

African Traditional Religion in Nigerian Video Films: A Rethink

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Abstract

This article examines the place of African Traditional Religion in Nigerian video films. It argues that Nigerian video films tend to stigmatize African traditional religion and African ethical values generally as inferior to those of Christianity and as a crude and underdeveloped system to which Christian ethics must introduce love, family life, interpersonal relationship and the right attitude to materialism. The paper, therefore, advocates for a rethink.

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 generation of indigenous film makers who were products of the Accra Film Training School. The Nigerian film industry was to witness 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 (for many of the films were shot with camcorders and then transferred to VHS tapes, (see Uge, 1996:53)); its greatest set-backs among others were shortage of professionals resulting in the use of amateurs “with limited knowledge of camera operation and limited production budgets resulting in poorly shot and edited video films” (Shaka, 2002:15).

These early crudities, notwithstanding, the Nigerian video film, popularly known locally as “home video”, has today blossomed. Thanks, however, must first go 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 de Hautes Etudes Cinematographiques 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. However, it was not until 1988 that Ade Ajiboye produced *Sonso Meji* which was generally accepted as the first video film. This opened the flood gate of 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 one very important factor. Yoruba films have very limited audience; for they are usually rendered in Yoruba without English subtitles.

As for the Hausa, whose home-land lie in the northern part of Nigeria, the growth of the film industry has been rather very slow. The reason is due largely to the conservative nature of Islam which is the dominant religion of the majority residents. As Dul Johnson observes, 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 (Johnson, in Jonathan Haynes (ed.), 1997:102). Another reason for the nonchalant attitude of the Hausa to the film industry could be deduced from the negative conceptions they had of the cinema. “The early Hausa names of the cinema such as *majigi* (derived from magic) and *dondon bango* – evil spirit on the wall” (Brian Larki, in Jonathan Haynes (ed.), 1997:114) further betray the conviction that it was contrary to Islamic beliefs and practices. And as Larkin 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 (Larkin, in Haynes (ed.), 1997:114). This negative conception was extremely responsible for the low rate of film production in northern Nigeria.

So that 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, in Haynes (ed.), 1997:99).

The Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria were late comers 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 break-through 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 subtitle for the first time “began loosening the ethnic affiliations of the videos” (Onokome Okome, in Jonathan Haynes (ed.), 1997:83) and conveyed the story line to non-Igbo speakers. Basking in the success story of “Living in Bondage”, Kenneth Nnebue two years later released “Glamour Girls” I and II (1994), which was shot in English. This was quickly followed by torrential release of innumerable number of 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”.

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, camera men, etc., and supporting other ancillary industries such as marketing and distribution firms and video rental shops. In addition to being a major income earner, the industry has also become the pride of many Nigerians. It has proved very wrong the often derisive saying that Nigerians consume every thing and produce nothing. If for nothing, the Nigerian video film industry has brought out the creative ingenuity of the Nigerian artist. Most importantly, the “home video” is one commodity that Nigerians have unquenchable appetite for as opposed to their penchant for foreign made goods and services. In spite of its preference as the favourite of the idle house wife, the young school leaver who is awaiting admission into the university or graduate who is yet unemployed (Afolabi Adesanya, in Jonathan Haynes (ed.), 1997:12) and the market woman; it has also become a veritable past time in banking halls for customers awaiting to be attended to and in the reception halls of other corporate firms and organizations. Apart from the romantic angle of these films which generally appeal to the womenfolk, the glamour of the actresses, especially in terms of their deep sense of fashion provides another attraction for the women who quickly copy the trendy dresses worn by these actresses for the next wedding party and other functions.

African Indigenous Religion in Nigerian Video Films

Since 1992, when Kenneth Nnebue’s trail blazer “Living in Bondage”, was released, the Nigerian video films have become very important vehicle in show-casing Nigerian rich cultural heritage and a looking glass, mirroring the various vices and decadence that are characteristics of Nigerian society. An ardent of the “home video” will learn, apart from the moral lessons they teach, the indigenous socio-political organization, traditional family life, indigenous religion and other traditional institutions which together form the fabric of African traditional societies. Of these traditional institutions, however, the indigenous religion and all that is associated with it has been as negatively portrayed as devoid of any positive character. As we applaud the Nigerian Video Film Industry in its attempt at removing the lingering cob-webs of neo-cultural imperialism imposed by Western influence through Hollywood; it is however, auspicious to note that at a time when the nation’s image has been so much battered by swindlers (often referred to in the Nigerian parlance as 419), corrupt politicians, 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 indigenous religion. In the remaining part of this essay I would attempt to show the various ways African indigenous religion is negatively depicted in the 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.

In the face of this frustration, he runs into an old friend (in most cases an old school mate) who already 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. It is the excessive passion of the characters of the video films to gain wealth, fame and position that has given the Nigerian film its distinctive feature of orgy of money rituals. This is understandable; for a film 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 film makers either lack adequate understanding of African indigenous religion or probably because they want to capture the attention of the viewing public, most of who are Africans, they bring in elements of African indigenous religion against the background of a strong and dominant Far Eastern religion.

In all this, however, it is the medicine man, often referred to derogatorily in the Nigerian video film as "juju priest" or "native doctor" that is implicated. Of 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 depicted as an old hog with long unkempt beard. His dresses which often are very outlandish coupled with his mannerism and peculiarity of behaviour depict him as an object of curiosity. Usually his favourite colours as depicted in the video films are red, white, black and yellow which he wears in a peculiar fashion. One eye lid may be painted with white kaolin and the other yellow. Dangling in-between his lips could be a piece of tender palm frond. In one hand, most likely the left, he may be seen clutching his staff of office, which is made of iron bar, decorated with little bells which jingle as it is stabbed on the earth. With the other hand, he holds a fan made from the wing of a 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. So depicted 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. Then scattered in front of the emblem are 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.

Yet, we know that the medicine man, his shrine and paraphernalia of office, as they were in pre-colonial time 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 has not fared 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, such wealth is sure to fritter away more quickly than it was gotten. And often times, 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 barren; when a pregnant woman is unable to put to bed; when a woman loses the love of her husband; and when a promising young man suddenly dies, the first instinct of the script writer is to finger the medicine man as responsible for these woes.

Yet, 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 try as much as possible to employ roots and herbs and the forces of nature to counteract their evil machinations. The medicine man in traditional African societies is a good tempered, kind-hearted and pleasant gentleman. J. S. Mbiti describes him as the greatest gift, and the most useful source of help (Mbiti, 1969:166). To buttress the importance attached to the medicine man in traditional African societies, Mbiti further observes that every village in Africa has a medicine man within reach and he is the friend of the community (1969:166).

Apart from 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*, which paints a vivid picture of an African traditional society yet uncontaminated with the forces of modern change. (See Tasie, G. I. K., 2002:115). For instance, when Ekweme under the spell of a love potion escaped into the forest, Nwokekoro, the Priest of Amadioha 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 members of his community to the extent that in cases where his clients could not afford his divinatory charges Anyika 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 which Christianity must always triumph. Very often, the picture is that of Christian missionaries bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ (which is usually described as light) to 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 bemoaned 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 *en masse* to Christianity destroying their "fetishes" and emblems. Or a recalcitrant priest of the indigenous religion is tormented by 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.

Yet we know 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 African indigenous religion has the capacity of adapting to changes without letting go of its own completely. Even now, with a renewed call for cultural rebirth and revival and the zeal to preserve what is authentically African, the future seems to be very promising for the indigenous religion. This is even more so as in this day and age, people under the guise of cultural rebirth and renaissance tend 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 film maker to assert the superiority of Christianity over the indigenous religion many watchers of the Nigerian video film industry are inclined to see this as another missionary strategy aimed at conversion. 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 see in what follows, it shows that between 1992 when the video film industry in Nigeria was beginning to gain popularity and now 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 am not going to 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 bank, without the desired financial break through. 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 stead, 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 attitudes that are 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 revile the indigenous religion which they erroneously believe is 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 bereft 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. Note again that the inability of the Chief Priest to provide solution even to the problem he himself has initiated fits perfectly into the inclination of the Nigerian video film maker. For in his conception, the indigenous religion and all that is associated with it is 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 emptied on Andy. Andy was to suffer further set backs when Flora perfected a plan to steal his money and absconds 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 an 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. Also at this instance, 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. It is the realization of this that drives Jude to his father-in-law (Livinus Nnochiri), a priest of the Christian faith for solution. His father-in-law chastises 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 are 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 attitude to materialism.

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 tourism 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.

We live in an era of cultural renaissance and reawakening – an era in which we labour to remove the lingering cob-webs of neo-cultural imperialism imposed by Hollywood and the Western media. The attempt to assert what is authentically African is now. Indeed, this has witnessed very many ideologies. Among the earliest was *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. 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: 267).

While the embers of *Négritude* were still being fanned by its adherents another ideological claim to promote the values of African civilization blossomed in what is known as 'African personality'. E. Mphahlele one of its apostles tells us that an African artist dealing with African themes, rhythms and idiom 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, 1962:21). 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, 1962:21-22).

Indeed, circumstances beckon on the African artist to assert, promote and defend African personality. After all, as Thurstan Shaws, 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 (Shaws, 1978:12). Shaws' remark should be seen as indeed a passionate appeal to the Nigerian video film industry to look inward and to uphold what is authentically African and not to debase African personality.

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