



A REASSESSMENT OF THE INTERPRETATION OF AFRICAN INDIGENOUS RELIGION IN NOLLYWOOD

George Tasie

Ph.D. and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies of University of Port Harcourt (Nigeria). *E-mail:* getasie@yahoo.com.

ABSTRACT

Since its debut on the eve of the twenty first century, the Nigerian movie industry “Nollywood” has become an important instrument in showcasing the Nigerian rich cultural heritage. Nigerian video films vividly portray the indigenous sociopolitical organization, the traditional family life, the indigenous religion and other traditional institutions, which, together, form the fabric of African traditional societies. A very dominant theme in Nigerian video film is the unsavoury portrayal of African traditional religion as devoid of any positive character. This paper shows how Nigerian video films tend to stigmatize African indigenous religion and African ethical values generally as inferior to those of Christianity and as a crude and underdeveloped system in which Christian ethics must introduce love, family life, interpersonal relationship and the right attitude towards materialism. The paper, therefore, advocates for a rethinking.

KEYWORDS

Reassessment. Interpretation. African. Indigenous. Religion. Nollywood.

1. INTRODUCTION

The film industry in Nigeria has a chequered history. In the nearly one century or so of its existence, it has metamorphosed from its colonial inheritance to witness the first gen-

eration of indigenous filmmakers, who were products of the Accra Film Training School. The Nigerian film industry observed a further growth with the emergence of the video film. The video film, which revolutionized the film industry in Nigeria, at inception, was bedevilled with innumerable maladies. Apart from poor equipment – once many of the films were shot with camcorders and then transferred to VHS tapes (UGE, 1996, p. 53) – its greatest setbacks, among others, were the shortage of professionals resulting in the use of amateurs, “with limited knowledge of camera operation and limited production budgets, resulting in poor shots and edited video films” (SHAKA, 2002, p. 15).

Notwithstanding these early crudities the Nigerian video film, fondly known locally as “home video”, has today blossomed, thanks to the Yoruba. The Yoruba ethnic nationality in Nigeria has a history of committed interest in the film industry. A very outstanding personality of Yoruba films was Ola Balogun, who was educated at the prestigious French film training school, *Institute des Hautes Études Cinématographiques* in Paris. One of his earliest Yoruba films, *Ajani Ogun*, was released in 1976; and then followed a series of Yoruba films, which he directed for the Yoruba Travelling Theatre, most of which were products of Herbert Ogunde classics, another icon of the Yoruba film industry. Nonetheless, it was not until 1988 that Ade Ajiboye produced *Sonso Meji*, which was generally accepted as the first Nigerian video film. This opened the flood gate for Yoruba video film releases, making the Yoruba, at that time, one of the most prolific film producers in the country. This success, however, was to be handicapped by a very important factor. Yoruba films have very limited audience as they are usually rendered in Yoruba without English subtitles.

As for the Hausa, whose homeland lies in the Northern part of Nigeria, the growth of the film industry has been rather very slow. The reason is largely due to the conservative nature of Islam, which is the dominant religion for the majority of residents. Dul Johnson (1997, p. 102) observes that “it appears that the producers are over zealous in their desire to preach Hausa culture and the religion of Islam, rather than to present their audiences with works of arts”. Another reason for the nonchalant attitude of the Hausa to the film industry

could be deduced from the negative conceptions they had towards cinema. “The early Hausa names of the cinema, such as *majigi* (derived from magic) and *dondon bango* – evil spirit on the wall” (LARKIN, 1997, p. 114), may have further heightened their conviction that it was contrary to Islamic beliefs and practices. And as Larkin (1997, p. 114) further observes, it became part of what was known as *bariki* culture associated with other illicit activities, such as drinking alcohol, male and female prostitution, and “pagan” religion. This negative conception was extremely responsible for the low rate of film production in Northern Nigeria. So, in the 1990s, while the Lagos-Ibadan axis has churned out videos at the rate of one per week, or even more, within the same period (1990 – 1997), Kano-Kaduna axis has produced a total of not more than fifty, what Lagos would produce within a year (JOHNSON, 1997, p. 99).

The Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria were latecomers to the Nigerian video film industry. Yet they were the ones who revolutionized the industry bringing into it so much glamour and turning it into a major money spinner. The breakthrough came with NEK Video Links Production (an outfit owned by Keneath Nnebue) “Living in Bondage, I and II” which was a box office success. Apart from the relatively better quality of the film, its success actually lies in its ability to capture both Igbo and the non-Igbo audiences. Although, it was actually shot in Igbo, its English subtitles for the first time “began loosening the ethnic affiliations of the videos” (OKOME, 1997, p. 83) and conveyed the story line to non-Igbo speakers. Basking in the success story of “Living in Bondage”, two years later Kenneth Nnebue released “Glamour Girls” I and II (1994), which was shot in English language. This was quickly followed by torrential releases of innumerable films; so that, as I write, unconfirmed reports claim that the Nigerian video film industry popularly known as “Nollywood” produces an average of twenty films a week making it the third largest film industry in the world after Hollywood and Bollywood. How the industry came to be associated with the name “Nollywood” is uncertain. However, Haynes (2005) recalls that the name “Nollywood” was invented by a non-Nigerian, first appearing in an article by Matt Steinglass in the *New York Times*

in 2002 and continued to be imposed by foreigners as regards to Nigeria. For Haynes (2005), “Nollywood” is an example of Nigeria living up to its potential role as a leader in Africa.

From such humble beginnings, the video film industry today is an important private sector player in the Nigerian economy. Apart from oil and gas, telecommunication and, perhaps, the banking sector, it is the largest employer of labour, providing job opportunities for thousands of professionals, such as directors, producers, actors and actresses, costumiers, editors, cameramen, etc., and supporting other ancillary industries, such as marketing and distribution firms and video rental shops. According to Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia, the Nigerian film industry is worth NGN853.9 billion (US\$ 5.1 billion) as at 2014. The Guardian has cited the Nigeria’s film industry as the third largest in the world in earnings and estimated the industry to bring in US\$ 250 million per year. Also, Phil Hazlewood (2014), in a sensational headline, “Nollywood helps Nigeria kick South Africa’s butt”, notes that, in April 2014, Nigeria’s GDP rebasing was concluded and “Nollywood” was announced to be worth NGN853.9 billion (US\$ 5.1 billion) and Nigeria’s economy was announced as largest in Africa. Jonathan Clayton (2010) reports that, in 2009, Unesco described “Nollywood” as being the second biggest film industry in the world after Bollywood in output and called for greater support for second largest employer in Nigeria.

In addition to being a major income earner, the industry has become the pride of many Nigerians. It has proven as very wrong the often derisive saying that Nigerians consume everything and produce nothing. “Nollywood” is one commodity that Nigerians have unquenchable appetite for as opposed to their proneness for foreign made goods and services. Most importantly, the Nigerian video film industry has brought out the creative ingenuity of the Nigerian artist. In spite of its preference as the favourite of the idle housewife, the young school leaver who is awaiting admission into the university, or graduate who is yet unemployed (ADESANYA, 1997, p. 12), it has also become a unquestionable pastime in banking halls for customers awaiting to be attended to and in the reception halls of other corporate firms and organizations. Apart from the ro-

matic angle of the films which generally appeals to the womenfolk, the glamour of actresses (especially their deep sense of fashion) provides another attraction for women, who quickly copy the trendy dresses worn by these actresses for the next wedding party and other events. To attest to this, Uchenna Onuzulike (2006) recounts the interview he conducted in May 2006 with Ms. Vida Causey, a Ghanaian, who resides in the United States in order to get a perspective on how Nigerian movies influence African culture. Ms. Causey told Onuzulike that Nigerian movies are fun and interesting. She states that Nigerian traditional attire is influential. “I like the elegance of it and I can relate to Nigerian culture”, she declares.

2. INFLUENCE OF NOLLYWOOD ON AFRICANS IN AFRICA AND ON THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

The influence and popularity of “Nollywood” goes beyond the borders of Nigeria. Within the West African subregion, it has impacted much on Ghana and has remarkably influenced the emergence of a thriving video industry in that country. Nigerian actors and actresses are household names in Ghana, as well as the roles they play. Norimitsu Onishi from the *New York Times*, in his article “Step side, L.A. and Bombay, for Nollywood” (ONUZULIKE, 2006, p. 10), presents a popular Nigerian actress, Kate Henshaw-Neattall, who uttered that when she visited Ghana, she was surprised about her popularity outside Nigeria: “I was shocked. People came up to me and said: ‘Aren’t you the Nigerian actress?’”. According to Onuzulike (2006), this is an evidence of the diverse African audience who patronizes Nigerian movies. Nigeria’s bigger market and the popularity of “Nollywood” have made Ghanaian production copyrighted to “Nollywood” and distributed by Nigerian marketers. This has also attracted many Ghanaian actors and actresses to star in many Nigerian movies. As a result of these collaborations, Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia, reports that Western viewers often confused Ghanaian movies with “Nollywood” and count their sales as

one; however, they are two independent industries that sometimes share the colloquial “Nollywood”. In spite of this welcoming attitude, sometimes reactions – especially from considered authorities concerning Nollywood – have been hostile. McLaughlin (2005) notes, “Nollywood”’s influence is so strong across Africa that there’s been a backlash against Nigerian movies in nearby Ghana, where police have reportedly been raiding shops selling “Nollywood” videos, though it’s not clear what laws have been breached. In an interview, Williams says, “They are struggling not to be colonized by Nigerian movies”.

“Nollywood” also has a domineering influence in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Gambia and many other West African countries. Oliver Mbamara (2000 apud ONUZULIKE, 2006) writes that a group of Nigerian actors and filmmakers, including Fred Amata, Olu Jacobs, Genevieve Nnaji, and Omotola Jolade Ekeinde, visited Sierra Leone and were hosted by the President, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, and the people of the country. It was the country’s way of showing appreciation for the role the Nigerian movie industry has played in helping the Sierra Leoneans heal from the scars of the civil war they went through in the past several years. According to Onuzulike, Mbamara further states that recent reports show Sierra Leonean affection for Nigerians and they hold the “Nollywood” stars in high esteem.

On the African Continent generally, the popularity of Nollywood has also been quite tremendous. In Zambia, Botswana, Kenya, Uganda, South Africa and many more, Nigerian movies are discussed all the time and many people find them irresistible. Mbamara (2005) notes that Ofe Motiki from *In Mwegi*, Botswana’s only independent daily newspaper, says that many people love Nigerian videofilms and find them irresistible, mostly because of their familiar story lines. He says that Nigerian movies are a household name all over Botswana. Similarly, McLaughlin (2005, p. 1) notes that other countries in Africa are hustling to copy Nigeria: Uganda is trying to jumpstart “Ugandawood”. The popularity of Nigerian movies has also been enhanced by cable network providers. Many devote a channel or more airing Nigerian movies. DSTV, with its strong presence in Africa, allocates channel102 to African movies, which invariably is dominated by “Nollywood”. The

video film has bridged the cultural gap between Africa and African diaspora and Africa and the rest of the world. Regarding this fact, Onuzulike (2006, p. 5) notes that movies made in and about Africa help to bridge Continents and the people who live in them, providing critical important points of reference for immigrant people who are struggling to reconcile dual identities, as citizens of their countries of origin and the new society in which they are trying to adapt and build new lives.

Such is the towering influence and acclaim of “Nollywood”. Its emergence is a cultural phenomenon which serves as a representation of Nigerian culture. It connects effectively with African culture. Many think that watching Nigerian movies will teach them and help them connect with African culture and that everything in the movies is real (ONUZULIKE, 2006, p. 3).

3. NOLLYWOOD AND THE INTERPRETATION OF AFRICAN INDIGENOUS RELIGION

Since 1992, when Kenneth Nnebue’s trailblazer “Living in Bondage” was released, the Nigerian video films have become a very important vehicle in showcasing the Nigerian rich cultural heritage. “Nollywood” has become a looking glass, mirroring the various vices and decadences that characterize the Nigerian society. An ardent of “Nollywood” will learn, in addition to the moral lessons one may teach, the indigenous sociopolitical organization, traditional family life, indigenous religion and other traditional institutions which together form the fabric of African traditional societies. From these traditional institutions, however, the indigenous religion and all of its associations, have been negatively portrayed as devoid of any positive character. As we applaud “Nollywood” in its attempt at removing the lingering cobwebs of neo-cultural imperialism imposed by the West through Hollywood; it is, however, auspicious to note that at a time when Nigeria’s image has been so much battered by swindlers (often referred to in the Nigerian parlance as “419”), corrupt politi-

cians, child traffickers and Nigerian commercial sex workers scattered all over the cities of Europe; the video industry tacitly seems to further exacerbate this already battered image with its unsavoury portrayal of African indigenous religion. According to Onuzulike (2006), in a BBC interview with Mangenda, a Zambian citizen, he said that the main problem with Nigerian movies is that they show too much witchcraft and black magic, adding that he did not think that all Africans are like that. He stated, “Mind you, these films are watched by children. Their minds get affected. He said he has prohibited his family from watching them”. In the remaining part of this essay, I would attempt to show the various ways African indigenous religion is negatively portrayed in Nigerian video films.

A very dominant theme in most Nigerian video films is the close association of occult rituals with African indigenous religion. The story often begins with a very lowly fellow who, in search of the trappings of city life, abandons his rural village and migrates to one of the urban centres, preferably Lagos. Contrary to expectations, he is faced with the cruelties of city life – unemployment, individualism, acute shortage of accommodation, etc. As he faces this frustration, he runs into an old friend (in most cases, an old school mate), who lives in affluence. With strong desire to be like his old school friend, he is initiated into a secret cult and undergoes a series of money-making rituals. The excessive passion of the characters from the video films to gain wealth, fame and position has given the Nigerian film its distinctive feature of orgy of money rituals. This is understandable; for a film, it reflects its society’s ideals and values. At present, the Nigerian society places so many premiums on wealth. Nigerians see wealth, however gained, as the principal criterion of social status.

Note that, in nearly all cases, the cult may not have any close connection with African indigenous religion. This could be attested to in the dress code of the devotees, in their manner of worship and, most importantly, in the names of their patron deities, most of whom seem to be of Far East origin. But because the filmmakers either lack adequate understanding of African indigenous religion or probably because they want to capture the attention of the viewing public, most of them are Africans and they bring in elements of African indig-

enous religion against the background of a strong and dominant Far Eastern religion.

In all this, though, it is the medicine man, often referred to derogatorily in the Nigerian video film as “juju priest” or “native doctor” that is implicated. With respect to the characters that feature in Nigerian video films, none has been so debased and ridiculed like the African traditional medicine man. Most often, he is portrayed as an old hog with long unkempt beard. His dresses, often very outlandish, coupled with his mannerism and peculiar behaviour, depict him as an object of curiosity. Usually, his favourite colours as represented in the video films are red, white, black and yellow which he wears in a singular fashion. One eye lid may be painted with white kaolin and the other yellow. Dangling in between his lips, one may find a piece of tender palm frond. In one hand, most likely the left hand, he may be seen clutching his staff of office, which is made of iron bar, decorated with little bells that jingle as it is stabbed on the earth. With the other hand, he holds a fan made from the wing of bird, probably eagle or vulture. As he moves from place to place, he engages himself in a monologue, soliloquizing – a babble of a near hysterical nature. As portrayed in the video films, the medicine man appears horrible and bizarre.

His shrine is not better depicted. It is always located at the precinct of the village or tucked away in the forest. It often consists of pieces of dirty white, yellow or red clothes stained with blood arising from decades of animal sacrifices. The emblem of his deity itself is usually a horrifying mask, made more unpleasant, not only from stains of blood arising from animal sacrifices, but also spews and residues of different colours of kaolin. Scattered in front of the emblem, it is found heaps of years of sacrificial remains and feathers of sacrificial victims. The sight, merely watching from the screen, is quite repulsive, causing a feeling of disgust for the indigenous religion. Nonetheless, we know that the traditional medicine man, his shrine and paraphernalia of office, as they were in pre-colonial times are not the same today. They have undergone tremendous changes to meet changing times and circumstances.

Even in the practice of his art, the medicine man does not proper better in Nigerian video films. He is often portrayed as a

charlatan, claiming to have more skill, knowledge and ability than he really has. His source of power is always believed to emanate from the “kingdom of Satan”. Even when through the practice of his art, he brings wealth to his clients, a wealth sure to consume more quickly than it was gotten. And, often, the beneficiary must pay, usually with something very dear to him – a beloved relation or even with his own life. Also, the medicine man in the Nigerian video films is portrayed as responsible for every calamity and doom of society. When a woman is sterile; when a pregnant woman is unable to deliver; when a woman loses the love of her husband; and when a promising young man suddenly dies; the first instinct of the scriptwriter is to finger the medicine man as responsible for these woes.

Nevertheless, we know that in a proper African setting, these maladies are the handiwork of witches and sorcerers. The duty of the medicine man is to employ roots and herbs and the forces of nature to counteract the evil machinations of witches and sorcerers. The medicine man in traditional African society is a good tempered, kind-hearted and pleasant gentleman. J. S. Mbiti (1969) describes him as the greatest gift, and the most useful source of help. To stress the importance attached to the medicine man in traditional African societies, he observes that every village in Africa has a medicine man within the reach and he is the friend of the community (MBITI, 1969, p. 166).

In addition to being the friend of his community, the medicine man is a statesman, who has love and deep concern for his community and its members. Take for example, Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine* (1966), which attempts to paint a very vivid picture of an African traditional society yet uncontaminated with the forces of modern change (TASIE, 2002, p. 115). When, for instance, according to Amadi, Ekweme under the spell of love potion, escaped into the forest, Nwokekoro, the Priest of Amadioha deity, was at hand offering those soothing and reassuring words that could only come from a kind and benevolent priest. Again, Anyika, the famous *dibia* (medicine man) in *The Concubine* was reputed for his deep love for the members of his community to the extent that in cases where his clients could not afford his divinatory charges, he had to pacify the deities with money from his own pocket.

Generally, all over Africa, the medicine man is highly revered and honoured, not only because of his knowledge of herbs and roots and his power of clairvoyance (for he sees what ordinary humans cannot see), but more importantly, by the nature of his vocation, he is the epitome of moral paradigm. As such, he is surrounded by innumerable taboos many of which forbid him from involving in evil deeds.

Another very important aspect of the Nigerian video films is the pitching of African indigenous religion in a fight-to-finish battle with Christianity, a battle where Christianity must always triumph. Very often, the picture is that of Christian missionaries bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ (which is usually described as the light) to the benighted souls in Africa, who live in moral darkness. This theme is reminiscent of early Christian missionary enterprise in Africa in which the white missionaries regret the fate of the so-called “primitive” people and their effort at redeeming them. In every confrontation with Christianity, therefore, the indigenous religion must collapse “Jericho-wise”. It is either that through missionary evangelism a dominant “pagan” community converts *em mass* to Christianity, destroying their “fetishes” and emblems. Or a recalcitrant priest of the indigenous religion is tormented by the Holy Ghost and his shrine consumed by Holy Ghost fire. Again and again, the general picture is that, at the instance of Christian evangelism, the indigenous religion is completely routed and annihilated by Christianity.

Nonetheless, we are aware of instances where the encounter did not produce much result in terms of converts and where the indigenous religion has been very resilient. J. S. Mbiti (1969), E. B. Idowu (1973), J. O. Awolalu and P. A. Dopamu (1979) and, very recently, J. D. Y. Peel (2003) have attempted to demonstrate that the African indigenous religion is capable of adapting to changes without letting go of its own completely. Even now, with a renewed call for cultural rebirth and revival and the devotion to preserve what is authentically African, the future seems to be very promising for the indigenous religion. This is even more as in this day and age, people under the aspect of cultural rebirth and renaissance are inclining to be more and more familiar and intimate with their traditional world view. In the light of this negative

portrayal of the indigenous religion and the deliberate effort of the filmmaker to assert the superiority of Christianity over the indigenous religion, many watchers of Nigerian video films are inclined to see this as another missionary strategy aimed at conversion.

4. TWO EXAMPLES FROM NIGERIAN VIDEO FILMS

In what follows, I demonstrate this negative portrayal of the indigenous religion with two Nigerian video films – *Living in Bondage* (1992) and *Spiritual Warfare* (2007). The choice of these two video films is deliberate. As we shall perceive, it shows that between 1992 – when the video film industry in Nigeria was beginning to gain popularity – and 2007, nothing much has really changed in their portrayal of the indigenous religion. African indigenous religion is still seen as second-rate and something that must capitulate to the imported religions. I will not render a blow-by-blow account of these films *per se*, but provide a general overview to enable the reader appreciate the point I have so far been making.

The video film *Living in Bondage* comes in two parts, I and II. The film centres on the excessive passion for wealth without adequate regard on how it is gained; which has become a very common feature of contemporary Nigerian society. The film tells the story of Andy Okeke, the lead actor, a man who has tried his hand in four different jobs, the latest being a banker, without the desired financial breakthrough. Frustrated with paid employments and ambitious to be like his friends who are self employed and who seemed to be on better financial footing, Andy began to agonize over his condition. Succour seems to have come the way of Andy, when he chances upon an old friend of his – Paul (played by Okechukwu Ogunjiofor) who undertakes to introduce him into the clique of the *nouveau riche* in Lagos. Andy is invited to a party hosted by Ichie Million (played by Francis Agu) where he comes in contact with the extremely rich Chief Omega (played by Kanayo O. Kanayo) who had earlier sacrificed his

mother for wealth and others of his kind. Little by little, Andy is introduced into the fraternity of ritualists who assured him of stupendous wealth, if he is strong-hearted enough to offer Merit (played by Nnenna Nwabueze), his loving and supportive wife for ritual purposes.

Against all odds, Andy was eventually initiated, but later reneged on his promise to offer his wife. In his wife's place, Andy presents Tina (Rita Nzelu), a prostitute. But the sacrificial victim is not accepted simply because she had invoked the blood of Jesus; a supposedly superior deity. Notice one of the general mindset dominant in the Nigerian video films; namely: that Christianity is superior to the indigenous religion and that the latter must capitulate in any confrontation with the former. Under intense pressure to sacrifice his wife or lose his own life, Andy eventually lured Merit to the shrine, where she is drugged and her blood drained into a syringe for members to feast on. This scene is reminiscent of the picture often painted by Christian apologists to criticize the indigenous religion in which they erroneously believe as characterized by witches and vampires who engage in orgy of wild merry making as they prey on the blood of their victims.

With the death of Merit, Andy became immensely rich and did not mourn his wife for, at least, three months as required by his Igbo tradition before jumping into another marriage with Ego. From now on, things are never to be the same again for Andy. His hitherto quiet and peaceful world has been shattered and the long sought wealth brings him so much misery and pain. First, the ghost spirit of his deceased wife begins to haunt him and will not let him be; secondly, Andy's new heart throb disappeared after stealing his two million naira. Andy is further plunged into misery with the off and on appearances of the ghost spirit of his late wife and the emptiness created by the disappearance of Ego. Very mindful of the vacuum in Andy's life, Flora cashes in on this and moves in with Andy.

The incessant appearances of Merit's ghost spirit drives Andy to the Chief Priest (played by Dan Oluigbo) for counselling. But the Chief Priest appears helpless and deprived of ideas. The only solution he could proffer was for Andy to relocate with the hope that this will help disconnect him from

the ghost spirit of his late wife. Notice again that the inability of the Chief Priest to provide solution even to the problem he himself has created fits perfectly into the inclination of the Nigerian filmmaker. In his conception, the indigenous religion and all of its associations are evil; and, as such, evil can only beget evil; evil cannot correct evil. The right solution can only be sought not in the shrine, but in the church.

When this appears inefficacious, the Chief Priest further recommends a ritual birth, whereby a goat is slaughtered and its blood empties on Andy. Andy was to suffer further setbacks when Flora perfected a plan to steal his money and disappears with her friend Carol to the United States; and, when he goes berserk at the height of a board meeting to seal a business deal. The demented Andy was dramatically discovered by a repented Tina (now a born again Christian), the hitherto prostitute who Andy was to use in the place of his wife for money ritual. With the help of Andy's parents, Tina takes him to her church where her pastor prays for him and admonishes him to confess his sins. With the revealing confession by Andy that he used his own wife, Merit, for money ritual, Andy's mother returns to the village, to the grave of Merit, to plead for forgiveness. The film finally comes to an end with Andy fully recovered and divested of all the paraphernalia of his ill-gotten wealth.

The other film which I would like to talk about is *Spiritual Warfare* (2007) released fourteen years after *Living in Bondage*. *Spiritual Warfare* is a video film which borders on spirit spouse – a theme very prevalent in African indigenous religion. The lead actor, Jude (played by Munna Obiekwe) has a marriage pact with a marine spirit which occasionally comes to have conjugal relationship with him, howbeit spiritually. When eventually Jude marries his heart throb Janet (Ireti Osayemi), his spirit spouse becomes extremely jealous. Her intermittent appearances at the homestead become a source of fear and worry for the couple. Meanwhile, Jude has become an ardent Christian, who would not want to have anything to do with his spirit spouse and the indigenous religion generally. Jude carries his problems to his mother who suggests he consults an oracle for solution. Jude refuses vehemently insisting that oracles and traditional medicine men are diabolic. On his

behalf, his mother visits the oracle which is tucked away in the bush. The priest of the oracle, a man, a little over middle age, is a pitiable sight. With over grown and unkempt beard, and outlandish dress and behaviour, the priest is a sad spectacle to behold. However, he discerns the problem, namely that Jude is married in the spirit world to aquatic spirit. Yet, the medicine man is portrayed in the film as having no solution to the predicament. He is seen as helpless in the hands of the water spirit who vehemently warns him to keep off. This scene is deliberately woven to portray the priest as a charlatan and to generally ridicule the indigenous religion as an obsolete and ineffective instrument in the prediction, interpretation and control of our space world – visible and invisible.

In any case, the priest offers Jude's mother a piece of protective medicine which would tame the water spirit. Jude reluctantly accepts the charm after much persuasion and hides it away from his wife in a chest of drawers in his bedroom. In the meantime, Jude's wife becomes pregnant and the water spirit, extremely jealous and angered by this development, makes life very frustrating and difficult for Jude, as he was thrown out of job. In spite of the protective medicine in Jude's bedroom, the spirit continues to have unrestricted access to his home to the point of attacking the baby in the womb and throwing out the charm from the chest of drawers where it was hidden. To further demonstrate the powerlessness of the indigenous religion and its ever readiness to succumb to any force whatsoever (as portrayed in the video film), the medicine man, his shrine and staff of office in a far-away village came under serious spiritual attack. The priest came under severe spiritual torment as he went berserk. His shrine quaked endlessly and his staff of office tumbled down from where it was hung as if in total surrender and in apology for daring the water goddess.

At this junction, it becomes very obvious to Jude that solution must be sought beyond the confines of the indigenous religion. Such perception drives Jude to his father-in-law (Livinus Nnochiri), a priest of the Christian faith for solution. His father-in-law censures him for not bringing the problem to his knowledge early enough; and for his inability to know the difference between light and darkness (Christianity and

the indigenous religion). Yet he confesses that the traditional medicine man knows the truth, but has a wrong solution to the problem. The film draws to an end when Jude's father-in-law summons one of his junior pastors and directs him to deliver Jude and his wife from the water spirit. Again, note that the choice of sending a junior pastor to cast out a water goddess that has proved extremely stubborn and intractable for the traditional priest is to further draw attention to the superiority of Christianity over the indigenous religion.

These two video films taken together is largely a representation of the model on which Nigerian video films is based. They tend to stigmatize African indigenous religion and African ethical values generally as inferior to those of Christianity and as a crude and underdeveloped system to which Christianity much teach salvation and to which Christian ethics must introduce love, family life, interpersonal relationships and the right behaviour towards materialism.

5. THE SYMBOLIC CONVERGENCE THEORY AND NOLLYWOOD

The symbolic convergence theory also known as fantasy-theme analysis deals with the use of narrative in communication. It could also be adopted to account for similarities between movie “myths” and opinion trends. Its leading proponents, according to Littlejohn and Foss (2005), are Ernest Bormann, John Cragan and Donald Shields. In the opinion of Griffin (1997, p. 34) “through symbolic convergence, individuals build a sense of community or a group consciousness”. Littlejohn and Foss (2005, p. 158) argue that since it is difficult to make a causal link between the fantasy themes of the movies and the parallel trends in public opinion, the symbolic convergence theory offers a potential explication with at least face validity. According to Onuzulike (2006), “one can recognize a fantasy theme because it is repeated again and again... for example, the depiction of ‘juju’ in Nigerian movies”. Relating this to “Nollywood”, Onuzulike contends that this theory suggests that repeated exposure to the myths and

themes of the movies on Nigerian cultures should influence individual's perceptions of Nigerians and Africans as a whole.

At present, the Nigerian video film industry, with its strong indigenous religious overtones, depicts a people whose indigenous religion is second-rate and inferior to Christianity and other world religions. The Nigerian movies portray an indigenous African religion whose tenets are an orgy of money rituals and "juju" worship. Based on what is portrayed in Nigerian movies, the rest of Africa and, indeed, the world believe that Nigerians are what Nigerian movies depict.

6. CONCLUSION

Nigeria is a beautiful land with over 250 ethnic groups and languages. This diversity of cultures, many of which are very scintillating and captivating, and other works of arts of strange and unusual character are capable of sustaining a thriving film industry. One of the duties of a responsible and patriotic film industry is to harness the rich cultural heritage of its immediate environment and, then, use the film as a veritable tool to project it to the rest of the world. For the Nigerian video film industry, this task, for one very important reason, should be seen as very urgent and compelling.

Africa lives in an era of cultural renaissance and reawakening – an era in which Africans labour to remove the lingering cobwebs of neocultural imperialism imposed by Hollywood and the Western media. For many, the time to assert what is authentically African is now. Indeed, this has witnessed very many ideologies. Among the earliest, we find "négritude". An expression first conceived by Aimé Césaire of the West Indies, but which was made popular by the famous poet, Léopold Sédar Senghor. For Senghor, Négritude is the awareness, defence and development of African cultural values. He argues that it is through Négritude that African people can make a contribution to the growth of what he calls "Africanity" and, beyond that point, to the contribution of the civilization of the universe (MBITI, 1969, p. 267).

While the ashes of Négritude were still being fanned by its adepts, another ideological claim to promote the values of

African civilization blossomed in what is known as “African personality”. E. Mphahlele (1962), one of its apostles, tells us that an African artist dealing with African themes, rhythms and idioms cannot, but express an African personality. The artist must keep searching for this African personality. He cannot help doing so because, after all, it is really a search for his own personality, for the truth about himself (MPHAHLELE, 1962, p. 21). Mphahlele further remarks that the artist must go through the agony of purging his art of imitations and false notes. Leave the artist to this evolution, let him sweat it out and be emancipated by his own art (MPHAHLELE, 1962, p. 21-22).

Undeniably, the present circumstance beckons on the African artist to assert, promote and defend African personality. C. T. Shaw (1978, p. 12), a famous archaeologist, who worked extensively in Nigeria and made astonishing archaeological findings, once remarked:

Nigeria has a great deal of ancient culture, which arouses the interest and admiration of artists and scholars in all parts of the world. Nigeria possesses her own glories and need no borrowed light from other cultures.

Shaw's remark should indeed be seen as a passionate appeal to the Nigerian video film industry to look inward and to uphold what is authentically African and not to devalue African personality.

UMA REAVALIAÇÃO DA INTERPRETAÇÃO DA RELIGIÃO AFRICANA NATIVA IN NOLLYWOOD

RESUMO

Desde sua estreia, às vésperas do século XXI, a indústria cinematográfica Nollywood tornou-se um instrumento importante de divulgação da rica herança cultural nigeriana. Filmes nigerianos retratam com vivacidade a organização sociopolítica do povo, a vida da família tradicional, a religião nativa e

outras instituições tradicionais, que, em conjunto, formam a estrutura das sociedades tradicionais africanas. Um tema bastante recorrente no cinema nigeriano é a reprodução de um retrato de mau gosto da religião africana tradicional, destituído de qualquer valor positivo. Este artigo mostra como o cinema nigeriano tende a estigmatizar a religião nativa e os valores éticos africanos geralmente apresentando-os como inferiores aos do cristianismo, e como um sistema rudimentar e subdesenvolvido em que a ética cristã deve levar ao amor, à vida familiar, ao relacionamento interpessoal e à atitude correta com respeito ao materialismo. Este artigo, portanto, propõe uma reflexão sobre o assunto.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Reavaliação. Interpretação. Africano. Nativo. Religião. Nollywood.

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