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THE REPRESENTATION OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND CULTURE IN NIGERIA POPULAR FILMS

Abstract

One of the ways by which religious rituals communicate in African society is by maintaining cohesion in the culture. They connect participants to richer meanings and larger forces of their community. Even in representational models, rituals create solidarity in the form of subjective experiences of sharing the same meaningful world which is attained by participants through the condensed nature of symbols used therein. Traditional religion is one ritual that despite the influence of westernization and scientific developments in Africa, still holds meaningful implications in people's everyday life. Thus, from day break to evening, people have religious rituals with which they communicate with their God or gods, deities and ancestors. Also from weeks to seasons, months to years, there are festivals and rituals both in private and in public situations which the African still celebrate in connection with the 'living dead' or those in the 'spirit world'. This paper by means of nuanced textual analysis of some Nigerian home based films: *Things Fall Apart* (1986), *Igodo*: *The Land of the Living Dead* (1999), *Sango*, (1998), *Festival of Fire*, (1999), *Bless Me*, (2005) traces religion to the root paradigm of African cultures as a channel to the construction of African identity.

Key words: Nollywood, Religion, Representation and Culture.

Introduction

Like the practice of philosophy in Africa, Nollywood has significantly become involved in the process of Africa's self reflection and identity construction by means of its cultural representations. Scholars like Kunzler, 2007, Onuzulike: 2007, Akpabio: 2007, Oluyinka: 2008, Osakwe: 2009, to mention but a few, by their findings attest to this fact and call for more nuanced analysis of Nollywood texts to explore the issue further. Thus, the use of films as a meta-narrative in exploring the religious identity of Africans is something of a revelatory process towards understanding not only the religious culture of the people but communalism in general as practiced in Africa. Again, it is aimed at decoding the aesthetics-pattern of the industry's representational brand as against other mainstream film industries' model of story-telling. In this paper therefore, the

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objective is to look at some culture-centered films in Nollywood and discuss the significant presence of the indicators of African traditional religion by means of rigorous textual analysis. First, let us look at the phenomenon of Nollywood.

Nollywood: Emergence and brief history

Nollywood by popular acclamation refers to the Nigerian national film industry. Even though the name has an uncertain origin and was derived from acronyms such as Hollywood and Bollywood; Haynes highlights that it apparently appeared for the first time in print in an article by Matt Steinglass in *New York Times* in 2002 (Haynes, 2005). It has other competing name like 'Naijawood' which has actually not taken root as 'Nollywood' among film audiences.

The argument whether Nollywood can be acclaimed the Nigerian film industry has been open ended on both camps of the divide. While some say the representations showcase an industry that has come of age; others pick on the technical flaws in the films to say they have a long way to becoming an industry. But even before the emergence of Nollywood in its present form today, the debate on whether a film industry exists in Nigeria or not, had already been going on. In 1974, for instance, Ola Balogun, called for establishing a national cinema in an article entitled 'Nigeria Deserves a Film Industry', published in a Nigerian Newspaper, *Daily Times* (Haynes, 1995). In 1995, three years after Nollywood has begun productions, Haynes also wrote that "the reasons a national cinema does not exist correlate with the political failures of the Nigerian nation". Among these reasons he include: "...disinterest, ideological bankruptcy, incompetence and misconceived projects; unwillingness of the national bourgeoisie to invest in film production, failure to establish a strong national center in cultural projects, and the nation still remaining supine in the face of neo-colonialism whereby cinema screens are filled with foreign productions" (Haynes, 1995: 115). Even in his edited work, *Nigerian Video Films* (2000), there is the reluctance to address Nollywood as a national cinema, hence authors used terms like 'Nigerian video films', 'Nollywood phenomenon' among others.

While not discarding the logic of those who do not see Nollywood as the name of Nigeria's popular film industry currently, the understanding here is to signal the significance of these popular films produced in Nigeria by Nigerians in the culture industry. The use of the concept 'Nollywood' indicates the understanding that these films are vehicles of encoded messages with themes and languages that re(present) the life patterns of proximate Nigerian consumers in particular and Africans in general to whom they explore their social issues and cultural concerns. Again, that the Federal Government of Nigeria in 1993 set up a regulatory agency, the *National Film and Video Censors Board*, to censor the activities of the industry implies that it is officially regarded as the 'national cinema' industry of the country.

The Nollywood films according to Kunzler, is "an industry that [has] developed out of a context related to domestic and international cultural, economic, and political environments [...]. It is heterogeneous in nature and can roughly be divided into Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo video films which designate their production centers in the South-West, North and South-East of Nigeria respectively" (Kunzler, 2007: 1). Thus, like any other national cinema, such as the Irish Cinema for instance, which "sustains and chal-

lenges the myths of a country's nationhood" (Hill and Rocket, 2004: 10), or as Williams argues, "functions as an economic weapon in the competitive arena of world capitalism, promoting national values" (Williams, 2002: 6), Nollywood uses languages and themes that resonate with Nigerians to tell their stories. Even though, the filmmakers make films 'essentially' to make money as Akomfrah argues, they are systematically being 'guided by the tenets of African nationalism and cultural identity which help them address local concerns' (2006: 282). It exists "almost entirely outside pan-African institutions and international circuits that shaped most of the politicized African Cinemas"[1] (Haynes, 2000: 5) and "borrows from state media and the transnational flows of Indian and American films and Nigerian folklores" (Dul, 2000: 238).

Generally, reception and textual studies of African films can be said to be in dire need of academic explorations. Only a few have been done and centred mostly on the canonized African films sponsored by the West (Zacks, 1995; Schmidt, 1985; Pfaff, 1992; Petty, 1992; Murphy, 2000; Tomaselli, Sherperson, and Eke, 1995; Haynes, 1995; Adedeji, 1971; Akudinobi, 2001; Diawara, 1988, 1992, 1996, 1999; Nwachukwu, 1994; Bakari and Cham, 1996; Larkin, 1997). Quite recently, attention has started focusing on Nollywood especially in the West African region (Haynes, 2000; Adesanya, 2000; Ogundele, 2000; Ekwuazi, 2000; Okome, 2000; Garritano, 2000; Johnson, 2000; Oha, 2000; Larkin, 1997, 2000, 2002, 2006; Haynes and Okome, 1997, 2000; Adejunmobi, 2002; Nwachukwu, 2003; Lawuyi, 1997; Oha, 2001, 2002; Ofeimun, 2003; Owens-Ibie, 1998; Kunzler, 2007; Haynes, 2007; Okome, 2007; Onuzulike, 2007; Okoye, 2007; Dipio, 2007; Adeoti, 2007; McCall, n.d; Esosa, 2005; Akomfrah, 2006; Adesokan, 2006; Aderinokun, 2005; Akpabio, 2007; Oluyinka, 2008; Uwah, 2008; Omoera, 2009) to discuss and analyze representations from insiders' perspectives.

How Nollywood translated from localized stage productions to a film industry in Nigeria is a journey that an article like this cannot ignore to highlight. Initially there were the economic factors that hit Nigeria so hard in the 1980s and made it difficult for the first generation of celluloid filmmakers to sustain their market. These were a group of Nigerian filmmakers who carried out film production practice by themselves without Government sponsorship between 1960s and 1980s and due to the high cost of production had to give it up. For many years then, Nigeria remained without film productions and people resorted to stage dramas.

There was also the technological dimension that aided the transition which was the use of 'ordinary' video cameras to make cheap films in order to cut cost against the economic burdens of the celluloid productions. Added to these is the fact that when the Nollywood practice came, it was rooted in the television industry. By this is meant that since people were already watching local soap operas and theatres following the 1972 indigenization act,[2] it was easier to watch Nollywood in the same way on the same television screen with less inconvenience and cost.

Essentially it can also be argued that another fundamental factor that gave inspiration to Nollywood's cinematic practices to succeed is 'citizen journalism'. This refers to the individual zeal of some Nigerians to empower themselves in order to make their voices heard by the general public. It arguably could be seen as what Okome identifies when he states that "the history of the emergence of popular video-film is connected to the deep-seated desire by [this group of] Nollywood consumers [and producers] to have a voice in the social and cultural debates of the time" (2007: 17), because in

their (re)presentations Nollywood producers and directors are creating parallel commentaries on the social issues concerning the people. It is this type of self representation that has marked the usefulness of 'you tube' and other participatory channels in the internet where ordinary citizens tell their stories on issues of concern. Especially in the 1980s and 1990s in Nigeria, when military rulers were at the helm of affairs, and when the "political tensions evident in society could not be directly addressed on mainstream television" (Oluyinka, 2008), because of fear of the rulers, most Nigerians began encoding messages that related their views and fears on the political and social issues of the day.

The success of this industry also comes from what Nwachukwu identifies as the drive for 'commercial viability' (2003: 127). This is because while the new video film industry places a high premium on entertainment, it also seeks the pleasure of viewers in order to recoup expenses from their sales by encoding what audiences desire to see. On this, Haynes states that "the new video films, on the basis of sheer commercial vitality can claim to be the major contemporary Nigerian art form" (2000: XV).

Nollywood's historical emergence according to Adesokan, hinges on "the neo-liberal deregulations of many economies in Africa that brought changes in the use of technology, especially of the digital kind, which is open to reformatting in quite imaginative ways. When you live at the mercy of poor economic and political calculations," he said, "you tend to be inventive, keen to improvise, bend tools to serve your purposes. The Nigerian films came out of that context" (Adesokan, 2006).

Nollywood's productions reflect the lived-in situations of Nigerians and represent many issues that both Nigerians and other African citizens can relate with. As Kunzler argues, "they affect Africans more than other foreign films" (Kunzler, ibid: 10). They emerge from what Richard Mofe Damijo[3] calls "real genuine stories about the cultural experience of the people, exemplified by Elechi Amadi's book that is translated into film, *The Concubine* (2006), and Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) also adapted into film" (Damijo, 2007).

Particularly in Nigeria, the film industry has significantly illustrated the ability of marshalling familiar symbolic religious rituals which help create nostalgia and resonance in the viewers. They reveal familiar stories, problems and values of Nigerians and Africans in general. Here, major universal questions of values and meanings of life are explored. Oluyinka in his findings on the industry, asserts that, "the issue of identity, preservation of cultural heritage and resistance of dominant western influence are clear factors contributing to the success of the [Nollywood] industry" (2008).

Delineating the Concept of Culture

Culture particularly has variedly been defined over the years and across continents. It is as Taylor (1832 – 1917) argues "a complex whole, including knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other habits acquired by people as members of a society" (cited in Luzbetak, 2002: 134). It is for Ang "the objectified set of ideas, beliefs, and behaviours of peoples" (1996: 133) and for Hall, concerned with "the production and exchange of meaning – between members of a society or groups" (Hall, 1997a, cited in Gillian Rose, 2001: 6). Hence, culture is all about living and the manner of doing things in the society.

Hall's view of culture in particular, which is "identity, history, agency and practice, according to Rojek cannot be taken as fixed entities but parts of a system of representation which is permanently in a process" (Rojek, 2003: 2). This means that culture is in a flux and brings about new formations with time. "The concept remains a complex one [...] a site of convergent interests" (Hall, 1997: 33), he argues. Thus, following this viewpoint, Nollywood can be said to combine significant features of culture which are "overwhelmingly rich and varied in [their] manifestations" (Hannerz, 1997: 12) to represent people's way of life in Nollywood films.

To undertake the study of cultures in this way, especially that of religion, "through its narrative address" as Bhabha argues, "does not merely draw attention to its language and rhetoric; but also attempts to alter the conceptual object itself, where its positive value lies in displaying the wide dissemination through which we construct the field of meanings and symbols associated with its national life" (Bhaba, 1990: 3). In this light, particularly African religious life and culture are presented from the perspective of nuanced visual and textual analyses as shall be shown later.

Since filmic representations consist essentially of media language and conventions (Lacey, 1998: 131), Bobo introduces the concept of 'discourse' to describe the moment of encounter between texts and audiences. Within this space of an inter-discourse, she explains that 'cultural competencies come into play'. Thus, "the viewers' position in the "social structure" determines in part what sets of discourse or interpretive strategies they bring to their encounter with the texts" (Bobo, 2003: 312). By bringing in this concept, Bobo subscribes to Bourdieu whose original idea it is. Thus, for him, 'one cannot fully understand cultural practices unless "culture" in the restricted, normative sense of ordinary usage, is brought back in the anthropological sense' (1994: 444).

Bourdieu's 'cultural competencies' is needed in a study like this which interprets filmic representations from their indigenous cultural roots. Unless one is equipped with the local knowledge of what is encoded, meanings of realities will be difficult to make. For this reason Anderson is of the view that cultural competencies can be called cultural power or cultural capital. In this instance, the currency of transaction is one's knowledge of culture. Thus, he defines cultural competency or cultural capital as "the amount of cultural power possessed by an individual or social group in terms of language, skills, and other cultural acquisitions" (Anderson, 1997: 191).

Generally, I have found Turner's (1974, 1982) explanation of the pleasures of theatre, film and television as a *ritual process* to be particularly helpful in understanding the place of Nollywood's cultural films among Africans who resonate with their themes and storylines to explore meanings in the society. Certainly, there are many useful explanatory theories of this phenomenon, but the ritual process is very illuminating because traditional African practices in particular can be described as a continuous series of rituals which express cogently the belief system and thought pattern of the African and Nigerian people that does aid the construction of their cultural identity.

Victor Turner's Ritual Process and Nollywood Practice

The theory of ritual process comes principally from the contributions of Victor Turner who did a study of the ritual of passage among the *Ndembe* people of North Western Zambia. People express in their communalistic rituals what moves them most,

and since the form of expression is conventionalized and obligatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed (Uzukwu, 1997: 41).

Ritual *per se* is a place where people integrate short-term pragmatic goals and the longer-range mythic values of a culture, where they can replace personal alienation with an affirmation of personal identity. In Turner's view, every society's attempt to mobilize itself to solve its broader societal problems leads to an emphasis on authoritarian institutions, creation of status differentiation, justification of the concentration of power and inequality, reward of individual ambition, technical knowledge and other forms of 'structure' (1969-1995: 106-107). Structure may be necessary, but it also generally produces conflict, alienation and oppression. Hence, Turner argues that most cultures balance the over-emphasis on structure with a periodic deep experience of community which emphasizes social leveling, concern for the needs of others in the community and personal identity formations.

The purpose of the rites of passage among the Ndembe, in his view, is to impress young people with their duties to the community and recall to those assuming positions of chieftaincy that they should not use their power for their own interests but to serve the whole community. In his interpretation, there are three moments in the ritual process: leaving the realm of structure, entering into a symbolic experience of community which is deeply emotional and pleasurable and then returning to the context of structure with a sense of social values. Turner characterizes this experience of community as 'liminal' (from the Latin *limen* or threshold of a door), that is, as an experience that is on the threshold between utopian communal happiness and the practicalities of structure in everyday life. Ritual is, as Real observes, celebratory, consumatory, (an end in itself) and decorative rather than utilitarian in aim and often requires some element of 'performance' for communication to be realized (1996: 48).

Certainly, Nigerians experience in everyday life communal mutuality in village festivals, traditional dancing tunes and steps, religious worships and socio-cultural co-operations in works. For this reason, rituals (whether in real life situations or in Nollywood filmic representations) have two references to what they achieve: backward to convention, habit, agreement and established order, and forward to indicate the immediate and soon-to-be realized social significance of an underlying order (Rothenbuhler, 1998: 14). In this context, by moving backwards, the notion of memorability and nostalgia are evoked in terms of what used to be in the days of the ancestors; while in going forward, there is the reference to the communal aspirations of the people towards reaching a goal with their ruling elders and leaders guiding the journey in the present.

One impressive aspect of Nollywood in all of these is in the representation of religio-cultural rituals as a major aspect of communalism. This illustrates the ability of film producers and directors to marshall familiar symbolic language of these cultures into their productions, especially to provide the experience of communal liminality (Animalu,1990: 46), cultural integration and nostalgic egalitarianism among proximate audiences – who are mainly Nigerians and Africans. But suffice to say that using the women's cult particularly in his *Ndembe* studies as an example of what ritual participation does for community members, Turner graphically states that:

Women's cults have the tripartite diachronic structure made familiar to us by the

work of Van Gennep. The first phase, called *Ilembi* separates the candidate from the profane world; the second, called *kunkunka* (literally "in the grass hut") partially secludes her "from secular life"; while the third, called *ku-tumbka*, is a festive dance celebrating the removal of the shade's interdiction and the candidate's return to normal life (Turner, 1974: 47).

Thus, Turner's structure therefore refers to social movements from where one is at a moment, to where he or she receives training, then to a higher level that is where he or she started and now returns, but with a higher vision and new knowledge. While the first stage is the normal human society, where there is power, struggles, achievements and subordinations (ordinary everyday society), the second stage is the symbolic environment that creates the learning process –'the *communitas*' (ritual environment). In it, all participants are equal and submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders, (which can be likened to watching a film in a room, or participating in a cultural symbolic (ritual) ceremony, or even in a religious worship). Thus, in this second stage, the participants undergo the initiation rite, which implies that they identify with the actions they have witnessed and feel ennobled by it. Here, some kind of cultural myths are played for the group and wisdom, no matter how esoteric, is imparted to them for higher tasks ahead. By this is meant that the encoded stories of the people's journey as a group, are retold and handed down to them (Abanuka, 1991: 9) like the experience of watching films which often creates new knowledge impression in audiences. By this is implied as well that the act of viewing is in itself a process of initiation into the represented 'reality' which informs the knowledge economy of viewers and positions them to make meaning of the subject matter represented for them.

The essences of these [represented] rituals according to Onwubiko are: "that they embody the values of the people, they document the traditional education of the people, the songs, symbols, signs, proverbs and riddles, and works of arts" (1990: XI). Resonating with this idea is the insight of Real on what he termed 'mythic rituals'. These according to him "connect us with our historical past and our physical environment. They establish order and define roles. They restructure time and space for our era and celebrate the central […] values in culture" (1996: 48). The ritual of belief is one aspect that strongly forms and continuously re-creates the identity of the African.

Faith and Religion in Africa

Religion as part and parcel of life is a major tenet of communalism in African traditional life (Mbiti, 1969, 1990; Uzukwu, 1997; Okere, 1995; Dipio, 2007). Every person is guided by a personal god, called *chi* in Igbo language [where this writer comes from] similar to the 'guardian angel' in Christian theology. As an aspect of communalism, Mbiti states that "religion is the way of life of Africans" (1969: 29). These are apparent communications between the living and the dead guided by the hierarchical ordering of things in African communalism. Humanity first is created by the supreme God who is called *Chukwu* or *Chineke* [...] the God that creates (*Yahweh elohim*). This is where African traditional religion shares boundary with Christian theology that defines the triune God as "the being which nothing greater than can be conceived (non solum es quo maius cogitari nequit) but greater than all that can be conceived (quiddam maius

quam cogitari posit)" (Anselm of Canterbury, in *Fides et Ratio*, No. 14).

The concept of God in African communalism is revealed by the names given to Him in African languages. Following the principle of 'agere sequitor esse' (acting according to being), God is conceived as an unfathomable being, a force that creates all others and beyond whom there is no other. Mbiti emphasizes this point by arguing that "God is the origin and sustenance of all things. He is older than the Zamani period.[4] He is outside creation and beyond creation. On the other hand, he is personally involved in his creations, so that it is not outside of his reach. God is thus simultaneously transcendent and immanent" (Mbiti, 1969: 29). This image of a *being* that is involved in the totality of African life is a force that recreates everything. Obiego, using the Igbo experience of religious faith to buttress this same point remarks that, "the profundity of their ideas and belief in *Chukwu* (God) is immortalized in their personal names (born mostly out of their experience in the struggle for life) as well as in *Chukwu's* praise titles or epithets. Some of these speak of *Chukwu's* existence in the emphatic way, as if to convince someone" (Obiego, 1981: 57).

Some of the epithets as outlined by Mbiti in some African languages which describe Africa's religious concept of God include the many definitions of his name:

'He who is of himself' (Zulu), 'the first who has always been
in existence and would never die' (Bambuti), 'who has no father
and is not a man' (Herero), 'the greatest of the great' (Ndebele),
'the great spirit' (Shona), 'the fatherless spirit' (Ashanti), 'marvel
of marvels' (Bacongo), 'the unexplainable' (Ngombe), 'the unknown'
(Massai), 'the "He" of the suns' (Ila/Baluba), 'mighty immovable
rock that never dies' (Yoruba) (Mbiti, 1969: 25).

These concepts come about due to the general understanding of the 'person' of God as the last end of all things or what this writer calls the *Dum* of existence. *Dum* is an Igbo word referring to the 'totality' of all things. It discusses God as 'totality' since He is pre-eminently immanent in nature. He is the 'All' of all things, the final summit and last apogee of existence who, even though, permeates all beings, is substantially unfathomable in being (Uwah, 2000: 26). For Adedeji, "God reveals Himself to Africans as a kingly Father who is dependable and a caretaker of the family, a friend who is trust-worthy for companionship, as a creator and life-giver who sustains and upholds the universe. For these reasons, Africans and Nigerians, particularly, see God as somebody who is good, merciful, holy, powerful, all knowing, omnipresent, a spirit, unchangeable, and unknowable. The Yorubas express these qualities when they say *Olurun mimo* (Holy God), *Atererekariaye* (omnipresent), *Oba awaramaridi* (unknowable), *Apata-ayeraye* (Rock of Ages), *Oba aiku* (Eternity), *Kabiesi* (Unquestionable)" (Adedeji, 2000: 41).

In the Igbo speaking area of Nigeria, more of these epithets describe the people's understanding of God (*Chineke*) as one of them who is involved in their affairs more like the ancestors communalistically. He is called *Amama amacha amacha* -'the unfathomable being', *Echeta obi esie ike* – 'one who, when remembered infuses confidence', *Ogbara nkiti okwu biri n'onu* – 'the silent being that holds the last speech', *Ogba aka eje agha* – 'the warrior who wins battles without weapons' etc.

In their communique at the end of a meeting in Accra-Ghana in December 1977, the pan-African conference of Third World Theologians state that "African theology must be understood in the context of African life and culture" (Appiah, 1977: 193). Ideologically therefore, God is pre-eminently a force in Africa, spiritual, but totally immanent. Everything revolves around him as the supreme force. Onwubiko arguing this states that "one's entire action is reflective of one's religious concepts and practices as seen in the ordering of society. This is because social morality is dependent on religion" (Onwubiko, 1991: 31).

The ritual of faith and religion in African traditional worship is seen among Africans in almost every religio-social rituals. It enhances their identity as a people and offer clues to understanding their cosmological framework and thought patterns. Since people believe that God is a higher spiritual force that is involved in their affairs as a community and individuals, they reach out to him through a pantheon of other gods and minor deities like *Ala* or *Ani,* the earth goddess, *Amadioha*, the god of thunder; *Ajoku* the yam god and other clan deities. On the personal level, there is always a personal *chi* called *Ikenga* in Igbo land, which is considered to wade off evil and bring good luck to individuals. Thus, this understanding frequently gets represented in Nollywood films especially in rituals and symbolically conveys the notion of faith in God and the gods, not only in the traditional settings, but also in modern day African society.

Religious Beliefs in Nollywood Films

Africans traditionally believe that "man is a product of a universe in which all energy and everything is interconnected, born out of a "primal force" which has spread a little of itself into all it has generated" (Barlet, 1996: 84/85). By this is meant that Africans believe in a world that is unified between all beings, whether material, spiritual or metaphysical. Thus, for Onwubiko, "the world of Africans is one of inanimate, animate, and spiritual beings and there is the influence of each category of these beings in the universe in which they inhabit" (1991: 3). This inhabited universe according to Nwoga is a 'space' which is a field of action and not just a location made up of discrete physical distances and separate physical spaces. *Ala mmuo* (spirit world) and *ala mmadu* (human world) according to him, are the plains of spirit action and of human action, and these need not be physically separated. It is "the non-separation of these entities in physical terms that makes interaction between the various worlds possible so that spirits and their activities impinge on realities that are seen in the human and the physical" (Nwoga, 1984: 36). It is this view of 'non-separability' of the two worlds that is expressed in films like *Things Fall Apart*[5] (1986) and many other African and Nollywood films where there is the constant tendency to consult the oracles (spirits) before taking up communal obligations which is part of African ontology.

The spirit world is seen as part of the human world and the mediators between these worlds are culturally called the chief priests [*Dibia* in Igbo language] and [*Babalawo* in Yoruba]. Significantly in both literature and film adaption of *Things Fall Apart,* the reality of this worldview is concretely represented. In the description of who the earth goddess [*Ani/Ala*] is, and what role she plays in the life of people as a local deity in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe writes: "*Ani* played a greater part in the life of the people

than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. And what is more, she was in close communication with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies had been committed to earth" (Achebe, 1958: 221).

In the adapted film of this novel, the elders often meet in consultation with communal deities like *Ani,* the earth goddess and *Amadioha,* the god of thunder, in order to carry out communal duties. This is the case before the funeral rites of Ogbuefi Ezeudu, for instance, in the film, *Things Fall Apart,* and in *Igodo: The Land of The Living Dead,* when the community experienced massive deaths as a consequence of the wrath of the gods. The role of the traditional priest in these village ontologies is therefore significant in every community, since he or she bridges the gap between the real and the supernatural worlds, striving to sustain peace and harmony between all members (Kalu, 1994: 52).

The film *Sango* (1997) by Femi Lasode particularly dramatizes Yoruba cosmology in its religio-cultural representations. In this film, the story is told of *Sango*, the traditional king of the old Oyo kingdom with spiritual powers that helped him win battles. Being an epic film equipped with cultural costumes, deep mystical powers of the gods and evocative sound tracks, this film reveals in great depths the idea of African traditional religion and belief in its richness of ritual communications between the human and spirit worlds. Similar to *Sango*'s deep ecological representations of African ontology are other Nollywood movies like *Igodo* (1999) and the *Festival of Fire* (1999), which focus not only on the relationship between the world of humans and the spirits in African worldviews but also emphasize how human activities are guided by the dictates of the gods. Instances of these types of activities in the films and the practical manner of behaviour in Africa makes Moemeka (1998) argue that Africans communicate communalistically. By this claim he pinpoints the indicators of communalism to include 'religion as a way of life' in people's daily encounters. In both verbal and non-verbal communications, Moemeka asserts that 'communalistic acts are engaged in to confirm, solidify and promote social order. In such cultures, communication is always a question of attitude towards one's neighbour [...] closely tied to communication rules designed to ensure communal social order' (1998: 133).

Religion and faith define a strong aspect of Nigeria's culture both in the traditional and modern day fashions. In his study on *The Role of the Mass Media in the Process of Conversion of Catholics to Pentecostal Churches*, Ihejirika identifies as one factor that makes people convert to Pentecostal churches, the idea that most believe there is always a contest between good and bad spirit in their lives (2003: 67). This confirms Oha's findings of the Yorubas too especially in relation to Nollywood's representations of their traditional religious practices, where the interface between religion and cultures is causing "a form of postcolonial education that means the emergence of cultural and religious hybridity in the society" (2002: 138). For Dipio, the "hybrid nature of this genre takes care of many interests at once. It combines art and commerce, pleasure and morals, reality and fantasy, tradition and modernity, and a form of Christianity that integrates traditional religion" (2007: 80).

However, while Ihejirika's finding might seem superstitious even though being attested to by both Dipio's (2007) and Oha's (2002) textual analysis of filmic representations on the Nigerian audiences, what it does reveal is the tension that characterizes the interface between faith and the apparent failure of being materially wealthy in

Nigeria. Oha corroborates this by highlighting further that "many Christian narratives foreground the conflict between God's forces and Satan's in the affairs of human beings. Secular human experiences are seen as reflections as well as consequences of spiritual warfare" (2000: 192). Conflict here is in the struggle of overcoming poverty which most people tend to think is caused by the Devil attacking them or 'tying down' their progress and wealth and therefore needs to be fought against by all means.

In *Festival of Fire* (1999) directed by Chico Ejiro, another edifice of religious rituals is depicted in the tension surrounding the early missionary encounter of the Catholic Church with the traditional beliefs of the people of Eastern Nigeria. Shot in a typical pre-colonial location, reminiscent of Chinua Achebe's Umuofia village before the advent of Christianity in *Things Fall Apart*, this movie pays great tribute to the heroic pioneering spirit of the early female missionaries while presenting the tenacity of a people's love and defense of their traditional religion and culture. The establishing shot, filmed from a wide angle perspective, gives at a glance, the romantic exotic nature of the rural African village Amani, in 1885, where people were deeply engrossed with the killing of twin babies for fear of upsetting the decorum of the land, purportedly guided by the local deity, *Amadioha*,[6] who prohibits the bearing of twins as an evil omen.

The film tells the story of a certain man, who to avert the killing of his twin babies as custom demands, separates them by handing them over to different women of two different villages to bring them up in their own houses outside Amani. The twins, *Ike* (male) and *Mary* (female), were given identical tattoos on their bodies, in case they survive and come to learn of their background. As believed by Amani tradition, the family of Ike happens to be a priestly clan and therefore is privileged with serving the communal deity at the level of chief-priests, referred to as *Eze mmuo*.[7] Of course the primary priestly function here includes the killing of twin babies as well as offering of sacrifices to the deity on behalf of the people. Twenty five years after the birth of Ike and his sister, Ike grows to be chosen as the *Eze mmuo*. This is also the time when the early missionary nuns decide to come to Amani for evangelization for the first time. Mary, the twin sister of Ike is one of them, and became the leader of the group soon after their European leader was killed while rescuing a woman being stoned to death by a mob for giving birth to twins.

In their fight to combat this tradition, Mary and other nuns had to battle to rescue some abandoned twins as well as offer medical assistance to the villagers. But Ike, as one of the custodians of Amani traditions would not tolerate the women's new religion. He turns the entire community against the nuns. While some got killed and buried, Mary is brutally flogged and disrobed by a mob led by Amaeshi, the prince of the land and his guards. Just at the point of getting ready to kill Mary, in sacrifice to appease *Amadioha,* the god of the land, a twist occurs. Ike saw the tattoo on Mary's chest which symbolically reminds him of the warning of the deity who once told him: 'you can't destroy your own! You cannot kill yourself!

Ike withdraws his sword from the day's task of sacrifice in order to consult his aged father, who once again, narrated the story of his birth to him, reminding him in clear terms: 'the woman with the tattoo on her chest is your sister'. At this point, like the spell of a bad dream, the screen zoomed slowly to a flash-back that relocates the audience into the distant past when Ike and his sister were born and rescued by separating

them. Thus, like a privileged revelation, the audience is here reminded that Ike too is a twin, and might after all, be encountering his sister unknowingly, who herself also is not aware of this fact either.

Bewildered by these hidden revelations of his father, Ike approaches Mary in her secluded cave and sorts out their identity and family background by asking family questions that revealed them as siblings. *Festival of Fire* does not only tell about the history of the 1885 missionary journey of the Catholic Church to the old Eastern region of Nigeria, but also showcases how the church was able to outwit the ferocious old traditions and the acceptance of new faith by the people. At the end, the king of Amani eventually was baptized and most of the people got converted to the new religion.

These films couched in symbolic proverbial words and ritualized actions depict the elasticity of tension that arises in the correlation of an old communalistic system with a new one, and therefore help appreciate the fact that Nollywood builds on village rituals to solicit audiences' resonance with the films. The issue of religion and worship among others is so strong that both in the traditional pattern and modern day bible based traditions, they are recurrently represented. Many films are encoded with representations of ritual worships and belief systems. Thus, engaging in the textual analysis of these texts justifies among other things, the basic assumption of this long essay that Nollywood's representations come from the people's everyday life contexts and significantly from their communal rituals.

Igodo (1999) is another Nollywood film that showcases the ritual of in Africa traditional religion by means of consultations and sacrifices to a clan deity to safeguard a community. As a religious film, the belief in the judgment of the gods is made supremely explicit and the consultations of oracles as a sure way of knowing the mind of the gods. It is the story of a man whose wonderful love for tradition and victory at a traditional wrestling made him the envy of other ruthless communal elders. He becomes a hero because of the fame he has brought to his village; but since a group of elders were not happy with him, they plotted and framed him up to be killed. However, since the earth goddess does not approve of his death as a god of justice, strange things started happening in the land and people began dying mysteriously starting with the elders. Upon consulting with his council of elders and oracle, the ruling king was asked to deploy six young men to go and fetch a cutlass from an the 'land of the dead' for cutting down a tree growing on the warrior's grave to placate the gods in their anger. In the film, terror is unleashed on the clan for an abormination and can only be calmed by appeasing the gods by means of communal sacrifices.

Bless Me (2005) is one other Nollywood film that depicts the religious–didactic genre of the Nollywood industry in a more modern fashion. Typically, it is Pentecostal or Charismatic in both content and outlook and evokes the sense of religion as a way of life by most people in the country. It systematically uses family hardships to moralize faith in the consciousness of viewers who more or less, might be engaged in it to see a reflection of their society and perhaps, their own life-stories.

Directed by Ernest Obi, this movie suggests a reading founded on the philosophy of evangelization by means of media outreach programmes and technologies. It uses the screen as a pulpit to preach faith and the steadfastness to God in the midst of difficult challenges. Again, it is a practical film that confronts once again the reality and problem of evil in the world created by an all good, a God. The bottom line theme of its

narrative is the age long philosophical question: 'why does the innocent suffer while the guilty prospers?'

Using Festus (Mike Ezuruonye) as the protagonist of this movie, the producers question the 'why' of the presence of evil in human existence. The irony which even Festus could not comprehend, even as he helps viewers identify with the narrative flow of his sufferings, is why should he, a devout Christian and worshipper of God, be left in abject poverty and squalor, while his neighbours of 'double-dealing' businesses succeed in all their transactions. Like the biblical saintly Job, he asks the 'why me' questions.

The opening scene of *Bless Me* begins with a wide angle shot of sun rays shinning softly on the houses of the rural Onitsha[8] area of the South-East of Nigeria, as family members are seen getting up from sleep. Swiftly panning the camera round the old and rusted corrugated iron sheets' houses in the area, to give a view of the environmental outlook of the place and depict the calmness of the night that was coming to an end with daybreak, the lens technically penetrates a particular bedroom and reveals to audiences a young couple in pyjamas, standing in the middle of their bedroom and singing 'worship songs' to God in a morning prayer session.

While the idea of standing and singing hymns to God is not recent in Nigeria, the Pentecostal way of doing it is quite different from those of the traditional churches, indicating the dawn of a new reality in the ritual of religious worship in the country. The screen expresses this point where it offers a representation of the morning prayer of Festus and his wife Amaka (Rita Dominic). Like devout 'born again' Christians, this young couple lift high their bibles, with eyes tightly closed and speak multitude of words 'to God' in a frenzied manner. This scene, while not particularly suggesting a reversal of the traditional film aesthetics of the Nollywood industry, where elders of families lead in traditional religious prayers by pouring libations to personal and family gods, as seen in *Things Fall Apart*, *Festival of Fire* etc, highlights the Pentecostal modern way of worship among most Nigerian families. Significantly it depicts the underlying argument that people in communalistic society see religion as their primary way of life. This family therefore, can be read as displaying the typical nature of faith in marriages among most elites in Nigeria, where gender equality also has become an accepted issue, and respect and honour are shared equally between husband and wife unlike the traditionally patriarchal settings where women had no voice of their own in the families.

Even though one might think that this film is Nollywood's attempt to adapt to market demands and conform to the religious inclinations of the Nigerian audience, still, it is a way of addressing the people on their problems at the level they can understand them. *Bless Me* is a desperate call to God for redemption out of poverty and stupor. The songs in it also, not only in the prayers but as film's music score reveal a desire of a couple burning for material upliftment, far more than spiritual successes. Or put in another way, they manifest the devout faith of a young family wishing all 'blessings' to turn situations around at the behest of God whom they serve.

Songs accompany filmic storylines in Nollywood. Most often they introduce the next sequence by using thematic issues in the films to highlight actions and reactions of characters. In this way "songs reveal the utmost depth of the singers' feelings and desires" (Livtak, 1996: 70). Yet, they demonstrate Nollywood's style of using them as a very important element of the folktale (film) aesthetics (Ogundele, 2000: 100). As Kun-

zler submits: "with simple words, these theme songs comment on the story or assess its morale" (Kunzler, 2007: 7); while Barlet argues in the context of all African films that "music is never gratuitous. When it comes from a traditional source, it contributes to the film's aim of perpetuating memory. When the film describes a painful reality; the music plays its part in conjuring away the anxiety and the difficulties" (2000: 185).

Generally in all of the films analyzed therefore, there are some glaring points that come across which justify the original claim of this paper that religion helps to maintain cohesion in African communalistic society and are expressed via rituals. These include the following:

• The usage of rituals by human beings to communicate with the 'living dead' and other supernatural beings including God and other minor deities in the community.
• The belief in a kind of power communication [vital force] between the 'spirit world' and the 'human world', whereby activities in one realm affects those in the other realm.
• The use of sacrifice by human beings as homage to the supernatural powers or even to obtain something from them or appease them in their anger against the people or their community.

7. Conclusion

The culture-centred nature of most Nollywood films can be argued to depict the industry as grounded on indigenous cultures like any other folk media, produced and consumed by members of the group. In this case, they reinforce the values of the people and are the visible features by which social identities and worldviews are maintained and defined (Eilers, 1992: 127). Thus, the general question of root paradigms in Nollywood films is ritualistic, ecological, sacred, cosmological and therefore strongly cultural in most cases. Understanding this role played by oral tradition and rituals in films helps film critics see how the filmmaker transforms his or her tradition into a new technology (Diawara, 1988: 13). It is, in the words of Barber, 'celebrating the traditional', which is an affirmation of self worth for the people as well as a demonstration of their progress and modernity (Barber, 1997: 1). It is this fact that this paper has shown by exploring the representation of culture and traditonal religion in Nollywood films. Therefore, while religion is not a new phenomenon in textual analysis, the ideological framework behind its presence in most Nollywood films is an indicator of a somewhat revelatory value in the identity construction and cosmology of the African. In them as in real life religion, the transitory and the eternally sacred meet in the dynamics of ritual celebrations and strongly therefore signal oscillations between viewing and using religion in Nollywood as panoply of cultural identity construction.

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Filmography

1.*Things Fall Apart*, (1986), David Orere, Nigeria, (NTA Serialization), pre–Nollywood.

2. *Igodo*: *The Land of the Living Dead* (1999), Don Pedro Obaseki and Andy Amenechi,
 Nigeria, Nollywood.

3. *Sango*, (1998), Obafemi Lasode, Nigeria, Nollywood.

4. *Festival of Fire*, (1999), Chico Ejiro, Nigeria, Nollywood.

5. *Bless Me*, (2005), Ernest Obi, Nigeria, Nollywood.

Notes

[1] African cinemas as implied here refer to those films produced mainly by African countries with the help of Western sponsors that are less distributed in Africa but more in Europe and America. For instance, France and Belgium are noted for their sponsorhip of most Francophone African films. This is one point that challenges the idea of branding such films 'African cinemas'. Nwachukwu purports that the West had their reasons for sponsoring and censoring most of these films and distributing them. He argues that 'exploitation by foreign-owned distribution companies exemplified colonial ideologies. Distribution was entirely controlled by powerful and highly profitable European-owned companies that suppressed the emergence of indigenous African cinema. To them, African cinema would bring competition and a change in audience taste that might challenge their exclusive hold on the African market' (Nwachukwu, 1994: 62). Paradoxically, what is often spoken about in the West, in relation to cinemas is placed in the singular case (African cinema) but refer only to these films as if all the cinemas of Africa are homogenous. This study considers cinema in Africa in the plural however, hence we have chosen to say African 'cinemas' rather than 'cinema', because of the view that we respect not only the individual country's political independence but also their particular film industry's independence. Barlet corroborates this perspective of addressing cinemas in the plural in Africa. He argues that 'Africa is plural and so is its cinema. Hence, the reference to African cinemas. There is, however, also a great unity to Black Africa' (1996: ix). Thus, following Barlet, we underscore the existence of many cinema industries in Africa, but focus mainly on the Nollywood industry, which is one out of the so many others in the continent. For this reason, we will refer to both the individuality of African cinemas as well as to their unity. We imply by this that they all share the Third Cinema ideologies as imbued with African themes and aesthetics, yet in all of these, from particular countries and perspectives.

[2] The *indigenization Act* was a decree of the Nigerian military government in 1972 that demanded all cinema halls, formerly owned by foreigners to be handed over to

indigenes to operate. It also challenged media houses to focus on indigenous productions and was aimed at promoting Nigeria's arts and cultures, against the dominance of foreign films and other media products in the country at the time (See: Aderinokun, 2005).

[3] RMD otherwise called Richard Mofe Damijo visited Dublin in the course of *Dublin African Film Festival* in April, 2007 at Cineworld Cinema, Dublin. I interviewed him at Jury's Inn Hotel, Parnel Street, Dublin, where he was lodged. He described himself as a Nollywood actor and a lawyer thus: 'I am a graduate of the University of Benin. I am a lawyer. I am an actor and a business man also'.

[4] 'Zamani Period' according to Mbiti is a Swahili word meaning 'the unlimited past'. He used it to signal Africa's understanding of the existence of God in their view of religion as a way of life. By this he describes God as one who started existing before ever there was any past. 'God is the origin and sustenance of all things. He is older than the Zamani period' (Mbiti, 1969: 29) he stated.

[5] *Things Fall Apart* is one of the key literature texts in Nigeria which has been adapted into film. Especially in 1986, the nation's Television, Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) serialized this movie on its channel which was a huge success and until date remains a reference point in discussing the dynamics of Nigerian cultures, especially the Igbo perspective. This is mainly because Achebe did not only capture the typical Igbo [African] cultural scenario before the advent of the Europeans but also illustrates the after effects of colonialism on the Nigerian country, using Umuofia village community to construct this. It is a key text and film that forms part of our discourse here on African cultures because of its resonance to what some aspects of the history and experience of Nigerians as people has been. Although the film is indicatively a pre-Nollywood production, suffice to say that it shares a lot of similarities with other Nollywood filmic productions, which include, being produced on VCD format and not on celluloid, being screened on television like other Nollywood films and using deep ecological aesthetics, characteristic of Nollywood in terms of cultural history and experiences to discuss African and Nigerian ontology and lived-in situations.

[6] *Amadioha* is known in Igbo cosmology to refer to the 'god of thunder' believed to be a messenger of the supreme deity, God, for invoking justice and truth in the world. People use the cultural symbol of *ofo* to invoke this god of thunder for justice. For Nnawuihe, *ofo* is a great symbol in traditional religion. It has a central position in all major religious, social and even political activities. For instance, titles are conferred with the *ofo* (Nnawuihe, 2005: 20) and elders mainly are those who carry *ofo* to adjudicate cases in the land traditionally, hence their work is for the peace of the land and are called *ndi Aladimma*. Literally *aladimma* can be translated as 'peace in the land'. While *Ala* refers to earth, a locale or a place, *di mma* means to 'be well', to 'have peace', or 'bring about wholesomeness'. Thus, *ndi Aladimma* refers to those who work to see that there is order in the land. *Aladimma* is for this reason the highest political and social forum for every Igbo community, where important decisions are taken. It comprises of all adult males and sometimes females of the native community and is led by the elders drawn from the heads of the family units, who act as official representatives of their family groups (Ekennia, 2000: 162).

[7] *Eze mmuo* literally means spiritual-king or a king that has the eyes of the spirits. It is a title for the chief priest in Igbo traditional religion who serves the deities and the

communities by performing sacrifices and consultations with the spirits of the ances-tors and the gods. Another name for *Eze mmuo* is *Dibia Afa* which implies one who sac-rifices and consults the gods. This type of traditional priesthood is significant in African ontology and cosmology because the priest is the spiritual leader of the community and deals with the traditional ruler (*Igwe* or *Eze*) who rules by maintaining order and peace after the dictates of the gods as revealed to the *Eze mmuo* or *Dibia Afa*. It is a sacred position in the community and can only be filled according to tradition by the choice of a deity or family heritage and requires absolute moral and spiritual codes by those elected to serve. In the Yoruba speaking area of Nigeria, the substitute is the *babalawo* who consults the *Ifa* oracle (that is, the Yoruba traditional deity similar to *Amadioha* in the Igbo speaking area), and gives messages of the gods to the *Kabiyesi* – the traditional Yoruba king (similar to *Igwe* in the Igbo part of Nigeria) to deliver to his people and community.

[8] *Onitsha* is a town in Anambra State in the South East region of Nigeria. It has a cen-tral place in the production and distribution of Nollywood films. Being an ancient city bursting with market dealings and businesses, the film *Bless Me* uses it to dramatize market scenes and religious attitudes of young people involved in trading.

Ебере Увах

ПРЕДСТАВЉАЊЕ АФРИЧКЕ ТРАДИЦИОНАЛНЕ РЕЛИГИЈЕ И КУЛТУРЕ У НИГЕРИЈСКИМ ПОПУЛАРНИМ ФИЛМОВИМА

Резиме

Један од метода којима религијски обреди комуницирају у афричком друштву јесте очување кохезије у култури. Они вежу учеснике за богатији смисао и веће снаге њихове заједнице. Чак и у репрезентативним моделима, обреди стварају солидарност у форми субјективног осећања дељења истог изражајног света који се од стране учесника постиже кроз сажету природу симбола који се у њима користе. Традиционална религија је један обред који, упркос утицају вестернизације и научног развоја, у Африци још увек има значајне импликације на свакодневни живот људи. Сходно томе, од јутра до вечери, људи имају религијске обреде којима комуницирају са својим Богом или боговима, божанствима и прецима. Такође, још увек постоје фестивали и обреди, и у приватној и у јавној сфери, које Африканци посвећују „живим мртвима" или онима у „свету духова". Овај рад, помоћу изнијансираних текстуалних анализа неких домаћих филмова у Нигерији (*Things Fall Apart* (1986), *Igodo*: *The Land of the Living Dead* (1999), *Sango*, (1998), *Festival of Fire*, (1999), *Bless Me*, (2005)) поставља религију на место кључне парадигме афричке културе, као канал ка темељу афричког идентитета.

Кључне речи: Ноливуд, религија, представљање и култура.