



Africa, the Bible, and the Spirit in Nollywood Scripts

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Abstract

Recent studies in African religions have established the precarious character of the Bible in the daily engagements of most African people. These dominant studies have suggested the defining religious obsession of the African people with different Christian motifs clearly sourced from the Bible. Unfortunately, the cinematic importance and use of the Bible in directing the plots of African stories in Nollywood scripts have not been given the needed attention. Departing from these studies, the present paper examines the problematic use of the Bible in the plot, conversations and motifs of Nollywood scripting. Within this present discourse, the paper analyses the cultural appropriation of the Bible in the different cinematic representations of Nollywood stories, and the significance of this practice in the mapping of the religious/spiritual dynamism of the African people.

Key-words Nollywood, Bible, Christian, Cinematic, Scripting

Introduction

The plethora of studies on African theology have demonstrated the difficulties of pinning down a pattern or method of doing or practicing African theology. Among the much-discussed issues is the difficulty of

accurately describing and articulating how the Bible is to be read, interpreted, and used among Christians. As already known, religion is an important element in the African worldview, such that controls and shapes how people live and act in the world, and even relate with the spirit world. Within this context, the African Christian does not only engage life issues from a religious perspective, but also from a hermeneutical use of the Scripture.

In popular African Christianity, one discerns several ways the Scripture is read and used, not from the exegetical point of studying and critically analysing, but a view of how random words and phrases from Scripture are adopted and used in the religious and common language of the people, beginning from teachers and preachers who preach and share the word of God to the common man on the street.

Though not an exhaustive study of the various possibilities of using the bible, we discern five approaches that serve as theoretical framework to understudy the typical vernacular patterns by which biblical words are used in different contexts (a) the Prophetic and Psalmist approach, (b) the Performative or Declarative approach, (c) the Cut and Paste approach (d) the Talisman/Syncretic approach, to (e) the Consumerist approach. Our study will reveal that each of these approaches can be used in different contexts, and the different approaches can be used intertwined.

The Nigerian movie industry, in its effort to capture the Nigerian situation in its social-cultural, political, economic, and religious contexts, has also captured this religious African reality, that is, using the words of the Scripture in almost every aspect of human communication. Of the many projections of faith motifs in movies, of Christian God as supreme over the African deities/spirits/gods/mermaid spirits, of the impact of religion on African culture, of the Christian message of love, forgiveness, hope, trust, faith, and steadfastness especially in times of suffering, hardships or difficult conditions, the projection of religion we shall pay attention to is how the Bible is used as weapon to fight or ward off spirits/forces inhabiting the African spiritual world. And as we present the different uses of the Bible in Nollywood stories, we shall occupy our attention on one of the approaches, namely the Talisman/Syncretic approach as one of the usages that situates best the Nollywood stories in their projection of the Bible and the African spirits.

In capturing the situational use of the Scripture in the popular African Christianity, the importance is not only to challenge Nigerians (and Africans in general) on the apprehension and misapprehension of the Scripture, but also as a projection of how the African religious worldviews influences our Christian worldview and vice versa.

Conceptual Clarification

The words used in this article that require clarification are the following (a) Use (b) syncretism, and (c) popular African Christianity.

(a) Use of: The word ‘Use’, though a common expression, is adopted here to speak of the different ways the Scripture/Bible is approached and can be applied in context to get a benefit, either for oneself or for others, or even in spoken or written conversations. Taking insight from 2 Tim 3:16, which states that the Bible could be used for *teaching the faith, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness*, our interest is on the different settings wherein words of the Scripture are employed. Here, the emphasis is not on the exegetical method of Biblical interpretation in Africa, but how believers can read or draw from the Bible inspirations and words to one’s advantage, either in the context of prayer, liturgy/worship, drama or even in normal conversation.

(b) Syncretism: The common understanding of syncretism as the “amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought”¹ is not applied here in the strict sense. Syncretism is also not used here as denigrative reference to a religion of those we don’t like.² The notion is used here in reference to the different ways Africans express their apprehension, misapprehension and appreciation of the function of the Bible in relation to their worldview, especially in relation to the traditional belief and ritual setting.

(c) Popular African Christianity: With particular focus on Nigerians, the expression ‘popular African Christianity’ is used here to speak of the way African Christians express their faith, with its beliefs, practices and values through their interaction with the bible. We see in many ways and in different

¹ Oxford Dictionary, Accessed at <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/syncretism> (2-July-2020).

² Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?: The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 44.

locations (in movies, on the street, in the church, land/road transportation, homes, etc.) the religious expressive nature of Nigerians which is not in its pure form a reflection of Western Christianity, but a blend of Christianity with elements of traditional religion and culture that very much reflects certain Christian religious culture and belief.

African Christians and the Use of the Bible

There are many reasons for which the bible can be used – from gaining insights into the word of God, for worship, for evangelization, to help the people of God to pray for their needs, for miracles/ healing, to cast out demons, to contextualize the text as it applies, and for blessings. During worship, evangelization/ministry, preaching, healing, deliverance sessions, teaching, family worship, private devotions, or even in discussions in public spaces, for instance, passages from scripture can be read, from long narratives to short stories, and from using biblical quotations to text allusions.

African Christian communities today are influenced, not only by the sacred words of the Scripture, but also by the social, religious, and cultural dynamics found in the sacred scripture. With the question of contextualization, the life situations and orientations of Africans have huge impact on the way believers use and read the Bible today. A typical African Christian believes that he/she lives in a hostile world surrounded by either supernatural forces, individual, family members or community that can bring evil to the person. There is also the belief that every facet of human life; progress, failure, success, sickness, health, marriage, and death is predetermined by some forces beyond human realm and understanding. According to David Tuesday Adamo, “In Africa, the existence of evil ones and enemies are painfully real... The belief in the existence of the evil ones and enemies is so strong that nothing happens naturally without some spiritual forces behind it.”³ The believer will use the Bible to evoke God’s help in his/her needs, especially to dispel the attack of the evil or evil one.

³ David Tuesday Adamo, “Psalms in African Indigenous Churches in Nigeria,” In Gerald O. West & Musa W. Dube, *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 336-349, p. 337.

Pentecostalism plays a key role in the way Bible is used in Christian communities today – in our religious affiliations, beliefs, and expressions of faith. For many, Pentecostalism is a re-enactment of African religious tradition and culture into Christianity⁴ and for others it is “a positive potential in a context of urbanization and modernization.”⁵ Whichever way we want to appreciate or criticise the influence of Pentecostalism, it must be stated that its presence, with special reference to new generation churches and ministries has introduced, some of the practices we see today in relation to reading and using the Scripture. What we identify as vernacular or typical African Christian use of Scripture may have emanated from Pentecostals, but it has spread to all Christian denominations, including non-Christians. In the different ways African Christians express their belief and faith; in ministry, preaching, healing, exorcism, praying, and even in spoken communication, we discern five different approaches to Scripture: the prophetic and Psalmist, the deliberative and declarative, the cut and paste approach, the talisman/syncretic approach, the consumerist approach.

a) The Prophetic and Psalmist Approach

The prophetic and Psalmist approach relates how scripture can be used, either in prayer or any other circumstance, from the point of knowing God and asking for his help. It looks at the scripture from the perspective of how God intervened in human history, especially in the history of the Jewish people, of how God answered the people of God and calls on God to come to the aid of his people today. Thus, in the prophetic and Psalmist approach words of the scripture are evoked or extracted as words of inspiration, and interpretations of particular passages are meant to allude to the situation of the time such that the listener could correspondingly make sense of the message or word of God.

In the Old Testament prophetic traditions, we see how words which were then part of scripture were evoked to inspire prophecy, such that exposes the evil of the time, the judgement of God and reconciliation. Words which were part of Scripture were also used to recall precedents of God’s past manifestation of

⁴ Luis Lugo (Director), *Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*, A Report from Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life / Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2010). Accessed at www.pewforum.org, 1/06/2020.

⁵ R Ingram, “Similarities in Pentecostal And Traditional African Culture: A Positive Potential In A Context Of Urbanization And Modernization,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 27 (2006), pp.339-360

authority, mercy, and generosity as grounds for a divine encounter with the present worshipping community. Take for instance the story of Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal in the way Elijah used the Scripture before fire came down from heaven to consume the altar of the prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18:36-37). Elijah related what God has to their fathers and asks God to prove his presence and power in his time.

With the Psalms, the people of God could use the text to respond to the acts and words of God. Psalms contain songs of praise and thanksgiving to God, of lament, wisdom, and royal psalms. This portion of scripture was a useful tool for Jews in their communal and family worship. As with prophetic writings, Psalms have words which recalled events that were contained in the Scripture and which the Psalmist community evokes to either praise God or seek his aid. Psalms are read also for special purposes.

In most Christian communities, believers read the Psalms for various needs – “to either cure special types of sickness, for success, or for general or special types of protection.”⁶ According to Tuesday Adamo, the therapeutic method of reading Psalms are influenced and shaped by Nigerian Christians in the African indigenous Churches (and even in the mainline Churches).⁷ In daily lives, people have followed the Psalmist approach in crying to God for a particular purpose. When someone feels his/her life is in danger or is besieged with so much problems, African Christians are known to have called upon God in wailing and lamenting, reminding God of what he has done in the past, and asking him to intervene in the present. With the intention of reaching God in prayer, the believer can make use of any part of the Bible, whether they are loosely or intricately linked to the words of the text, provided he/she is able to create a unity message or purpose of using the Scripture.

b) The Performative or Declarative Approach

In this approach, a Christian believer or preacher recognizes in the Scripture words of covenant, promises or pledges (promises of victory, success, hope, achievement) that can be used in a declarative way to evoke changes or

⁶ David Tuesday Adamo, “Psalms in African Indigenous Churches in Nigeria,” In Gerald O. West & Musa W. Dube, *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 336-349, p. 345.

⁷ Adamo, “Psalms in African Indigenous Churches in Nigeria,” p. 342.

transformation in the life of a believer.⁸ Paul Gifford notes how such use of scripture falls back to the influence and key role Pentecostalism has played in the African religious beliefs and expressions. Pentecostalism ushered in a certain method of Biblical reading that identifies the scripture as a record of covenants, promises, pledges and commitments between God and his chosen and such promises and commitments speak directly to me.⁹ The impact, he argues, is that preachers of this method use the bible in a selective way in order to prove their point. Certain words of the Scripture especially passages that express the theology of success, power, victory, and prosperity are the selected and generally used during prayer or deliverance sessions.

The performative or declarative words can be short expressions, such as: ‘I will open the windows of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won’t have enough room to take it in!’ (Mal 3:10); ‘you will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD has done’ (Ps 118:17); ‘the fire of the God of Elijah will burn your enemies’ (1 Kgs 18:38); ‘the fire of the Lord of host will consume your enemies’ (Ps 97:3); every tongue that rise against you in judgement shall be destroyed’/no weapon fashioned against thee shall prosper (Isa 54:17); ‘strangers in your home will hear the voice of God and run out’ (Ps 18:45).

Songs are regarded as a form of prayer. In songs, one can appeal to God for assistance, offer thanksgiving or seek for the forgiveness of sins. Biblical passages can be used as songs, such as

*Abraham blessings are mine,
Abraham blessings are mine.
I am blessed in the morning, blessed in the evening,
Abraham blessings are mine.*

In declarative approach, Biblical narratives can be used, in a long cluster of statements that speak about blessings and prosperity. In his sermon on Joshua 3: 7–17, where Joshua tells the people God will drive out the Canaanites, the

⁸ Paul Gifford, “The Bible In Africa: A Novel Usage In Africa’s New Churches” *Bulletin of SOAS* (School of Oriental and African Studies, 71, 2 (2008), 203–219,

⁹ Gifford, “The Bible In Africa,” 206.

Hittites, Hivites and so on before them, Martin Ssuna, pastor of Nairobi's World Harvest Church, says

You've stepped in disappointments, you've stepped in despondency, you've stepped in betrayal. When they stepped in the waters of the Jordan, the water parted. In other words, God transformed their feet into supernatural makers of roads... . Every office you step into, you can possess; every job you step into you can possess. Every embassy you go to, they can never deny you a visa, because your feet have been washed. You will step in right places; places where you will get benefits. You will step into an office, and they will say: "We have been waiting for you". Order is coming to your life. I will begin to magnify you. You are going to have to stand still because your pain has to go...¹⁰

Apart from the use of performative or declarative word of Scripture in Churches or during religious events, believers can also use them in normal conversations, especially when one receives a favour or is expecting to receive a favour. Expressions such, 'May the God of Abraham bless you,' 'like the widow of Zarephath you shall never lack,' 'givers never lack' 'Whoever receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward'. In both religious and non-religious circles, the approach to the Scripture can be used to exploit people, especially for the wrong reasons.

c) The Cut and Paste Approach

Joel Kamsen Tihitshak Biwul points out that most preachers today use the 'cut and paste' approach, a situation where preachers of the word "either enter the pulpit and preach without reading from the Bible or they read a passage, but close the Bible soon afterwards and go on to tell some experiential stories."¹¹ The expression 'cut and paste' taken from Word Processing (computer) language has become an idiom that can be used to address many situations whereby a text, data, sermon or even event is moved from one point and

¹⁰ See Gifford, "The Bible In Africa," 207.

¹¹ Joel Kamsen Tihitshak Biwul "Preaching Biblically in the Nigerian Prosperity Gospel Context" *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 32 (2013), 121-134, p. 125.

transposed to another without much consideration for the original context and content.

In reading or preaching the Scripture, a preacher is accused of adopting a cut and paste approach when he/she intentionally uses someone's else's idea, language, stories, or sermon as one's own without acknowledging the source.¹² In relation to the Scripture, some preachers are accused of the practice of citing passages or quotations, connecting widely different texts and contexts of the Bible without serious consideration for order, harmony or even the source wherein the text originally come from. Others are in the habit of holding on to passages that are favourable and using them as templates for all preaching, teaching, healing and praying.

According to Biwul, "the Lord/God said to me" is a regular phrase used by such Nigerian preachers whenever they are preaching."¹³ Other expressions include, 'my Bible tells me in', Increasingly, the cut and paste approach is becoming a popular pattern of reading and preaching the bible today. This style or attitude, while it may give the preacher the opportunity to enter into conversation with the Scripture, poses a serious danger of making the Scripture become everything and nothing.

d) *The Talisman/Syncretic Approach*

Edwin M Yamauchi in his article "Scripture as Talisman, Specimen, and Dragoman" argues that magic played a role in the religious tradition that gave rise to the writings of the Sacred Scripture.¹⁴ He observed how biblical quotations were used as magical amulets to implore God's blessings, drive away evil spirits or obtain healing. Among the many examples cited, we have for instance Gen 49:22 "used as a prophylactic text against the evil eye, evil affliction, evil Satan, and all kinds of visitations."¹⁵ In his opinion, Christian worship today reflect this primitive view of the Scripture, only that often preachers and non-preachers alike use the Sacred Scripture "for magical ends

¹² John S. McClure, *Preaching Words: 144 Key Terms in Homiletics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 105.

¹³ Biwul "Preaching Biblically in the Nigerian Prosperity Gospel Context," 125.

¹⁴ Edwin M Yamauchi, "Scripture as Talisman, Specimen, And Dragoman" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50 (2007), 3-30, p. 3.

¹⁵ Yamauchi, "Scripture as Talisman, Specimen, And Dragoman," 5.

and at other times are followed literally without regard to their original contexts.”¹⁶

Speaking about the use of the Scripture as magical talisman, Yamauchi observes that the use of magic is also a prevalent culture in Africa. The African believes in the reality of the spiritual world filled with spiritual forces, spirits, and gods. In context, the worship of ancestral spirits, gods, and deities are usually accompanied with sacrifices, divination, ceremonies, consultations, appeasement, and prayers.¹⁷ Through these practices, it is believed that these spiritual beings can exert some sort of life-force into human world, such that can change the behaviour, situation and circumstances of people. To solicit the help of the spirits, medicine, magic, sorcery, charms, or talisman are used. In most cases, the intervention of the spirit or god are quick and striking.

As mentioned earlier, there has been so much emphasis on the existence of demons, evil, and monsters in our human society, thanks to the African worldview about spirits, ancestors and gods, as well as the Biblical worldview on demons, spirits and the devil. According to Biwul,

Coming from a worldview that perceives the world as permeated by evil spirits who live in forests, graveyards, caves, body of waters, and so on, the Christian life in Africa generally is characterised by fear of these evil spirits. In order to dispel such fear in the hearts of members, elements of spiritual warfare always find their way into African Christian preaching.¹⁸

It is in the light of the above that Scriptural passages have been used as life force, power dispeller, devil crusher to destroy or dispel the power of the devil. In context, biblical statements such as ‘Holy Ghost fire,’ ‘My God is a consuming fire,’ ‘Angel of darkness, burn to ashes,’ ‘Fire consume them,’ ‘Holy Ghost fire, burn them to ashes,’ ‘In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, be destroyed,’ ‘I do not take orders from you,’ ‘Blessed be your holy name,’ and ‘My Bible tells me that no weapon fashioned against me shall stand’ are used for deliverance and exorcism sessions.

¹⁶ Yamauchi, “Scripture as Talisman, Specimen, And Dragoman,” 3.

¹⁷ Magnus Aniago, “Deities and Shrine in African Traditional Religion: The “Spark” in Igboland,” *Middle-East Journal of Scientific Research* 23 (2015), 2183-2185.

¹⁸ Biwul “Preaching Biblically in the Nigerian Prosperity Gospel Context,” 129.

Obviously, there exists different kinds of sickness and evil in our society. However, demonic possession has taken the commonplace since it is becoming the populist belief and most profitable market for pastors and preachers.¹⁹ Either because of lack of knowledge or gullibility, many persons have been exploited, lured into the belief that the instant reading or use of the Scripture works magic. Even the mere holding of the bible and shaking the Bible or citing the words of the Scripture is believed to instantly bring healing even when the victim may be suffering from mental breakdown, delusion, depression, lunacy or psychosocial disabilities.

Most of the pattern of deliverance and healing done in some Churches take the form of traditional African culture and beliefs. Like the traditional healer (*dibia*, *Babalawo* or *Onisegun*) who employs incantations to dispel or destroy harm and demons, the pastor takes the bible and pronounces the words of the Scripture and expects miracle to happen almost like a prompt (immediately, as against something that could happen over time). In some cases, pastors have been alleged to use traditional powers, such as voodoo, talisman, charms, and magic to perform miracles in Churches. Others are accused of dabbling into occultism and using their powers to practice healing and deliverance, and make their worshippers believe that the magic is done by God.

Last but not the least, in normal conversations, people use such destructive or Talisman expressions towards another. In reaction to provocation, you can hear a person utter any of the following : ‘May God strike you there,’ ‘May God strike me dead if I have committed this or that offence,’ May *Amadioha* strike you dead, ‘thunder fire you’ ‘May God fight my fight,’ May God avenge my cause’. These expressions can be found on the lips of men and women, religious and non-religious alike.

This is a way of belief that is ill-informed, a system of belief that is syncretic in approach. What should not be in doubt is that there is power in the name of God. That in the use of Scripture one expresses his/her faith. But the understanding, interpretation, and use of Scripture in the context discussed above are wrong. God acts in human history, and the Scripture contains words of God that can

¹⁹ See also Dauda Musa Enna, Emmanuel Paul Idakwo & Olaku Dorothy Akpovye, “The Impact of the “Magic” In Nollywood: An Analysis,” *American International Journal of Contemporary Research* 5 (2015), 117-187, 117.

bring about transformation. But the way this transformation is featured in Churches or home certainly presents Christianity as magic and reduces faith/healing in Christ as a divine show or drama.

e) *The consumerist Approach*

It has been argued that one of the reasons for the overwhelming myths and beliefs about the magical powers ascribed to the Bible in Africa is poverty. Poverty influences the response people give to religion by fostering the ‘I can do anything attitude,’ ‘the bible provides all my needs,’ ‘the Bible cures all things,’ as well as the ‘hunger for miracle attitude’. According to Biwul,

When people seek cheap popularity and cheap blessings under the guise of prosperity on their way to greatness, they may go to any length to achieve their ends. Worse still, the atmosphere for seeking miracles will be charged especially when some church members electrify others with their testimonies about God’s miracles in their lives, whether such claims are factual or fictitious.²⁰

In what P. J. Griffiths described as the ‘consumerist fashion’, he underscores how scriptural passages are used among preachers for their own selfish interest. In preaching, preachers read what they like, when they like, and accept what they like in what they read. Then they discard it and move on to read something else.²¹ Passages of the Scripture are cited or used only where they are directly relevant and they are usually characterised with the expressions such as, ‘my Bible tells me,’ ‘I think,’ ‘I feel,’ followed by different kinds of interpretations of particular texts.

This consumerist approach could be likened to the performative or declarative approach, or even to the ‘cut and paste’ approach, only that in the former the emphasis is not only on covenant or prosperity passages found in the bible. The pastor or preacher can use any of the verses for material gains: from sexual exploitation, economic exploitation, merchandize of religion, exercise of power, political gains, gender discrimination, manipulation of families and homes, to harmful separation of reason from faith (such as those that reject

²⁰ Biwul “Preaching Biblically in the Nigerian Prosperity Gospel Context,” 128.

²¹ P. J. Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2011), 41.

medical help in the name of religion). In addition, there is no strict adherence to the words of the scripture. There is usually an arbitrary word-juggling between the different parts of the bible, from Genesis to Exodus, from Exodus to Luke, and from Luke to Malachi, all in the bid to defend a selfish interest. Here we also talk about religious merchandize of scriptural words. Often you see scriptural incipits on arm bands, T-shirts, necklaces, stickers, and pamphlets. Right along with the discussion that most of these objects are used in the sense of magic or talisman, most of them are money making ventures. Why Nigeria is afflicted by poverty, the society continues to witness the alarming rate at which (fake) preachers and pastors defraud the people in the name of God. “In a society where the idea of “cheap,” “free,” and “have it quick” is a dominant factor in people’s drive for the things that life demands, consulting mediums and false prophets for miracles becomes commonplace.”²² While the above discussion seems to be revealing popular African Christianity, it is very much interesting to have observed that some of the themes or approaches to the Bible have its origin from the Scripture. It is of note that Scripture can be cited for so many reasons, but the recurrence of the themes of healing and deliverance in the Nigerian Church and society has left significant imprint on the overwhelming use of some of the approaches over others. Interesting and important approaches are the (i) the consumerist approach, (b) the talisman/syncretic approach, and (c) the cut and paste which we find more popular among Christians, Churches, communities and families. The belief and conceptualized imaginations in the existence of evil, the well and ill-understood grasp of our human society as full of spirits and gods (good and bad), and the particular religious syncretism found in Nigeria have given rise to these common patterns of use of Scripture. Using the Christian stories as told in Nollywood movies, we wish to understudy the talisman/syncretic use of the Bible as it projects the Nigerian religious worldview, especially in the confrontation between Christianity and the fearful spiritual inhabitants of the African cosmology.

²² Biwul “Preaching Biblically in the Nigerian Prosperity Gospel Context,” 128.

The Bible in African Movies

The Nigerian film industry has distinguished itself in the way religion, culture, and history are featured in movies as avenue to underscore the cultural values, beliefs, and the social religious situation of the people. On the part of religion, one of the themes, or rather the dominant theme is the belief that there is evil in the world, and religion or rather faith can dispel the evil or evil one. A selection of few religious movies, such as “The Powerful Man Of God That Destroy Witches & Wizard” (2018) by Mount Zion Movies; “Son of the Most High God vs King of the Devil” (2020) by Mount Zion Movies; “Brotherly Sacrifice” (2019) produced by Chibueze Ucheama; “His Holiness” (2010) a Future King Production; “The Word of God is Powerful Weapon” (2020) a Donatus U Nwobodo Production; “Occult Master” (2020) an Okwyson Production; “Anjonu Laafin” (2020) a Mr Adunlede Adekola Movie; “Ipodo” (2020) a Mr Adunlede Adekola Movies; and “Fake Church” (2018) by Sylvester Obadigie Production will help us discuss some of the African belief pattern found in movies and how the Bible is featured. The movie “Brotherly Sacrifice” features the theme of ‘greed, occultism, power and wealth.’ The movie “His Holiness” is about greed and religious merchandize. In “The Powerful Man of God That Destroy Witches & Wizard,” is a story on justice and fairness. The movie “Son of the Most High God vs King of the Devil’ is about the presence of bad and evil spirits in the world and their consequences.

In these movies, there are recurring themes: (a) there is evil in the world, (b) all bad things, misfortune, sickness, death, ill luck, even improper behaviour are caused by the evil one, (c) the different images, figures and personalities used to depict the presence of evil or the evil one come with trembling force, destructive energy and fearful dread, such that the victim will need the service(s) of the man/woman of God, (d) in the presence of the man of God there is the confrontation between good and evil, the good spirit and the bad, the good God and the evil god, (e) the man or woman of God will then use prayer objects and the Bible to cast away the spell, the devil or the evil thing, (f) there are many fake pastors and fake ministries, (g) several of the new-generational Churches use mysterious powers to perform miracles, and (h) there is so much exploitation of believers in “the Name of God”.

It is of interest to point out that in each of these movies the use of the Bible was significantly featured; from preaching with the Bible, staging deliverance sessions with the Bible, healing with the Bible, quoting Biblical passages randomly, holding the bible in hand and entering into a sort of frenzy, shaking the head, body or moving around the scene. The preacher/healer/prophet could enter praying session by quoting texts from the scripture, repeatedly flexing the elbow joint back and forth. It can also take the form of a prayer that evokes the words of the scripture, selecting the words that fit into the context without holding the Bible in hand. In most of the “In the Name of Jesus” (the common word that begins every prayer/healing session, the Bible is believed to be the charm that is going to dispel and defeat the devil. Another scene is the random use of scriptural words in songs to confront the evil thing or person with or without holding the Bible in the hand without uttering any word.

The Talisman/Syncretic Approach in Nollywood Movies

What we call the African Religious worldview today is a blend of traditional religious belief systems and culture with the Christian beliefs and practices. To begin with, the portrayal of witchcraft, sorcery, native doctors, herbalist, spirits, deities, and their likes in Nollywood films are mainly presentations of African traditional religion, even though they are presented in a negative light. From our African understanding, the nature of action, mode of being, communication, operation, and function of some of the deities are forceful and dreadful. Spirits inhibit the human world, and they can use their powers for the good or harm of human beings. They possess mysterious powers that can be transmitted into certain objects, human and animals to carry out their respective missions.

This belief is very much reflected in stories of deities like Sango the god of thunder and lightning; *Ogun*, the god of Iron and water; *Amadioha*, the messenger of God’s wrath and judgement; *Esu* (or *Ekwensu*), the god of mischief; and *Sopono*, the god of the disease of small pox (etc.). These spirits or deities can be assigned by the supreme being to punish offenders of justice

or loyalty.²³ They can also be “manipulated” to serve the humans or vice versa.²⁴ The manner in which they strike individuals or groups always leave the people with great fear for the gods and spirits. The belief in this tradition is very dominant even amongst Christians. Noteworthy is that some of these beliefs are transposed into African Christian spirituality and the African Christian approach is that the Bible and Christian theology can address the problems of the experiences, influences, and impact of the bad spirits in our society.

A closer look at some of the statements used during deliverance or healing movies suggests a Jewish context. The sense of fire in the expressions ‘Holy Ghost fire!’ or ‘The God I serve is a consuming fire!’, ‘Fire consume them,’ ‘Holy Ghost fire, burn them to ashes,’ used in movie context as a physical consuming fire is not derivative from any New Testament narrative but from the Old Testament, such as, stories of Elijah and 450 prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18) and from the Narrative of Moses and the burning bush (Exo 3:1-5). Statement like ‘Angel of darkness, burn to ashes!’ is also descriptive of passages in the Old Testament that speaks of the burning of evil doers (Mal 4:1; Ps 11:6; 140:10; Nahum 3:15; Num 16:35).

Few passages in the New Testament also speaks of burning, such as, Matt 3:12; Rev 17:16; 18:8, but little is said about the burning or destruction of the enemy. We have also in the New Testament stories that speak of the presence of evil/devil in the world. Jesus cast out demons from those who were possessed (Matt 8:28–34; Mk 5:1-17). Paul casts out the demonic spirit that possessed the slave girl (Acts 16:16-24). But the attitude of Jesus and the disciples in the matters of healing or exorcism/deliverance were not aggressive or to be compared to the use of destructive language found in the Old Testament.²⁵

The image of fire has important place in Old Testament theology, not only in its reference to sacrifices of burnt offerings (Lev 9:24; Judges 6:21; 1 Chronicles 21:26; Leviticus 6:12), but also as an instrument of God’s judgment (Num 11:1; Ezk 20:45-49). Concerning the later, punishment by fire in the Old

²³ See also Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, “The Dimensions of African Cosmology,” *Filosofia Theoretica: Journal of African Philosophy, Culture and Religion* 2 (2013), 533-555, pp. 541-550

²⁴ Yusufu Turaki, “Africa Traditional Religious System as Basis of Understanding Christian Spiritual Warfare,” in *Lausanne Movement: Connecting Influencers and Ideas For Global Mission*. Accessed at <https://www.lausanne.org/content/west-african-case-study> (12/06/2020)

²⁵ See for instance, the destruction of false prophets in Deut 18:20-22; Ezk 13:9; 1 Kgs 18.

Testament could be comparable to the action of certain gods (deities that act with fire and thunder) in the African religious cosmology. As already mentioned, *Amadioha* (the son of *Chineke*), *Sango* (the Yoruba god of thunder and lightning) or *Oya* (the goddess of the River Niger) can visit offenders of justice, those accused of crimes or evil deeds with fire, thunder, and lightning.²⁶ *Sango* and *Amadioha* are gods of thunder, lightning, and fire to the *Yorubas* and *Igbos* respectively. Though these gods are no longer worshiped or celebrated, especially among Christians, their influence is still very deep in the African culture and mindset. A great many Nigerians will use expressions such as ‘thunder fire you’ or ‘may god strike you there’ or ‘God punish you’ when they are provoked. Although they may not mean such expressions, such use of words attests to the cosmo-ontological influence of African traditional belief on the realm of our thinking, actions, and Christian belief. Most Nigerians uphold Christianity as their household religion. However, their deep-seated traditional belief on the ontological relationship between human beings and their deities, ancestors and spirits still manifest itself in their Christian faith and tradition.

Apart from the influence of biblical words, expressions or concepts, Jews and African Christians share similar ontological perspective about the divine. The realities about the nature and workings of God in the New Testament are somewhat different from what we read concerning God in the Old Testament. Some of the manifestations of God in the Old Testament do not reflect what we have come to know about God in the New Testament, especially the supernatural destruction of God’s enemies or the enemies of Israel (c.f., the sending of thunder and hail upon the land of Egypt, Ex 9:23; the sending of fire and earthquake unto Korah and all that belongs to it, Num 16:31-35; the destruction of Philistines by thunder, 1Sa 7:10-12; etc.). What the Jews have portrayed about God is in line with our African Traditional belief of the actions of gods and deities; a God who can enter into combat with foreign deities, such as, the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal, 1 Kgs 18:16-40.

The above discussion can help explain why the scene of immediate destruction, judgement, and the uses of fire, thunder and lightning seems to inspire Nollywood writers in their projection of the confrontation between Christian preachers and ‘so called agents of devil’. More so, it helps explain why most

²⁶ Kanu, “The Dimensions of African Cosmology,” pp. 541-550

Christian Nollywood movies are a blend of biblical characters/passages with characters that image the African deities and gods/and speech. The movie, 'Son of the Most High God vs King of the Devil' by Mount Zion Movies is a typical representation of this mixture of two different religious traditions. First, we have the 'devil' personified as a human being, who in the movie is called 'King of the devil'. This character is surrounded by native servants of the chief priest who would chant in the praise of the 'King of the devil' traditional songs, '*alusi abiago*' meaning 'the oracle has come'. Even the song that was used in the movie was a Christian song, *olisa nuru olum, ewoo akwa ariri* (God hear my cry, my cry of sorrow).

The character that plays the 'King of the devil' was once a good chief priest by name *Aguiyi*, whose role was to protect his people. But he was later manipulated by an evil spirit that entered him as a snake and turned him to an agent of devil. At every utterance, he will look up to heaven. In the movie, every calamity, or indication of doom or evil deed is introduced with thunder and lightning sound. The 'King of the devil' spoke of his mission using biblical passages referencing 'to the fall of Satan, his existence from the beginning of creation, his desire to wipe out all of mankind and establish his kingdom among mankind, to take a human being as his queen, and together to rule with the women.'

Interestingly, Christian movie writers can easily orient their narratives around the physical presence of fearful deities and god vis á vis their battle with men/women of God because such religiosity thrives in our context. It reflects the society, but it is more a reflection of the worldviews of the *Igbo*'s and *Yoruba*'s, and more particularly, the thinking pattern of the *Igbos*. The use of powerful and destructive deities/spirits or the use of certain destructive natural phenomenon to depict evil is very much reduced in *Yoruba* movies. It is not a dominant part of their religious symbols or expressions. You find such religious expressions and religiosity among Eastern film makers. Whether what the film project is the real situation, is another question. We shall be coming to that later in the work.

Concerning the usage of the New Testament, we have remarked that New Testament does not speak or contain scenes of the battle of the gods, or battle of the believers with cosmic beings. The whole idea has developed, thanks to the Old Testament. But the connection being made to Christ is based on the

teachings and works of Christ during his mission on earth. The projection of casting out demons or supernatural beings in Nollywood movies are based on the theological conviction that God, in Christ, has given men/women of God the ministry and power of healing strange diseases and casting out demons (Mtt 10:1; Mk 3:15; 6:7; Lk 9:1; 10:19). It is on these words of Christ that men/women of God could enter physical combat to drive out devils.

Regardless of how the manifestation and use of Christ's power is scripted or screen shot in Nollywood movies, the ministry of healing or driving out evil spirits by men/women of God have been witnessed in our time. And this may form the grounds on which Nollywood writers can use movies to intrigue, convince and preach to their viewers about the supremacy of God over African spirits and deities. What is interesting, however, is that such manifestation of the power of God over evil forces and men is not common in our time. While many have attributed it to the prevailing belief systems, ideology and culture of the Nigerian society,²⁷ it is my view that such presentation or Nollywood story lines are exaggerated, thanks to the influence of Neo-Pentecostalism among Nigerian movie writers and actors/actresses and the impact of religious merchandize.

The effect of Nollywood projection of Africa, the Bible, and the Spirit on AfricansThe different figures, images and personalities used to depict the presence of evil and the spirit world exposes the complex nature of African Christianity that is closely related to the traditional faith belief than Christianity. The African world is a world of religion, deeply engrained in the worship of gods, spirits, ancestors and the likes. While Nollywood films have tried to explore the socio-religious life and the specific African religion of the people, the encounter with modernity, Christianity and African Traditional Religion within the movie world has resulted in a conflation of identity, theme, purpose and message.

In the selective use of the scripture in combination with African tradition to project the supremacy of God over fearful spiritual inhabitants of the African cosmology, movie writers have shown us that God acts in a turbulent manner. God is a dramatic God (like the God of the Old Testament) who can in a

²⁷ Asiegbu Bature-Uzor "Rituals in Nollywood Films," 227-242.

dramatic way destroy the evil one/evil thing, fight the enemy, and deliver the faithful. This dramatic display of God's fierce wrath against his enemies or certain African spirits is not a representation of how we have come to know God. On the contrary, it is a conflated knowledge of God that wraps itself up with our African religious imaginations.

This dramatic display of power has resulted in a direct and indirect influence on some of the spectacular fake displays of healing, deliverance or prophecy business found among so-called fake men/women of God. Some acclaimed men/women of God have been reported of using spiritual powers or forces in their involvement in their church's ministry.²⁸ Others have been accused of being members of occultic society, witchcraft and sorcery, and using the medium to manipulate and bewitch their members in order to exploit them. To a large extent, the presentation of deliverance or miracle stories in Nollywood movies, while showcasing the prevalence of the existence of spiritual forces in the African traditional life and culture, has given room for the exploitation of ideologies about African spirits and deities to make money which in the end has psychological, emotional, and religious impact on people.

Another point is the stereotyped understanding of the 'Holy Spirit' as a consuming and a burning spirit. In the Old Testament, pillar of cloud, fire, ark, Temple, and the *Shekinah* were manifestations of divine presence (Ex 3:3-4; 14:19; Num 9:15-16). The manifestation of God in the form of fire served the role of 'removal' and 'purification' as in the fire on the altar of burnt offering (Lev 9:24). In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is associated with the role of teaching, guide, helper, and as the manifestation of the indwelling presence of God (John 14-16; 14:26; Rom 8:9). These attributes of God and the Holy Spirit do not speak of destruction as Holy Spirit is invoked in some context today. As already pointed above, it is possibly with reference to the understanding of the Spirit-Fire in the Old Testament that Christian movies present deliverance sessions as destruction of either the evil thing or evil one. Nevertheless, the Holy spirit is not a destructive agent, but transformative and purifying for the good of God's children.

²⁸ Olamide Oni, "Popular pastors use demonic powers on church members" <https://www.pulse.ng/communities/religion/tb-joshua-oyakhilome-popular-pastors-use-demonic-powers-on-church-members-bishop/k2ddhm5>, 02/12/2016 (Accessed, 19/06/2020).

In addition, some of the Christian movies are badly acted that ‘the world of make belief’ projected is entirely disconnected from the reality and most viewers have find it difficult to separate reality from acting. The whole idea of make belief has virtually overtaken our society, from fake pastors who give false teachings, fake miracles and to fake prophecy. Often, we see real scenarios where a self-acclaimed man/woman of God goes into deliverance session with a mad man/woman on the road. Such scenarios have often ended in fight and mission unaccomplished. Institutions like family and marriage have been destroyed because a man/woman of God have given husbands/wives/families false prophecy. Persons have been inflicted with incurable sickness or death because man/woman of God gave the victim a false testimony. You go to school and ask children to pray for their parents, and they will begin praying and shouting, ‘Holy Ghost fire,’ ‘Holy Ghost fire,’ ‘fire,’ ‘fire’ ‘fire,’ ‘no enemy will touch my parents, and so forth. Persons can be contacted by men/women of God to agree to act healing or deliverance miracles.²⁹

Truthfully, Nollywood movies have tried in their effort to educate the masses. Nollywood movies have also tried to capture the African traditional religion, but such effort is an invention of Nollywood’s imagination that works more for entertainment than education. There is need to readdress the true purpose of Nollywood as Nigerian’s greatest means of showcasing the social, cultural, religious, and political situation of our time. There is also needed to push our religious identity rightly, especially in the projection of African traditional belief system and in the projection of what Christianity stands for. There are many aspects of the African religion and tradition that are played down in movies, such as, encouraging community spirit and co-operation, rather than the overwhelming focus on rituals, occultism, sorcery and money making.

One should also note that the whole idea of making movies that involve rituals for money is not part of the African Traditional Religion. This is a manipulation of the African traditional religion in light of contemporary perception of reality. The African gods/spirits were known to solve real life problems for their adherents or followers and punish offenders of justice and law. But the existing

²⁹ “Oditia Sunday, “End of road for woman used by ‘pastors’ to perform fake miracles”
<https://guardian.ng/news/end-of-road-for-woman-used-by-pastors-to-perform-fake-miracles/>, 07
March 2020, (Accessed 18/06/2020).

problems of our time have forced people to solicit the gods/spirits to favour them with wealth. A content analysis of some of the stories about soliciting wealth from the gods have shown that such stories are unfounded.

There is need for a more critical use of the Bible and a better comprehension of African religion in Nollywood scripts not only for the importance of situating the Scriptural/African tradition in their proper setting, but also for the continuing influence of Nollywood movies on the mindset of Africans.

Conclusion

This article began with a presentation of the different ways the Scripture is used in popular African Christianity. Texts and passages from scripture can be used from (a) the Prophetic and Psalmist approach, (b) the Performative or Declarative approach, (c) the Cut and Paste approach (d) the Talisman/Syncretic approach, and (e) the Consumerist approach. A remarkable use of these approaches is found in Nollywood movies. In fact, Nollywood movies have promoted African culture and religion and brought Nigeria to the limelight of international society. Nevertheless, in the effort to project the supremacy of God, the Christian message and the power of the Bible, Christian movie writers are caught up in a syncretism of religion and belief. Viewed from this point, the study went further to analyse the Talisman/Syncretic approach considering the projection of African spirits and cosmology in Nollywood stories.

It is noted, on the one hand, that Nollywood has interpreted, but also have misinterpreted and misrepresented the rich cosmological ideas of an African world dominated by supernatural beings, alongside the potent power of these spirits and their influence on human activities. It has also brought to the limelight the closeness of African belief system and the Jewish understanding of God. However, in the projection of the power dynamics of God and the African deities and spirits, they have failed to draw the line between reality and magic world, between what Christianity preaches and what the African belief system encompasses, and they have had damaging effect on the socio-cultural mindset and religious belief of the people.

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