

Rituals in Nollywood Films: A Discourse in Ideology

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Abstract

Nollywood films are replete with themes and scenes of ritual murder, magical and spiritual powers. This has been attributed to the prevailing belief system and mind-set of the Nigerian society. Interestingly, this has received so much attention from scholars locally and internationally. However, film is a cultural product, which thrives within the culture of a film's origin. As such, the cultural background provides the scenarios and thematic preoccupations which form the predominant ideas in films. This paper examines rituals in Nollywood films as statements on the life patterns of the Nigerian society. This research involves a textual analysis of the video film text, *Issakaba 1*. The choice of this film narrative is informed by the thematic content in relation to the ideologies of the Nigerian society. The findings reveal that rituals are part of the culture and belief systems of the Nigerian society. In that case, Nollywood films can only present their narratives against the backdrop of culture by relating content to existing situations within the society. This paper therefore recommends that for proper critical assessment of rituals in Nollywood films, an understanding of the culture and belief system of the Nigerian society is important.

Introduction

Nollywood movies refer to the video films produced in Nigeria. The history of Nollywood films industry is, as it is considered in some quarters, a “child of circumstance” (Adesanya 1997; Shaka 2003). This idea stems from the fact that video film production in Nigeria started as an austerity measure to combat the high cost of shooting in celluloid. As at the early 1980s, the decline in the Nigerian economy forced government to introduce the structural Adjustment Programme. This made the cost of producing celluloid films astronomical for the Nigerian filmmakers. In the bid to stay afloat and relevant to their chosen career, they found alternative in the video format. The video format is quite cheap when placed alongside celluloid film format. Whatever the position, the video format has come to stay and is popularly referred to as “Nollywood films.”

Consequently, the Nigerian video film industry is a highly placed commercial industry competing with her Western and Asian counterparts. The industry has grown to attract inquiries into its structures and mode of operation by both local and international scholars. It has also developed generic traditions which are characterized by their Nigerianness and which can only be understood in the Nigerian context. Hence, one can outline the different genres in Nollywood film as follows: ritual genre; the vigilant genre; family drama; comic genre; epic genre; religious genre; love; and organized crime genre. However, a film can display aspects of more than one genre. In all the films regardless of the genre to which one decides to place them, one thing is common – the films are representations of the life patterns and the ideologies of the Nigerian societies.

Nollywood Ritual Genre

A film is a cultural product whose meanings can only be deduced from the context of its culture. According to Ralph Linton, “the culture of a society is the way of life of its members; the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation (cited in Haralambos p. 664). Therefore, film being part of culture reflects the ideologies of the society in which it is made. Nollywood films in particular are reflections of the different ideologies in Nigerian society. Ideology here refers to the concepts or ideas inherent in a society. According to Sol Worth (1981):

one cannot say that any film has a significance or meaning on and of itself. For any film, just as for the word *dog*, there must exist a common and shared significance among the members of a group who make implications and inferences or draw meaning from (...) the process of communication. (p.75)

Because the ideas are inherent in the society that is the only reason they can be meaningful to the members of that group. The ritual scenes in Nollywood films constitute what Nicos Hadjinicolaou terms “visual ideology.” Visual ideology according to him is “the way in which the formal and thematic elements of a picture are combined on each specific occasion. This combination is a particular form of the overall ideology of a social class” (1982, p. 244). The focus on this paper is on Nollywood films with “filmic themes and storylines which reflect scenes of using human beings for sacrifices in order to become wealthy.” Uwah (2013:167). At the beginning of what is now referred to as Nollywood, majority of the video films produced are replete with scenes of ritual murder, necessitated by the get-rich –quick syndrome as exemplified by the narratives. Starting with *Living in Bondage* (1992), the film that shot Nigerian video film to limelight, to *Rituals* (1997), and *Issakaba* (2001) even up to this day, Nollywood films still

contain one form of ritual or the other. The question to ask is “is this really a true representation of the Nigerian society”? No matter how one tries to answer this question, the fact remains that the same idea comes up in all the genres that can be identified in Nollywood films. In the epics, comedies, crime, political, religious, love and any other genre that one can think of. It is this reoccurrence of ritual in almost all Nollywood films that informed this paper. The video films- *Issakaba 1*, *Rain of Tears*, and *Heart of a Beast* will be used to study ritual films in Nollywood.

Genre in film refer to the categorization of styles, modes of treatment of the text and the main ideas presented in a text. According to Graeme Turner (1993:85), “One of the ways in which we distinguish between different kinds of film narrative is through genre....” In film, genre is a system of codes, conventions and visual styles which enables an audience to determine rapidly and with some complexity the kind of narrative they are viewing. However, genre in film is cultural bound. It is determined by sets of cultural conventions inherent in society in which it emerges. Thus, the categorization of films is governed by what society believe the film to be. This position can be seen from the point of view that the films actually reflect the society which can also be studied through the films. Genre categorization in film can also be affected by “time spirit”.

The notion of ‘time spirit’ borders on the idea that the films mirror the popular conditions and attitudes of the period in which the film is produced. To buttress this, Utah (2013) argues that the ritual representations in Nollywood films became prominent “especially in the 1990s under the military regimes of General Ibrahim Babangida and General Sani Abacha when economic hardship was rife everywhere and people could do anything to get rich including using loved ones for ritual sacrifice.” (168-169) Richard Griffith (1976) explaining, how time spirit can affect the genre of film narrative notes that the strength

of such film as a genre lays in the fact that the story was really there, and that the audience knew it and can recognize it (Nichols, pp.111-198). So far it is to say that the prevailing condition or conditions within a society can affect the genre of films produced in that society. Nollywood films also made use of the prevailing conditions of the Nigerian society then and even up to this day in their narrative themes and storylines.

The popularization of the video format as popular format in film production following the hardship imposed on filmmakers by the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) actually started with the release of Kenneth Nnebue's ritual films- *Living in Bondage* (1992). The years between 1992 and early 2002 witnessed proliferation of films with ritual themes. Films such as *Circle of Doom* (1993), *Idejimba* (1995), *Blood Money* (1997), *Rituals* (1997), and *Last Burial* (2000) are just a few among the ritual films. Yet, ritual scenes and magical manipulations to succeed in one thing or the other is still manifest in Nollywood films till date. It is a common scene to behold in Nollywood whether they are religious or secular films. Apart from the religious films, ritual scenes in Nollywood movies serves as the deus ex machine to achieve success or hinder someone's progress. Even the religious films are not bereft of ritual scenes in their narrative structure. This recurrent decimal has become the hallmark of Nollywood films.

Synopsis of *Issakaba 1*

The story of *Issakaba 1* carries the theme of crime and punishment. The story presents a society where crime and ritual activities has become the order of the day. The people are no longer safe by day or by night. Crimes are aided and committed by people and in places one will not think of. The society is in confusion and fear of what will happen next or who will be the next victim. Chief Mbanefo

(Pete Eneh) is a known philanthropist in his community who unknowingly to his people, sponsors most of the criminal activities that happens in the community. The community in seeking for solution invites the Issakaba boys led by Ebube (Sam Dede) and Nwoke (Mike Ogundu) to help fish out the criminals. The Issakaba boys' activities leads to some harrowing revelations- the crippled beggar and the corn seller who runs guns and bullets; chief Mbanefo who is the biggest magnet in the crime world and yet, the people sees him as the greatest of the philanthropists in his community and the Igwe's son who turns out to be an armed rubber even while his father the Igwe (Amaechi Muonagor) is bent on wiping out crime from his community.

The coming of the Issakaba boys is seen as a big relief by the people. The policing system has failed to meet with the people's demand and aspirations. The presence of the Issakaba boys reveal the gun business between Chief Mbanefo, the Police Officer and the Police Constables who give gun to the armed robbers. In all these chaos, there is a magician cum spiritualist (Zulu Adigwe) who prepares charms for both the armed robbers and their sponsors. It is this charm that makes them invincible in the society. At the end of the film, the Issakaba boys are able to wipe out all the criminals

except one who fled the community.



A typical ritual scene in Nollywood film narrative.

Rituals in other Nollywood Films.

The narratives in the *Issakaba* series present cases of ritual murder and magic, yet there are still other ritual forms presented in Nollywood films. In the *Rain of Tears* (2014) produced by Ibe Akachukwu and directed by Ifeanyi Ogbonna for instance, Amadi Ezeh (Sidney Diala) uses magical power to control his brother Ifeanyi Ezeh a. k. a. Omerorah (Kenneth Okonkwo). With the help of Chief Udo Akpu Enyi (Chiwetalu Agu) and Udene Aja, Amadi perpetuated series of wicked acts on the brother which finally leads his arrest and sentence to prison. Though Omerora is known for his philanthropic acts in his community, Chief Udo Akpu Enyi convinces Amadi that Omerora is magically controlling the progress of his son Chijioke. Amadi bought the idea and decides to seek

solution from Udene Aja.



Amadi at Udene Aja Shrine with gifts

When Omerora lost everything including his freedom, he meets someone in prison who hearing his plight encouraged him to take revenge on the chiefs in his community for their betrayal. This narrative continues in *Heart of a Beast*(2014) where Omerora sets out on a revenge mission on his brother Amadi and the community following the public assassination of his son. He uses higher magical power to counter the power of Udeneaja, thereby terrorizing the whole community. He becomes inhuman in his actions taking other people's wives and daughters in marriage forcefully. He also forced the chiefs to accept him as the king even with his record as an ex-convict.



Omerora being fortified by a native doctor.

A Play for Ideology

The story in the narratives represents the dominant ideas in Nigerian society. Ritual-murder for money-making or protection are concepts that people are aware of in the society. The acceptance of these stories stems from the fact that the ideas are not totally new to the audience. According to Robert Kolker, “somehow a thing seen directly - or through a visual representation like a painting, a photograph, or a film - brings us close to some actual reality.” (2006:12) In the case of Nollywood films, the viewers are constantly aware of beliefs in magical and spiritual powers as well as the ritualistic activities inherent in the society.



A scene of magic in Nollywood film narrative

In *Issakaba1*, ritual and magic are vagrantly displayed. Both the criminals and their pursuers depend on ritual and magic for their successes. The armed robbers go to the magician cum spiritualist for power and protection. At the same time, the Issakaba boys depend on their own spiritualist cum magician to combat crime. What we have here then is a clash between the benevolent ritualists and the malevolent ones. However, we look at it, there is still that dependence on the magical and the spiritual.

According to Turner (1993:77), the satisfaction an audience finds in a film does not emerge from the narrative alone. At the simplest level, film narratives are viewed within a context that is both textual and social. From the social context, connections can be implied between a film and contemporary events. On another hand,

the films of a culture can also be used to read the culture of its people. In that case, the meanings of the images are hinged in the culture of the film. Any reading or meaning attached to a film text in this context is subject to the culture of its origin. Culture also helps to determine genre categorization as it is only what the people collectively believe the film to be that it will be. On this note, Barry Keith Grant (1986) explaining how genre films make meaning among the audience note thus:

Surely one of our basic ways of understanding film genres, and explaining their evolution and changing fortunes of popularity and production, is as collective expressions of contemporary life that strike a particularly resonant chord with the audience. (116)

That is to say that the popularity of the films stems from the familiarity of the subject matter among the audience as it is drawn from their contemporary life. In the case of Nollywood films, the stories are part of the everyday life experiences of the audience. On this note, it is obvious that the popularity and preference of the ritual themes in Nollywood films stem not only from the film narrative but also from the social context. The social context here refers to the beliefs of the people, a belief in the potency of magical and spiritual forces that culminate in the process of ritual and other magical/spiritual activities.



A ritualist consulting in Nollywood film narrative.

In the Nigerian society, it is a common idea that someone can perform one form of ritual or the other to either impede someone's progress or to enrich himself. Some even believe that a certain ritual can make a person invincible just as used in *Issakaba 1*.



Magical images are realized through Computer Generated Images (CGI).

Against this backdrop, there are proliferation of churches and spiritual houses who counter the activities of the supposed ritualists. In some cases, they do almost the same thing that the ritualists do-ensuring wealth and positions for their members. Instead of asking for kolanut, gin and alligator pepper, they request for candles, anointing oil, and bible. In their prayer, they open doors of prosperity and protection for their members.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Nollywood films generally have the inherent characteristics of the Nigerian society. The thematic preoccupations and the meanings of film narratives can only be understood within

the context of their culture. In that case, they “can be thought of as a phenomenon of culture in their own right, reflecting the value systems, coding patterns, and cognitive processes of the maker.” (p.77) Consequently, the ritual representations found in almost all the genres of Nollywood films represent the dominant ideas and the belief systems of the populace.

Rituals in the culture and belief systems in Nigeria can be used either positively or negatively. In the narratives under study, rituals are used both positively and negatively. The Issakaba boys are able to trap the ritual killer by means of their own ritual power. At the same time, the magician cum spiritualist is able to dodge arrest by the Issakaba boys by means of his own magical power. At the end, the benevolent power suppresses the malevolent one. On another hand, *Rain of Tears* and *Heart of a Beast* present another form of ritual in Nollywood films. Different forms of magic are used to punish or remove someone from where he/she is supposed to be. People die mysteriously, while some mysteries beyond human imagination are created. Thanks to the use of Computer Generated Images (CGI).

Generally, the viewer perceives in these films the unique aura of the ideologies and belief systems which constitute the Nigerian society. Therefore, this paper recommends a critical assessment of rituals in Nollywood films based on a proper understanding of the ideologies of the society of these films origin.

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