

FILM REVIEW

Jadesola Osiberu, director. *Isoken*. 2017. 98 minutes. English, Bini, and Pidgin (with English subtitles). Nigeria. Tribe 85 Productions. Streaming on Netflix. No price reported.

As a debut film written, directed, and produced by Jade Osiberu and released in cinemas in 2017, *Isoken* made a bold entry into the cinematic space as a successful neo-Nollywood film. This film, which can be classified as both a romantic comedy and a drama, ticks many of the boxes which characterize neo-Nollywood films, including production quality, commercial expansion, theatrical release, and transnational collaborations. After the release of *Isoken*, Osiberu has gone ahead to solidify her voice as a Nollywood producer with other box office films such as *Sugar Rush* (2019) and *Ayinla* (2021).

The film opens ceremoniously with a traditional wedding which immediately introduces to its audience the main focus of the film—marriage. From the onset, we see how marriage is delicately woven into the narrative structure of the film. It becomes the thread that binds some of its other themes, namely, love and friendship. Weddings are a major part of the Nigerian culture, and so, when the film fittingly opens with the colorful entrance of a traditional wedding ceremony accompanied by a cheery atmosphere, the opening sequence is welcoming.

The plot is simple, following a complex love story that addresses a contemporary issue encountered by many women in Nigeria. It tells the story of a beautiful, ambitious woman named Isoken (played by Dakore Egbuson), who is in her mid-thirties but not yet married. An inciting incident is subtly introduced when Isoken's mother expresses her displeasure about Isoken's unmarried and unbothered state, especially since two of her younger sisters are married. The wedding ceremony of Isoken's youngest sister, which opens the film, presents a fitting opportunity for her mother and some relatives to unburden their concerns about Isoken's single status. Following that, Isoken is introduced by her mother to Osaze (played by Joseph Benjamin), a handsome, successful bachelor.

The conflict is ironic, and it arises when Isoken faces the difficult decision of whom to select as a life partner, choosing between carefree Kevin and picture-perfect Osaze. Isoken transforms from being a perpetually single woman to one who must choose between two men who sincerely love her.

There is seemingly an initial connection between Isoken and Osaze, until Kevin comes into the picture by way of an accidental meeting, which is not quite a meet-cute. Kevin is a white man who displays the genuine interest and curiosity that accompanies being foreign, and Isoken is happy to show him around. What begins as an awkward meeting grows into a connection built around friendship, and love promptly follows.

Osiberu proves herself to be an emotive screenwriter, structuring the story evocatively. The audience is at once giggling at the witty banter between Isoken and her friends, smiling at the subtle flirtations between her and her suitors, and then frowning at her mother's insensitive persistence. At some point, parallel editing is used to emphasize the relationship dynamics between Osaze and Isoken's idealistic romance, and Kevin and Isoken's cheery explorations. This is used to tease audiences into taking sides and choosing for Isoken. In some of Kevin and Isoken's expeditions around town, Osiberu highlights the daily experiences of ordinary "Lagosians," including the craziness of Lagos traffic, tricycle rides, and the mannerisms of bus drivers, all vividly depicting what it means to live in the commercial capital of Nigeria.


Racial disparity is a significant stumbling block in Kevin and Isoken's budding relationship. The unlikely union between them is heightened by the much bigger societal and parental bias of race and expectations for couples to marry as close to home as possible. While race may have not been a deciding factor for Isoken, she pays particular attention to it, even if only subconsciously. For example, she tells her friend over the phone about her awkward first encounter with Kevin, describing him as an "Oyinbo" man she had just met. Their difference, however, becomes a bonding factor for them. Isoken finds him both intriguing and fascinating, which he entertains, calling himself "Oyinbo Afro Juju" because of his interest in African music. It wouldn't be inaccurate to say that the contentious love triangle places Kevin at a disadvantage because he is a foreigner in a highly cultural family situation. Osaze, on the other hand, gets an imbalanced advantage, not only because he is Nigerian, but also because of the cultural connections that both families enjoy.

Osiberu's depiction of Isoken as a career-driven and ambitious woman is very significant, even though her accomplishments are often disregarded by her family and friends. Isoken is not portrayed as typically homey, constrained, and fashion-conscious, but as an alternative representation to the projection of the good-girl image. Osiberu's stance can be read as feminist, judging by some of her characters' actions. One of these is Isoken's decision to pursue her career and her personal goals, in spite of marriage pressures. Also, there is the difficult decision Isoken makes to call off her wedding just one week before the event. While the action suggests vulnerability, at the same time it underscores strength and courage. Despite her mother's vehement disapproval, she further stands up to her family to concretize her decision. Similarly, Reme (Isoken's younger sister), eventually puts her foot down against her husband's incessant demands and puts herself and her

work first, although one flaw of the film may be the fact that there was no mention or hint of a career until she randomly mentions it in the closing scene. It is noteworthy that the aesthetics and beauty of some aspects of the Nigerian culture are carefully woven into the generous display of ceremonies. The colorful traditional attires, vibrant music, and live band performances are representative of Nigerian cultural events. With all of these, Osiberu sufficiently introduces some Nigerian cadence and culture to a potentially unfamiliar audience.

The film never really gets too serious, as humor is graciously inserted to remind us of the simplicity and lightheartedness that characterizes romcoms. Some examples can be found in Isoken's religious aunty who prays and casts out evil excessively; the endless teasing when Isoken and her friends get together; and Isoken and Kevin's unconventional chitchats. The film ends just as ceremoniously as it begins— with a glamorous wedding. This time, it is Kukua, one of Isoken's best friends, and Chuka, one of Kevin's friends, who are getting married. The audience is once again reminded of the center focus of the film—marriage—but without the accompanying tension that the film began with.

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