

African Traditional Religion and the African Cinema: The Case of Nollywood

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Abstract: This study aims at a discussion of the portrayal of African Traditional Religion in some selected Nollywood films. It is herein argued that Nollywood is deliberately bent on denigrating the African traditional religion. Three main religious groups are represented in Nigeria. These are Muslims forming about 50.4%, followed by Christians 48.2% while followers of other religions especially African Traditional religion, comprises 1.4%¹. This statistic has earned for Nigeria an accolade: a multi-religious country (McKenzie, 1976). In effect, serious discourse on the impact of religion in Nigeria name Islam and Christianity as the two dominant and competing religions. The tension between Muslims and Christians has a long history. African Traditional Religion is almost always relegated to the background because it has no direct stake in religious disturbances in Nigeria (Olupona, 1992). Yet, movies on the fierce encounter between Islam and Christianity are almost non-existent. Rather, most of these religious films launch a fierce attack on African Traditional Religion.

Keywords: African traditional religion, Christianity, Islam, Nollywood

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is Africa's most populous country and ranks seventh in the world. The 2006 census reveals that it has a population of 140,003,542. The north is largely Muslim with large numbers of both Muslims and Christians in the Middle Belt, including the Federal Capital Territory. In the west of the country, especially in the Yoruba land, the population is said to be evenly divided between Muslims and Christians, while in the southeastern regions, the people are predominantly Christians: Catholics, Anglicans and Methodists are the majority with few traditional practitioners, while the Niger Delta region is mainly Christian. The above indicates that Muslims are in the majority, followed by Christians. Believers in African traditional religion are in the minority.

Religious conflicts and unrest are so common in Nigeria that they are compared to a "potential Achilles' heel" (Olupona, 1992) Religion is a social phenomenon involving a group of people with a common belief system and is upheld as a communal activity (Roberts, 1984). Religion plays several roles in the lives of people. First, religion provides a meaning in life that is, a world view, or cosmos, by which justice, suffering and death can be seen as ultimately meaningful. Second, it provides a sense of identity for believers. Third, it serves as a status symbol and a sign of respectability. Finally and of prime importance is its role in uniting its adherents. To this, Roberts concurs with Durkheim that religion serves as a sort of glue to bind people together, which otherwise have diverse

interests; it helps them to define themselves as a moral community with common values and a common mission in life. On the other hand, if a society has more than one religious group, the unity among the people becomes threatened, since these religions may disagree on basic prohibitions and taboos. With this in mind, the introduction of a foreign religion by both westerners and Arabs as a first activity to be followed by education, governance, et cetera, was no coincidence. The perpetrators had a common agenda: to divide the indigenes; so they could easily implant confusion among the people and have control over them as well as exploit them. This scheme has proved successful.

Achebe (1984) illustrates this conflict in his monumental *Things Fall Apart*, in which the community of Umuofia unanimously lived by the same belief system until the introduction of Christianity. Islam from the north and Christianity from the south lunched a heavy attack on African Traditional Religion (Parrinder, 1953). In so doing, the perpetrators succeeded in dividing the indigenes and luring them to succumb to their worship. Roberts (1984) identifies "Particularism" as when members of a particular religious group insist that they have exclusive possession of truth, knowledge and goodness. Such a group is known to use millitance to mobilize followers around its cause. In addition, they thrive on opposition of the lesser groups, which is a reflection of the "we/they theory" that culminates in creating antipathy between the groups (Roberts, 1984). It is with this theory of Particularism, together with their superior standing and power, that Christianity bullies other less

popular sects. The instance of the demise of Jews in Europe is a fine illustration. There, Christians who were a dominant group, labeled the minority Jews as “devious, manipulative, et cetera.” (Roberts, 1984). In Africa and in particular Nigeria, the same policy or plan was used. In *Things Fall Apart*, we read from the Christians, “all the gods you have named are not gods at all. They are gods of deceit who tell you to kill your fellows and destroy innocent children...your gods are not alive and cannot do you any harm...they are pieces of wood and stone” (103). It is worth noting here that in the example from *Things Fall Apart*, the Christians were in the minority as compared to the majority of traditional worshippers. Yet, they managed to condemn the religion of the majority sect.

While Christians used several means of getting the indigenes to cower, Islam used similar but subtle means. Parrinder notes:

One reason for the rapid spread of their faith here was the magic practiced by the Hausa teachers....they have proved potent means of attracting into the fold in Nigeria. Other practices too were attractive, in particular the drumming and dancing on festival days are of great appeal to the Yoruba....another means of spreading the faith is by the Quranic schools. (64-66)

Abdu-Raheem adds:

Many reasons have been advanced for the fast spread of Islam in the various areas. These include its literacy, uniformity of mode of worship, its accord with the African culture particularly on polygamy to some extent, its universality, the uniqueness of the Qur’an as a literary masterpiece, etc. (74)

With the above quotes began the denigration of African traditional religion. Traditional belief and its adherents became heathen, savage, non-believers, local and inferior tradition, et cetera (Roberts, 1984; Olupona, 1992). But was the traditional worship “really” evil, pagan and inferior as we were made to believe? A typical point is in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, where the Christians clear a portion of the evil forest to build a house for their teacher, Mr. Kiaga. Because the portion they cleared was part of the evil forest, the inhabitants expected them to be dead within four days. The days elapsed and yet the missionaries still existed. The question now is, why did the traditional gods not act? The act of the foreigners clearing a portion of the evil forest for the purpose of worshipping God was not in conflict with the worship of the gods and deities. This is one key fact that has forever escaped the adherents of the Christian and Islamic religions.

The above scenario was a winning point for the Christians, but their major tool was education. Parrinder’s account includes instances of pagan parents increasingly giving off their children to be educated at the mission and Quranic schools. The majority of these children from traditional families changed their religion at Christian or Quranic schools. Here, the examples of Nwoye and Eugene in *Things Fall Apart* and Chimamanda Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* (Adichie, 2006) respectively can be cited.

Schools were built, along with administrative offices for judgments, clerkship, et cetera. With all these, Islam and Christianity got a large following to the extent that the earlier statistics shows African Traditional Religion is nearly extinct in Nigeria. Parrinder observes:

In many places mosques have replaced pagan temples and in other places Christian churches have sprung up. One finds abandoned temples serving as store houses or shelters for animals. Often a few dracena shrubs mark the site of an old temple. Many temples that are still used have an air of neglect and only a few old people to keep the cult going....most of the members are illiterate. (Parrinder, 1953)

Eugene in *Purple Hibiscus* converts to Christianity at the St. Gregory’s school (194). Due to this change in faith, he refuses to greet his father (Papa-Nnukwu) and never visits him. The only thing he does is to send slim wads of naira through his driver (61-62). All this is because Eugene regards his father as heathen (62). The case of Eugene is one example of a thousand of such cases. Despite these developments, the naturally dying religion is still not being left alone.

Nollywood presently is the third largest film industry in the world; it produces between 1,000 and 1,500 movies a year and its annual turnover is estimated at \$320 million (Hight, 2012). Its emergence in the world is like the emergence of African literature in the mid ‘90s. There is a huge market for films from Nollywood. Nollywood, according to Haynes (2007), may refer to “southern Nigerian, English-Language films, whose distribution is largely Igbo marketers... it has come into general use as the name of the Nigerian video film industry”. Therefore, though there are other film producers in Nigeria, the term has overshadowed them. As a result, every film from Nigeria is now known as a Nollywood film. This study relies upon that presumption.

The image of the African as portrayed by western writers has for decades been a subject of prime concern for African scholars. For instance, the portrayal of the African by Conrad (1996) in *Heart of Darkness* has dominated academic discourse for years. In this book, Conrad (1996) attempts to describe the African and his environment by using words and expressions such as

“savages” (2208), “sordid farce...God-forsaken wilderness” (2213), “faces like grotesque masks” (2214), “ants” (2215), et cetera. These descriptive phrases, amongst others in the text have for years attracted several criticisms from all corners of the continent. The African reader feels denigrated and in most cases insulted by these descriptions by the western artist. As a result, some Africans have taken every opportunity to correct this pseudo-representation by Conrad and his cohorts. The list of literature from the continent geared at debunking the ‘so-called’ western imperialist portrayal of the African in the ancient and modern world is inexhaustible. Likewise the list of novels, poems and plays written for the same purpose will overflow the shelves of any library in the world. The question of how many of these are read and appreciated is better left unanswered. Therefore, the emergence of the motion picture, which most people the world over find easy to associate with and appreciate, is an appropriate vehicle with which to expose to the world the real nature of the African.

This vehicle was, however, sadly not fully utilized until the early 1990s when, through the ingenuity of Kenneth Nnebue, Nollywood was created and brought onto the world scene in 1992.

Instead of being an avenue for promoting African belief systems and values, Nollywood films are on a mission to ensure by all possible means that Nigeria and for that matter Africa is rid of any trace of the African Traditional religion. As a result, series of films are produced everyday which are purposely aimed at the continual discrediting of traditional beliefs. For the purpose of this essay, I asked from my African literature class for Nollywood films that depict the encounter between Christianity and tradition. Readily, I had the following list: *Egg of life, 40 days in the wilderness, the Python, Omega, the Stolen Bible, The Gods are Dead, Lost in the Jungle, Age of Iniquity, Widow, The God to Serve, The Gods are Hungry, Goddess of the Sun, Cross in Tinapa, Barracuda, Mary Slessor, Wilderness, Festival of Fire, Abako, Orijah Shrine, Igodo, Arrow of the Gods, Mistakes of the Past*, et cetera. I then asked them for films that depict the encounter between Christianity and Islam and had this: *Breath of love*. The seeming unavailability of Christian and Muslim conflict films suggest the silent tension that exists between the two religions which no one is ready to spark into flames by the production of such movies.

For the purpose of this study only few movies shall be reviewed with a focus on the portrayal of the traditional religion. A major limitation in writing this study had to do with obtaining the films. Most of these films are nowhere to be found.

NOLLYWOOD AS AN AGENT OF CHRISTIAN ONSLAUGHT

That Nollywood films are mainly produced in the south, which is predominantly Christian, is not an

excuse enough to use the industry as a yardstick, a mouthpiece, or an agency for denigrating the African Traditional religion. Adedun (2010) concurs with Kaichiro Matsuura (UNESCO Director General) that films and video productions are vehicles of identity, values and meanings. He adds that they open the door to dialogue and understanding.

Jonathan adds:

“The image of Nigeria nation, literally and metaphorically, is now largely shaped by these films, which have become wildly popular across the continent and beyond. Video film is the primary expressive medium through which Lagos makes itself visible, both to itself and to the external audiences” (134).

Hight cites Zina Soro Wiwa as stating that:

“The industry provides a vision of Nigeria and Africa...for the first time and in the purest, rawest form, Africa is representing and interpreting Africa”. (19).

Zina Soro Wiwa’s quote above sounds very paradoxical because the very Africans whom she says are representing Africa to the rest of the world are rather actively out to demonize Africa and its belief systems to the world. This statement nonetheless attests to the fact that video, or that which appeals to the eyes, has lots of power. And this is the weapon that Nollywood rides on to destroy the Traditional religion.

The disregard has reached such an extent that anything of evil, greed and hated intent is accused of being rooted in the Traditional African religion. As a result, the difference between evil and tradition is blurred. The gods, ancestors and deities who once upon a time served to protect the people, are now portrayed as agents for this callousness. In *The Black Moon* (2005), when a man, out of greed and selfish inclinations, decides to tread the path of evil, he is situated in the context of African tradition since that and only that could be the reason behind such acts. In this film, two brothers fight over a piece of inherited land left for them by their late father. One of them decides to cheat the other out of securing a portion. To ensure his success in this evil plot he consults a traditional priest who gives him potions to spread on the farm land. He succeeds somehow but the powers of another traditional priest are able to undo his power.

40 Days in the Wilderness 1, 2 and 3 (2005) also paints such a picture of the African religion. In this film, the power behind the miracles of a supposed man of God is revealed as coming from the groves of a traditional god. A pastor embarks on a 40-day journey with his junior pastors to a far away village under the guise of going to spread the gospel. On their way they encounter several mishaps to the extent that most of them lose their lives. least do the unsuspecting junior pastors know that they are on a journey to the groves of

a traditional god who has given their mentor and senior pastor the powers to perform all the wonders they witness. As a contradiction, the supposed evil powers he gets from this traditional god are used to do good things in the church such as healing, among others.

Yet in *Egg of Life*, the dichotomy between the traditional religion and evil is clear. In this film, the king has successive girls who, as tradition stipulates, cannot ascend the throne. The king prays to the gods who in their due time favor him with a son. Yet, evil spirits from the underworld try to capture the soul of the young prince. When the priestess of Efuru is consulted, she provides the right antidote to save the soul of the young prince from evil and, finally, the royalty is restored to save the kingdom. As part of the antidote to save the young prince, eight virgin maidens are sent to the evil forest to secure an egg which will help restore the life of the prince. Though they are fortified by the priestess of Efuru, these maidens encounter several evil spirits who kill most of them until, finally, only one of them remains to bring back the egg. The point here is that the fact that the god Efuru sends the virgin maidens on a mission to secure an egg that will see to the well being of the prince indicates that Efuru is a good spirit. However, these maidens encounter adversity from other spirits which are evil and hostile towards the well being of humanity. This is an indication of the fact that the gods, goddesses and deities whom Efuru symbolizes here are entirely different from Satan and his evil demons who are almost always seen to be against the well being of humanity and are in effect mistakenly confused with the gods and deities.

As the guardians and custodians of the land, the gods, goddesses and the deities do not in any way condone acts of pride, greed and evil inclinations. Scorpion God 1, 2 and Ikoka 1, 2 and 3 (2007) attest to this. In *Scorpion God* (2007), a young man rapes a girl in the bush and denies it before the god Amadioha¹. He is warned several times by the traditional priest to confess but he refuses, aside the warnings, the gods reveal themselves to him on several occasions so he may have a change of mind and perhaps confess but he remains adamant. In the end he dies for being headstrong. In the same way, for the pride of a king in the epic film *Ikoka 1, 2 and 3* (2007), the gods permit his people to desert him so as to teach him a lesson. In deed, in the first instance, it is clear in *Scorpion God* that the gods do not in any way condone evil with its associated vices; so, too, do we witness this eschewing of evil in *Ikoka*. What, however, becomes clear is the fact that, in all these instances, the opportunity for repentance is evident as is the case with Christianity and Islam.

What most critics of the traditional religion fail to realize is the fact that even in the realm of the Almighty Creator of the universe, one of His angels managed to nurse evil and schemed to see it succeed. So too are

there in the traditional religion, gods, goddesses and deities who harbor evil and perpetuate it on unsuspecting individuals. The traditional maxim that one pea spoils the entire bowl of peas cannot be applied in this instance. This is because the fact that one of Jesus' disciples was a thief and betrayed him does not in any way create any logic for people to see Jesus and his other disciples too as evil.

In *The Stolen Bible*, the aim of the producers and directors to create mischief, as is common with Nollywood, is evident. In this film, the protagonist steals a Bible belonging to a middle-aged woman (also a Christian) in the church premises. This supposed follower of Christ does not forgive, but heaps curses on the thief. The curses follow her (the protagonist) until she goes to join a gang and they steal from a church shrine. The Ebudu² shrine is introduced as a place where people go to seek help, as is common with all traditional African shrines. The thanks giving royalties and pledges dedicated to the shrine are what the accursed ladies steal from the shrine. Not only does the priest of the shrine curse them, he, in fact, tries to recover his money. When he is unable to do so, he too, heaps a series of curses on the thieves. Now when the curses begin to take effect, the perpetrators are plagued with all kinds of sicknesses. Ebudu, the goddess of fire, is branded evil and, eventually, the mysterious magical powers of Christianity are used to redeem the thieves. Thinking of it, where did the curse emanate, certainly from church; but that is shielded. Shielded by whom? Of course by the directors and producers who have one aim: to denigrate the traditional religion.

The fact that some traditional cultural practices, (e.g., human sacrifice) needed to be changed has long been questioned before the advent of Christianity. For example, Obierika in *Things Fall Apart*, a novel which projects an era before the advent of Christianity, questioned the motive. *Things Fall Apart*, a text published after the introduction of Christianity depicts the scene of the African before the advent of the Euro Christian missionaries. Therefore, for Nollywood in *21 Days with Christ* and *Ikoka 1, 2 and 3* (2007) to hype some of these occurrences and to use them as yardsticks by which to judge the indigenous religion as evil is unfortunate. In *21 days with Christ*, the protagonist, a young female virgin of about 15 years old is captured by traditional executioners to be killed and her soul made to accompany that of the king on his journey to the next world. On the day of the sacrifice, the powers of Christianity are used to redeem the maiden from the hands of her assailants. The idea of the film is to portray in a way that human sacrifices were deep rooted in the traditional region. But it must be emphasized here that in some instances, such cultural practices desecrated kings and generations upon generations of people. This fact is clear in the epic film, *Ikoka*, where

it takes the sacrifice of the queen Ideh to restore the entire kingdom of Benin to its glory and unity.

In *The Last Tradition* (2007), god Amadioha³ intercedes on behalf of a man who feels cheated because his betrothed bride betrayed his love after he waited over twenty years for her to come of age. As usual, the director and his crew try to manipulate things to portray the traditional belief system as evil. In fact, the accompanying song has a lyric "... what a wicked tradition". It is a wicked religion and for that matter "tradition", because; a man who feels wronged decides to seek vengeance and solace from the deities. In the case of Islam and Christianity it is always said that God fights for the poor and needy (compare Deut 32:35, Surah-Mohammed Chp. 47:4) if the Christian and Islamic Gods are willing and able to inflict punishment on behalf of the afflicted what is wrong in the case of Amadioha who in the same vein gives justice to him whom it is due and so be seen as evil for his action.?

CONCLUSION

I have so far discussed Nollywood as deliberately waging an unfair war on the traditional religion with the intent of extermination. For Nollywood to try to communicate to its audience the world over that there is nothing happening with the Muslim/Christian front worthy of attention in their movies is deceptive and misleading. Despite its many causes, the famous Biafran war was rooted in religion. Recently, the activities of Boko Haram and the tension they have created are known the world over. Lovers of Nollywood yearn to see these Muslim-Christian religious conflicts in motion pictures, on DVDs and in the theatres. Besides, these two foreign religions can never be said to be without inhuman practices such as the ills of their patriarchal practices. Thus we see Nollywood flogging a dead horse.

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Notes:

- ¹: See 2009 world religious survey
- ²: The names of gods with endnotes symbolize my limitation in getting the correct pronunciation and spelling
- ³: See note 2