(Re) Thinking the representation of Nigerian traditional religious practices and Western religion in selected Nollywood movies

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Abstract: This paper sets out to analyze the depiction of Nigerian traditional religious practices vis-à-vis Western religious practices in some Nigerian movies against the backdrop that some Nollywood films are imbued with ideologies that uphold and promulgate western Christian values at the expense of core Nigerian traditional religious values. Previous studies demonstrate that the tendency in Western religious thought has been to see African cultural practices and spirituality as void of moral character in the history of human civilization deserving distillation. It is unfortunate that the tendency for most African filmmakers is still to produce contents that discredit Nigerian spirituality by portraying it as void of moral character. The study is informed by Multimodal Discourse Analysis which provides methodological tools applied in the analyses of the selected movies. The paper, therefore, analyses the discursive strategies used to promote western Christian practices against those of Nigeria in particular and Africa at large in the movies under study. This paper assumes that Nigerian traditional religions and spirituality are depicted in contrast to western religious values in a conflicting space. By depicting custodians of Nigerian traditional religions and spirituality in malevolent practices in contrast to custodians of western religion depicted as benevolent, the filmmakers in the films under study undermine the essence of Nigerian core values. The analyses demonstrate that the Nollywood movies selected for the study are imbued with stereotypes that serve a colonial agenda by properly engaging Nigeria's religious history with western religions. They serve as a medium through which western religious ideologies are upheld at the detriment of traditional Nigerian values in particular and African in general.

Keywords – Africa, Culture, God, Ideology, Movie, Nigeria, Nollywood, Religion, Representation

1. INTRODUCTION

The film industry represents one way a country can uphold and promote its cultural values. The Nigerian film industry, popularly known as Nollywood, stands out as that singular medium through which the core cultural values of the African society, in general, and Nigeria in particular, which were chastised and negated by the erstwhile colonialists, could be redefined and sustained in order to give them the pride of place and dignity they deserve in

human civilization. Though this has been a significant preoccupation amongst scholars for quite a long time, there is a need for continuous research into this phenomenon. One of those core values of the African continent that have long been countered is the practice of African traditional religion, usually termed "idol worship" and or "witchcraft" by adherents of western religion. African traditional religion in western theological ideology is "void of moral disposition and diabolically motivated." In this antithetical predisposition where the African traditional religions and the Western religions are mutually exclusive rather than complementary constituents and quintessence of human civilization, African traditional religions embody all that which is "uncivilized" and thus necessitating the presence of Western religion to purge the "savage practices" (Uwah, 2011; Ekeopara, 2005; Lugira, 2009; Chukwuere, 2020).

In Africa, the film industry provides the continent an opportunity to redefine and tell her own story from an African perspective with an African agenda. Chimamanda (2009) argues that stories have been used to dehumanize people and that stories can also be used to restore the dignity of a people. From this premise, this paper holds the view that some African movies have accompanied other forms of media in depicting African cultural values in general and African traditional religions in particular as diabolic and void of moral character (Asogwa, Chika, Ibe & Ojih, 2015). Therefore, this argues that African movies represent one way Africa could rebrand its pride of place and dignity relating to spirituality and religions that the colonialists chastised to foster intercultural understanding between Western and African spirituality in particular and culture in general. To this effect, the Senegalese-American popular singer and songwriter Akon (2017) opines that in order to redefine how the world perceives Africa, Africans should tell stories about Africa from an African perspective with an African agenda. Osofisan buttresses this view at the Sixth Lagos International Forum on Cinema, Video, and Motion Picture in Africa, where he postulates that films have profound implications on the way others perceive Africa. To this effect, filmmakers, directors, and artists, in general, have a key role to play in redefining the way the world perceives Africa (Asogwa, Chika, Ibe & Ojih, 2015; Okeke & Iloh, 2020; Chukwuere, 2020). These critics do not only lament the negative projection of the African cultural image in African movies but equally prove that the film industry in Africa can comfortably redefine and globalize African core cultural values by decolonizing the already tainted image of the continent mainstreamed in the Western media.

In the wake of the cultural renaissance incarnated in terms such as negritude, African scholars advocated the recognition, development, and preservation of African cultural values, including indigenous religious practices, to decolonize the continent. Literary writers have been grabbling with this unfortunate incident in the history of African civilization to redefine and give Africa the pride of place and dignity it deserves in human civilization by deconstructing the colonial trajectory, which relegated African cultural practices to the background. One would expect that the rise of the Nigerian film industry to prominence in the 1990s would have given Africa another opportunity to widen the dire need for such cultural revitalization. Unfortunately, filmmakers tend to depict traditional African practices at the boundary of civilization where African religion represents savage customs to which Western "Christian ethics must introduce cultured values. In fact, Tasie (2013) intimated that "we live in an era of cultural renaissance and reawakening - an era in which we labor 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" (Tasie, 2013). The author thinks that the lingering negative image of Nigeria out of the country is a result of a pejorative depiction of the Nigerian way of life through Nollywood films.

However, the foregoing premise does not suggest that Nigerian filmmakers and or African filmmakers, in general, have not been intimating the necessity to recognize, defend and preserve the worth of the African cultural values. Uwah (2011) and Afutendem (2019) argue that Nollywood filmmakers use cinematographic techniques to reassert the African cultural identity. However, little attention has been paid to the representation of African traditional religion in particular. While these tendencies remain relevant, there is a need for in-depth analyses to understand the stereotyping phenomenon in Nollywood movies better. This paper shares the view that some Nollywood filmmakers

have fostered the derogatory and negative perception of African traditional religion in favor of Western religious practices by depicting their custodians as malign and benign, respectively.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The expression of African religions have been a subject of debate and research for decades now due to two main reasons: the first is whether we are referring to religions as practiced in Africa today or religions as the way of the Africans (African spirituality) before the arrival of the missionaries; and the second puzzle arises because, over the years, African culture has been projected by Eurocentrists as "void of ethical and moral foundation", so Africa "had neither a religion nor worshipped God" before the arrival of the missionaries. This misunderstanding shows a shallow conceptualization of God/the Supreme Being in African ontology. The concept of God is not new to Africans as purported in western religious dogma, but Africans knew and worshipped God in diverse ways. Through reflections on the universe, a realization of man's limitations, and the forces of nature, Africans came to believe in the existence of a Supreme Being believed to be responsible for these mysteries and onto whom they can turn to in sorrow, joy, request for assistance, or show appreciation (Wiredu, 1998; Lugira, 2009; Ekeke & Chike, 2010).

God in African ontology is uncreated and immortal. The relationship between God and Man is established through divinities that have been given a wide range of names such as gods and idols in Western religion to undermine its worth (Quarcoopome, 1987; Onuzulike, 2008). Divinities in African religious thought represent intermediaries between God and Man; God's benevolence to Man is experienced through divinities while Man communicates with God through these divinities. Temples and shrines in Africa represent abodes of these divinities where they turn to whenever they need or seek assistance from God (Awolalu & Dopamu, 1979; Ekeke & Chike, 2010). This remains one of the most contestable practices in western religion as the presence of shrines and temples are misunderstood to be dwelling (heaven in Western religion and Islam) rather than that of the divinities (which this paper dares argues is equal to Angels in western religion) linking God and Man. This paper, therefore, uses the expression African religion to refer to the concept of God in African thought as it existed before the arrival of Western religion to buttress the fact that this concept is not new to Africans and that African religion recognized and valorized the Supreme Being through myriad ways as incarnated in a multiplicity of names which are "descriptive of his character and the reality of his existence" (Ekeopara, 2005).

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

African critics and writers have demonstrated that Western religion was/is still a colonial tool and has thrived in the continent to date. While research demonstrates the need for intercultural communication in the 21st-century multicultural world, the tendency for most Nollywood filmmakers is still to produce thematic contents which purportedly depict African traditional religion at the boundary of civilization. Nollywood film producers have not properly engaged Africa's indigenous religion with Western religion in ways to properly foster intercultural understanding. The failure by Nollywood filmmakers to adapt Western religious ideologies properly with African religious practices has produced unwarranted conflicts. The tendency is to produce contents in which there are always "incomprehensive, savage and malign" custodians of African indigenous religious practices pitted against "benevolent and ready-to-save" missionaries going through tormenting moments to rescue whole communities entangled in bondage. Thus, these films serve as a medium through which Western religious ideologies are upheld at the detriment of African traditional values. This study interrogates this anomaly with the aim making a commentary on the significance of African traditional religion in the lives of the people on the continent.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper is guided by Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) and draws from Framing Theory to complement the analyses. Multimodal Discourse Analysis is a theoretical approach to Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) which focuses on the analysis of both written/verbal and visual texts as modes of communication (Ventola & Guijarro, 2009; O'Halloran, 2011). This is complemented by Framing theory, which argues that the media influence audiences' perception of particular events through a framework. To this effect, representing custodians of African traditional religion and those of western religion in the films through certain film techniques serves to skew the perception of these different types of religious practices by the audience. It is against this premise that these theories are employed to back up the analysis in the paper.

Given that the mode of communication in the film is both verbal and visual, this approach is applied to help interpret images and verbal exchanges as modes of communication that are imbued with ideologies about African traditional religion and western religion in the films. This article, therefore, employs this approach because it combines verbal communication with other semiotic modes to express ideological meanings in the films. The images in the films, exchanges between actors, and other visual interactions are interpreted following Kress and Leeuwen's visual grammar approach (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006). To lend credibility to this theory and fill the lapses which this theory may pose, this paper equally draws from Framing Theory (Entman, 1993). Framing theory posits that the media represent phenomena through different frames, which in turn influence different interpretations or perceptions of an aspect of reality.

By representing events in specific ways (frames) the media sets the agenda and controls public opinion by selecting and highlighting certain "aspects of a perceived reality" in order to make these aspects "more salient in a communicative text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (Entman, 1993). This follows that media does not only tell people what to think about but equally influences how to think about it by invoking certain interpretations of information. Other than attempting factual demonstration through surveys, Framing emphasizes qualitative content analyses of texts using scientific methods in order to deconstruct what go into such text production and/or consumption. This paper, therefore, draws from these theories to assert that movies have a propensity of influencing not only what audiences think about but equally how to think about it. Nollywood movies are interpreted against the backdrop that they have a tendency of fostering the negative and stereotypical perception of African culture, in general and religion in particular, through the derogatory depiction of its custodians.

5. METHODS

This paper makes use of a qualitative research design and analyzes three Nollywood movies which were purposely selected for the study: *God is above Custom and Tradition (2019)* by Chimdi Chiama, *Adopting a New Religion (2019)* by Ogbonnaya Okereke, *The Power of God on this Reverend Father Destroyed the Chief Priest* (2019) by Evans Uche. The rationale for the choice of these three movies was due to their contemporariness and the thematic issues treated in them. All three movies are recently published and demonstrate the currency of the issues treated. Using a checklist, each movie was watched and the thematic concerns raised in the movie identified and analyzed in line with the selected theories. The analyses considered verbal language in face-to-face interaction between actors and/or actresses, the use of colours, setting in terms of history and location, and image postures. Each of these elements was examined as a constituent part of the entire film discourse(s).

6. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

The films selected for this study portrayed traditional Nigerian spiritual/religious practices in a conflicting space with Western religious practices. Traditional Nigerian spiritual/religious practices are depicted as unaccommodating and maliciously motivated in contrast to Western religious practices depicted as representing hope and salvation. These ideologies are expressed through discursive linguistic and discursive techniques, as the analyses below reveal. The tendency in Nollywood is to use cinematographic computer-mediated images to depict traditional Nigerian religious practices in ways that dishonor and disregard the moral worth of these practices in favor of Western religious practices. While the Bible is used to represent God, his power, and his "goodwill" through missionaries and priests, visible human spirits and awful fabricated objects of wood and animal skin are used to depict the power and "evil" character of traditional Nigerian spiritual practices incarnated by the chief priests. God is portrayed as operating in invisible ways through the Bible, while custodians of traditional Nigerian spirituality rely on human spirits invoked by chief priests. The invisibility and visibility of God and spirits as depicted in movies respectively purportedly suggests that God in western religion is superhuman while traditional Nigerian spirituality relies on mortal human spirits. This ideological predisposition which purports that traditional Nigerian religious practices are "void of moral character and maliciously motivated," has been held and sustained by the two Nollywood films.

In *God is above Custom and Tradition,* the conflict between the church and tradition, which results in the latter being overpowered by the former, demonstrates such an ideological leaning. Like Tasie (2013) opines, the traditional doctor who is the custodian of African traditional religions remains the most ridiculed character in Nollywood movies. *God is above Custom and Tradition* projects Ezemo- the traditional chief priest as inclined towards evil. The refusal by the heir (the Prince) to allow the late Igwe's corpse to be kept at the shrine for confirmation by the Gods as the tradition demands results in a clash between the church and tradition in which Ezemo keeps invoking spirits to battle with the Prince, the priest and his fellow Christians who side with the Prince. While Ezemo invokes the spirit of the late Igwe to confront and kill the "stubborn" Prince the priest and fellow Christians use the Bible and prayers to fight against. The image of God remains invisible and manifests through the Bible and prayers while Ezemo invokes the spirit of the late Igwe to battle in an attempt to kill the Prince. The appeal to and reliance on visible human spirits by Ezemo reinforces the ideology that traditional Nigerian spirituality and African traditional religions, in general, are "idol worshipping" in contrast to Western religion depicted as dependent on the invisible power of the Bible and prayers, which reinforces the "God-is-superhuman" doctrine and that he was unknown to Africans before the Western missionaries. This contrast in the representation of both spiritual practices legitimizes the ideology in Western religious dogma that "God is immortal and superhuman, thus, powerful beyond all powers while African Gods are mortal" as indicated in the pictures below, following Van Dijk's Ideological Square Model of positive self-representation and Negative other representation (Van Dijk, 2006).

Picture 1: Images depicting the traditional chief priest and pastor in conflict

The understanding that African traditional religion is "void of moral worth and evil inclined" and, thus, deserving cleansing by Western religious practices is portrayed in the film through Ezemo, who engages in a futile battle with the church. The steadfastness of the Prince and the church and the "stubbornness" of Ezemo to surrender culminate in his disgraceful defeat and the victory of the church in which Ezemo "repents" and the shrines is destroyed. The

church's victory over Ezemo's spiritual practices purports "the cleansing of the village" as the Prince accepts that the Igwe title promises to lead his people in the "right direction". Such a projection glories western religion and castigates traditional Nigerian spirituality. In line with Framing Theory as complemented by the Ideological Square Model, this sort of representation is intended to discredit practices that are negatively depicted and to promote those that are positively depicted (Entman, 1993; Van Dijk, 2006; Van Leeuwen, 2008).

In, *Adopting a New Religion* equally projects traditional Nigerian religious practices at the boundary of civilization. The movie takes a historical journey back before introducing Western religion in Africa and projects the kingdom of Achadike entangled in bondage and fighting "senseless" wars. Depicting the kingdom of Achadike through such a historical epic movie in which the Gods have failed to protect the people held in bondage is disdainful and contemptuous of Nigeria and Africa's traditional spiritual practices. This is buttressed by Asogwa, Chika, Ibe and Ojih (2015) view that Nollywood glorifies the deplorable aspects of the traditional African customs, some of which are long forgotten historical images. In this film, the plea by the Igwe and Ezemo to the Gods of Achadike to rescue the kingdom and the suffering people trapped in calamity fails. The community is portrayed as one in which there is nothing to celebrate but one in which the people spend time battling to overcome disasters imposed on them by the Gods. There is no social and economic progress, and the community is void of social cohesion and guided leadership. The singular activity projected as bringing people together is war. Such a one-dimensional depiction of this past tends to dishonor Nigeria and Africa's cultural history and the moral worth of their religious practices.

To lend more credibility to this derogatory representation, the suffering of the people comes to an end upon the arrival and Christianization of the community by the missionaries. The arrival and Christianization of the community purge the "evil" inclined people of "savage" practices such as human sacrifices, as indicated in the pictures below. Here, these images are used to express unequal power relations between traditional Nigerian spirituality and western religious practices at the expense of the former following Van Leeuwen's visual approach. Under this approach, images and actions depicted in particular ways advance particular worldviews against others (Van Leeuwen, 2007, 2008; Entman, 1993).

Picture 2: Images depicting villages in bondage and the reverend father involved in a spiritual battle with the 'Evil Spirits'

Such a depiction of both religious practices lends credibility to the western doctrine that African thought was void of the Supreme Being (God) before the arrival of the missionaries in the continent. The notion of God in African ontology depends, partly, on the realization that man's power was limited in the face of misfortune, and as such, they tended to believe in some Supreme Being from whom they seek help in times of need. God in African thought is represented through a multiplicity of names, however, sharing the same understanding that there is a Supreme Being onto whom we can turn for help in difficult times and who is the creator of the universe. Spirits in African religion, therefore, served as the link between Man and God and not God as purported in western thought (Ekeke & Chike, 2010).

It is, however, regrettable that Nollywood filmmakers have been front liners in the spread of this ideology by purporting and glorifying Western religious practices against African religious thought. The tendency to portray Africans as worshipping visible human spirits, which can be invoked to battle with the invisible God manifesting through the Bible, serves to undermine the worth of traditional African religious beliefs. While this paper shares the

view that some practices in Africa were uncultured, it dismisses the view that all of these practices lacked moral and ethical understanding. The continuous depiction of traditional African practices as dependent on visible human spirits rather than serving as a bond between God and Man is faulty. Western deserving a rethink to give traditional African practices the pride of place and dignity they deserve in the history of human civilization. Therefore, by rejecting this premise, these films undermine the worth of traditional African religions, thereby creating a negative image of African practices in general and Nigeria's spiritual practices in particular on the one hand and a positive image of Western religious practices (Van Dijk, 2006).

The Power of God on this Reverend Father Destroyed the Chief Priest is yet another Nollywood film. Traditional Nigerian spirituality, or, better still, African traditional religion and Western religion, are depicted as "night and day," respectively. In this film, *Otashingele* (the Chief Priest) is represented as a diabolic chief priest whose actions bring nothing good but suffering and pain to the people. His demand for human sacrifice and his unforgiving character seen when the child catches a fish dedicated to him, and he is taken as a sacrifice to replace the fish. He demands to have a child who is born in the week dedicated to the veneration of *Otashingele.* This demand for a human being to be used as sacrifice enhances such an ideological understanding of the practice of human sacrifice in Africa, a long-forgotten practice. Such a representation that lacks any recourse to the past presupposes such a practice in Nigeria or Africa in general. O*tashingele,* who is the custodian of Nigeria's spirituality and Africa's religions by extension, is depicted as evil and unremorseful. To lend credibility to this prejudicial predisposition, the movie mortalizes *otashingele* by projecting the shrine as a tree while immortalizing God, who is projected as living in the Reverend father. Engaging the Reverend father and *Otashingele* in a spiritual battle where the former uses the Bible while the latter depends on human spirits and trees enhances this ideology of power/immortality and powerless/mortality of God in Western thought and African "gods." The Reverend father represents light and salvation to the people who have long been subjected to the savagery and wickedness of *Otashingele*. Such a stereotypical depiction, therefore, fosters the image of the "bad guys," "good guys," and "victims" wherein the bad guys bring pain and suffering to the victims while the good guys sacrifice to save the victims (Van Dijk, 2006; Wodak, 2008).

The moral rectitude of the Reverend father and the moral void of the traditional chief, the ideology which runs through the movie, is strengthened by projecting the chief priest as pitiless and egoistic while the reverend father is ever merciful and selfless. The merciless *Otashingele* inflicts pain and agony on the helpless people while the merciful Reverend father commits himself to the deliverance of these people. This puts the two custodians of the two represented religions in a constant state of conflict. While *Otashingele* vows to destroy the Reverend father, whom he sees as a threat to their practices, the Reverend father, on his own part, is determined to challenge him and to rescue the suffering people. This reinforces the ideology that African traditional practices were evil and deserving to be cleansed by western thoughts and practices. This certainly accounts for the constant defeat and humiliation of the chief priest in The *Power of God on this Reverend Father Destroyed the Chief Priest* like in other Nollywood movies, as already demonstrated earlier. The images below show instances where *Otashingele* is either involved in diabolic practices or engaged in a futile battle with the Reverend father, which finally culminates in his humiliating defeat.
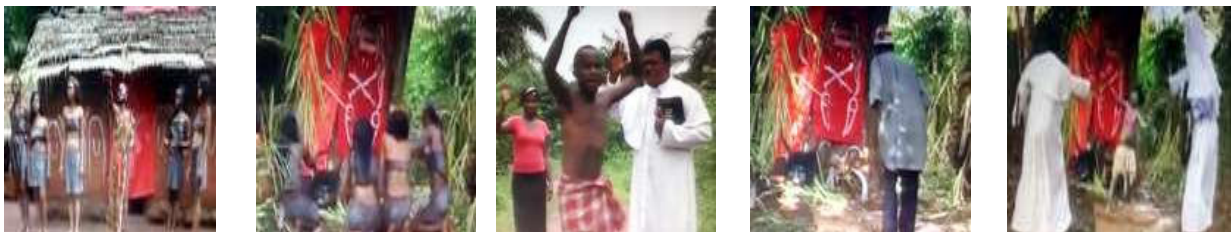
Picture 3: Images depicting villagers worshipping 'idols' and the reverend father fighting to 'save' the villagers

As indicated in the images above, traditional African practices in general and Nigeria's spiritual practices, in particular, continue to embody all that which is diabolic and savagery as portrayed in the selected movies. Such a contemptuous depiction of Africa's religious history discredits the continent's cultural history worldwide.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper sought to investigate traditional Nigerian spiritual practices as a metaphoric depiction of African Traditional religions and western religious practices in Nollywood movies against the backdrop that some Nollywood filmmakers continue to uphold Western religious practices against those of the Africans. Despite the dire need for cross-cultural adaptation in multicultural contexts, the tendency is still for these filmmakers to discredit and scornfully regard Africa's cultural practices as worthless in the history of human civilization. Such a stereotypical depiction of traditional African practices enhances the colonial status quo. Writers and scholars from across the domains have been dismantling to give the African culture the place and dignity it deserves in human civilization. Far from being entertainment media, some Nollywood movies are embedded with colonial imagery. It is incumbent upon the African filmmaker to realize the injurious effect such a representation has on the image of the continent so that they may rebrand and redefine new avenues of thought of Africans and about Africa.

8. FUNDING

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