as promote cultural awareness, pride and practices. In spite of the challenges of the risk of dying minority cultures and the pervasiveness of the all-powerful alien pop culture that globalization and westernization have thrown up, Benin video-film has arguably made the Benin culture resilient, capable of maintaining and sustaining itself, while it engages other cultures and exigencies. Indeed, the Benin video-film's usage of local iconic cultural artefacts, festivals, religion, indigenous history and folklore of the people makes it a propagator of the Benin culture even though entertainment and didacticism may be the primary aim. Also, due to its preponderant use of vernacular over English as a linguistic medium, Benin video-film can be seen as a formidable cultural tool that could be used to sustain the interest of educated Benin youths in Benin language which observably is dying and relegated because of the pervasiveness of the English language as lingua franca and its variant/corrupted Pidgin form in Nigeria.

It is important, too, to stress here that, the potential of Nigerian film or movie in upholding Nigeria's rich and diverse cultures as well as a source of critical rallying point for promoting unity among Nigerians in spite of religious or ethnic differences is underutilised because of the low popularity of indigenous/ethnic Nigerian films compared to the westernised film variant of English expression. Let's not forget so quickly that in the past, film (often then called cinema) was shown across the big cities, towns and villages in Nigeria upon payment for tickets by interested audience members who could afford it. For instance, cinema goers thronged Capitol Cinema, Ovator Cinema, etc., in Benin City and environs. The cinemas operated at night following an earlier advertisement of the film to be shown for the day through posters mounted at the entrance of the cinema houses. Although there is a reappearance of this cinema experience in the area with the establishment of Silver Bird Cinemas, Film One Cinemas, Citadel Cinema, among others, in Benin City and environs, with mostly day time viewing, we must exploit this renaissance for the Benin cultural revival and the possibility of using this emerging industry for economic empowerment of the teeming unemployed youths.

The attitude to Nigerian cultural heritage should be foremost in the minds of screenwriters and Nollywood content creators when they write scripts. To help foster this, we wish to propose a small but dialectically relevant paradigm, 'homefrontism'. As a concept, it calls for a painstaking aesthetic inward-looking attitude of filmmakers

¹⁷ D. DAPIO, *Religion in Nigerian home video films*, «Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture», IV, 1, 2007, pp. 65-82.

¹⁸ J. NEILL, *What is cultural resilience?*, 6 August 2019, from www.wilderdom.com.

into their social cultural milieu in making video-films. It holds that a conscious scouring up of iconic cultural resources such as proverbs, myths, folklore, heroic exploits, kingship (or Obaship at the level of Benin) rites, pithy adages, dress patterns, among other linguistic and cultural tropes, which are yet to be fully tapped, can deepen the entertainment and cultural value of indigenous or ethnic films and other film variants in the Nollywood multi-culture. The intellectual resourcefulness of the foregoing proposition is underscored by Okezie's assertion that:

The languages and customs of Africa define and identify the people at their local settings. They guide their behaviour and determine the outcome of their efforts. It means that without their languages and customs, the continent has no identification and thus cannot be defined, cannot think, nor act constructively and independently, which are necessary elements for development.¹⁹

Therefore, the indigenous/ethnic video-film practitioners, scholars, critics, enthusiasts, theorists, among other types of audience, should embrace and possibly adopt the rather deconstructive dialectics of 'homefrontism' to theoretically benchmark the output of the teeming indigenous video culture.²⁰ By extension, with globalisation as a universal philosophy of development and societal engagement, Africa must look inwards and maximise its cultural resources as it seeks to evolve a society where poverty, illiteracy, marginalisation, poor health and the environment are key issues to be addressed.

In this regard, film producers should use film as a medium to first promote unity among Nigerian communities as they have done in some films in order to reiterate our oneness in spite of our cultural, religious or ethnic differences. The talents (actors and actresses) chosen should be compelled to dress and speak like real indigenous Nigerians. Filmmakers should explore the lives of great African personalities who have made meaningful contributions to the development of the family and socio-cultural values, and whose stories are both powerful and compelling to promote unity. There should be a continuous analyses and positioning of the understanding of the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of Nigeria to healthily meet national needs, values and expectations of the Nigerian peoples.

3. Conclusion

This paper has examined how Benn video-films have served as archival sources of history in Nigeria. It used some historical Benin films to underpin its argument and highlighted the cultural capital as well as economic possibilities of paying close attention to indigenous Nigeria's history and cultural heritage through films in order to promote cultural identity and help to salvage some of the dying minority cultures. In doing this, technology should be deployed to archive and preserve these films as social dairies for posterity, generations of Nigerians yet unborn and for the present and future scholars of Nigerian culture, art and history.

¹⁹ G.N. OKEZIE, *Theory on development, language and custom for Africa [DLC theory]*, «Journal of Black and African Arts and Civilization», IV, 1, 2010, pp. 203-218: 204.

²⁰ OMOERA, *Audience reception of the Benin video-film*, cit.; ID., *Nollywood Unbound: Benin Language Video-films as Paradigm, Nigerian Film Culture and the Idea of the Nation: Nollywood and National Narration*, James T. Tsaaio and Francoise Ugochukwu Eds., London, Adonis and Abbey. London. Omoera 2017, pp.175-205: 155.

Map of Edo State Showing the Study Area

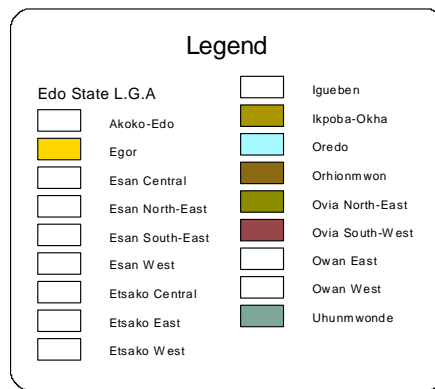
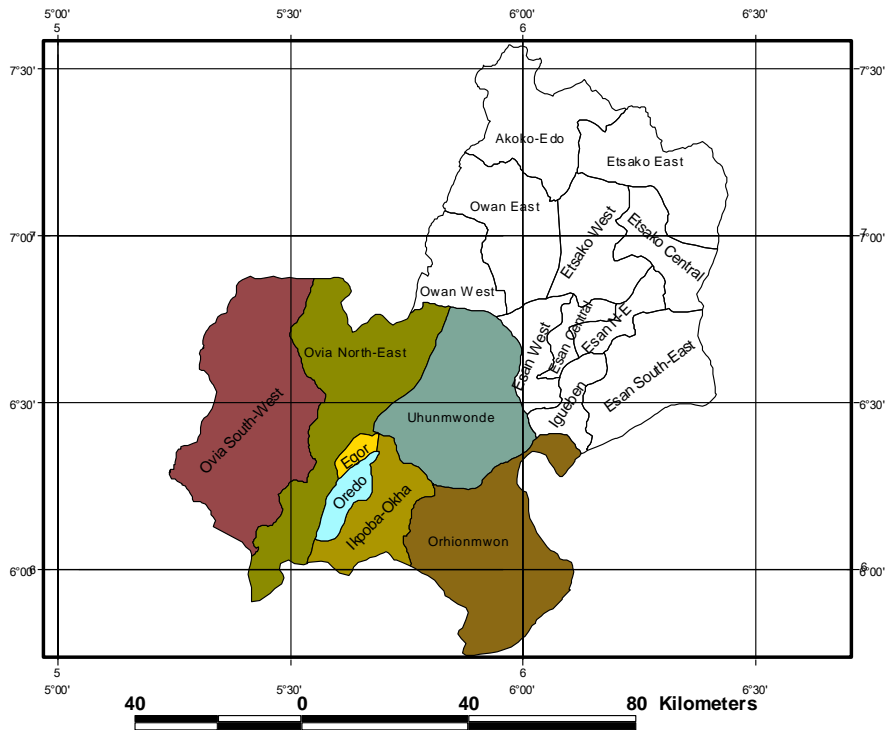


FIG. 1. Map of Nigeria Showing Edo State

Map of Nigeria Showing Edo State

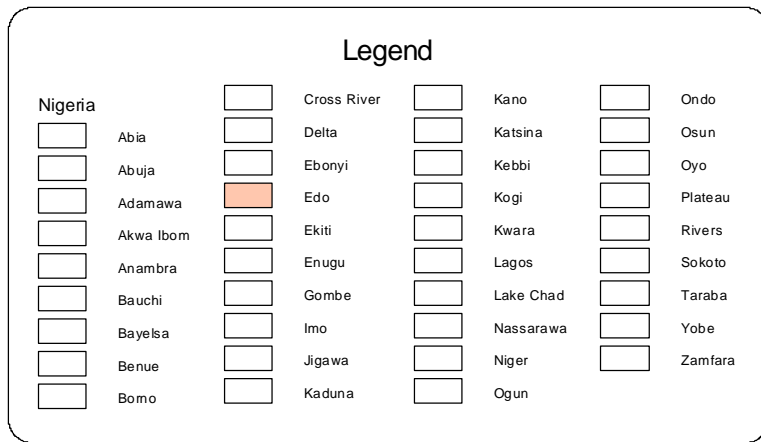
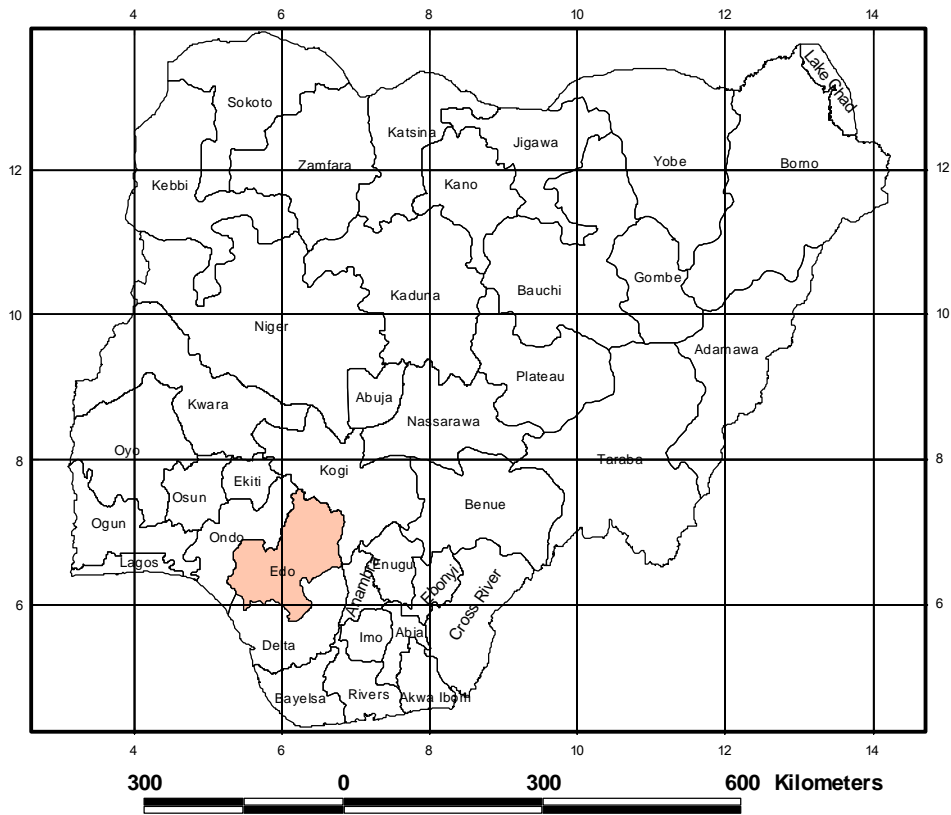


FIG. 2 Map of Edo State Showing the Study Area