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## Religion in Nigerian Home Video Films

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### Abstract

The relationship between religion and art, as forms of cultural expression, is an inextricable one. Both are concerned with the fundamental human search for the good, the true and the beautiful. The religious sense of a people is inscribed in their artistic productions. Both art and religion are universal and fundamental human values and they use similar forms of expression. In order for a work of art to have a popular appeal, artists articulate stories that activate and awake the religious perception in audiences. Religion, in a broad sense, is prevalent in Nigerian home video films. The focus of this paper is to examine the religious questions that these films address, and whether these representations facilitate audiences in their search. The paper also explains what accounts for the popularity of these films.

### Introduction

This paper explores the place of religion in Nigerian home video films. Religion here is understood in the broad sense as a concept covering all religions and forms of religious experiences. Ultimately, religion is understood as the human search for the transcendental infinitude. The religious sense which explains the 'rationality and the roots of human conscience' (Guissani 1997, xiii) is present in every individual and every culture; and art is one of the cultural forms that expresses this search. In the words of Michael Bird,

art can locate, emphasize, and intensify those strivings in culture for the transcendent that occur at the boundary of finitude. In this way, the theological function of art is that of bringing before the viewer a picture of culture's own striving for the infinite (Bird 1998, 4).

Thus, an exploration of the religious sense involves a study of the culture of the people; of the experiences of the individuals as they strive to live meaningfully to

understand the ultimate meaning of life, to face up to their own finitude as human beings, and to continually desire and search for the infinite. The same idea is expressed by Leo Tolstoy when he says that the religious perception does not pertain to any single religion; rather it is the religious sense that appeals to and unites all human beings. In all religions, the religious perception concerns itself with whatever stands as obstacles to the unity of humankind. The object of good art, in this regard, is to cause the unity of people, to draw them together by the commonality of the feelings shared (Tolstoy 1991, 412). Such feelings are eternal and universal: they cannot be outlived by culture.

Nigerian films belong to the category of popular culture. What is characteristic of popular cultural productions is the fact that

...they express the experiences and struggles of local creators and speak to local audiences. Contemporary arts of Africa reveal the real Africa because they are mostly produced outside the scrutiny of the policies on culture and the fine arts imposed by African governments. Because popular arts are created outside the watchful eye of the law, they often incorporate elements of subversive narrative, and do so in a playful manner (Okome 2001).

Nigerian popular films are, thus, the people's art: the unofficial medium open to all those who have stories to tell about the ordinary and daily events of their lives but cannot afford to do so through celluloid format. They have all the freedom to experiment with various styles and themes. The fact that this film developed from the popular travelling theatre and the Yoruba drama groups in the 1970s marks it out as a genre that developed to meet the particular needs of the ordinary people who, pressed by the difficult economic and political situations at the time, could not afford to go to a movie theatre. These were years of political insecurity and economic depression in Nigeria, during which, lack of security made it difficult to go out to the movies. Although set in a particular cultural context, and meant to cater for domestic needs, Nigerian films have become a popular diet in the video studios and living rooms of many African town dwellers and beyond. It has traversed its national borders to become a booming money-making business in many African towns. In this genre art and business are intertwined and the audiences are harnessed by the hybrid combination of what is culturally indigenous or subversive; or the classically sensational Hollywoodian and Bollywoodian traits, making this cinema curve its unique Nollywoodian identity (Adebanwi 2004). With the popularity of such genres as the Nigerian home video films, it is no longer appropriate to denigrate the popular as simply escapist and unserious art. The escapist in such popular forms has specific social functions to play. John Fiske argues that,

...escapism or fantasy necessarily involve both an escape from or evasion of something and an escape to a preferred alternative: dismissing escapism as “mere fantasy” avoids the vital question of what is escaped from, why escape is necessary, and what is escaped to (Fiske 1997, 317).

This popular form gives the ordinary people the occasion and the pleasure to create a symbolic world of their own in which they are temporarily and symbolically in control of the situation.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The objective of this paper is to examine the thematic and formal characteristics of this genre in order to explain what it is that makes it popular especially with African audiences. The paper draws from ethical theorists like Matthew Arnold and Leo Tolstoy who believe that art has a religious function to play in society; and that its popularity depends on its ‘infectiousness’ and ability to draw audiences to experience the religious perception that unites all humankind.

In Tolstoy’s view, what makes a work of art appealing is both the familiarity of the subject matter and easy comprehensibility. It is this that communicates the religious sense. Art that is capable of evoking the religious sense is that which draws people together, regardless of class, gender, age and level of education, into an experience of universal brotherhood. The religious sense in a work of art points to the beyond: the characters transcend their own limitations as their search leads them to address religious questions such as love, forgiveness reconciliation, etc. The purpose of art, for him, is the promotion of universal brotherhood. The common feeling that runs through all art is what Tolstoy calls the religious perception which, in his view, is present in every society. It is this perception that directs the society. In other words, this is the conscience that gives direction to the society: the moral soundness of a society depends on the presence of the religious perception expressed through the various artistic forms of a given community. The religious perception is the mirror of the society; it makes the society see where it stands in the light of its highest values. He articulates,

In every period of history and in every human society there exist an understanding of the meaning of life, which represents the highest level to which men of that society have attained – an understanding indicating the highest good at which that society aims. This understanding is the religious perception of the given time and society. And this religious perception is always clearly expressed by a few advanced men and more or less vividly perceived by members of the society generally (Tolstoy 1991, 407).

Artists and storytellers are among the few advanced people in the society who express the religious perception of a given society in their works.

The question of the moral function of art and its effects on the audience has been addressed by Plato's classical statements in *The Republic*. This issue of the proper function of art continues to be relevant today. Plato made his dictates on art on the basis that in the Greece of his time, art played a synonymous function with religion: that is, to morally guide and educate especially the young. Later moral critics like Tolstoy and Arnold have drawn from Plato's *magna carta*.

Indeed, there is a natural affinity between art and religion, as both are instruments of the great question, 'Where is humanity moving?' In the words of Arnold, art is a 'criticism of life', an interpretation and evaluation of the meaning of human existence – a substitute for what religion can no longer do (Arnold 1991, 357). This, perhaps, explains why cinemas and theatres hall are filled especially in countries where fewer and fewer people go to church. In these halls, audiences are involved in the ultimate search for God in various ways. Indeed for Arnold, 'More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry' (Ibid, 358-59). Both art and religion are intrinsic aspects of a people's cultural expression. Be it in the form of music, painting, architecture, literature or films, art is the ultimate expression of a people's culture. The interface between art and religion is, therefore inevitable as both deal with universal and fundamental human values. Above all, both use the same medium of expression such as symbols, images and story. This marriage between religion and art is expressed by John May when commenting on the many stories Jesus narrated in the bible. He argues, 'Stories themselves can be bearers of religious meaning, even if they affect us only indirectly, figuratively, imaginatively. Indeed, they possess the kind of ambiguity that we have come to associate with art' (May 2002, 17).

The religious is, among other things, expressed through symbol which is a major vehicle of artistic expression; and the power of a symbol lies in its ability to point to the beyond. The intricate relationship between religion and art is expressed by poet philosophers like George Santayana for whom art and religion are identical in origin, and therefore, religion is efficacious only when it becomes art; and art that is worth the name is that which performs a religious function. He says, 'Poetry loses its frivolity and ceases to demoralise, while religion surrenders its illusions and ceases to deceive (Santayana 1900, 172). Both, in his view, are celebrations of life that cannot be substituted by science because they are born of human consciousness as a result of the interaction between the psyche and the physical environment (Santayana Answers).

Evidently, there is a lot of religion in Nigerian films. This paper examines whether these films are concerned with the fundamental questions of the human search; whether their form and content facilitate the audience in their ultimate search for

the good, the true and the beautiful: God; whether the narrative styles and thematic concerns of the films open the audience to an experience of conversion, inner/spiritual growth, hope for the better, or search for the transcendental values in a convincing manner. Selected Nigerian films have been analysed for the religious sense following the above principles. The general view of this paper is that Nigerian films, typical of African popular narratives, take a didactic posture. They are narratives of education in traditional human values, and they come up with clear moral lessons at the end. Some of the obvious religious questions encountered in these narratives are witchcraft, Christianity and religious hypocrisy; issues of social justice such as political corruption and the plight of the disadvantaged in the community; the ideals of love pitted against manipulation and jealousy, forgiveness and revenge.

Studying a people's narrative can be a window onto understanding their philosophy and culture. The exploration of the place of the religious perception in Nigerian home video is, therefore, an attempt to understand the culture and values of this community. Being by nature expansive, narratives are effective media to explore the search motif in which human beings are involved. This search is ultimately religious in nature.

### **Thematic and Formal Characteristics**

The major themes in Nigerian home video films centre on pertinent social issues, ranging from domestic to political, in which the lives of the emerging 'middle class' members of society are intertwined. The motivations of the filmmakers are socio-realist problems dramatised in a Manichean style where the good and the evil; the beautiful and the ugly, the true and the false are polarised with the intention to educate and entertain. Although there is a high degree of entertainment in these films, pleasure is never for its own sake; the moral lessons that are offered at the end of the narratives are always evident. The one who looks for entertainment in these films gets just as much as the one who looks for moral lessons. The films often end with a closure: almost always, the good characters are rewarded while the bad, irredeemable ones are punished. It is this clear characterisation driven by the desire to tell a story which can be followed without taxing the audience, that is partly responsible for the popularity of Nigerian cinema. The appeal, on account of comprehensibility, cuts across social classes; though the question of aesthetics and taste may vary. The fictive situations created, though based on reality, traverse the real and take the audience to the melodramatic and the supernatural. This appears to be consistent with the African religious perception where the link between the living and the dead, the natural and the supernatural are not totally disconnected.

To borrow a leaf from Victor Turner's theory of liminality, these films are like *liminoid phenomena* through which the artist creates an experience in which

individuals who may be on the margin of the society have the freedom to explore the fictive world; to say and do what they would not otherwise say or do in real life; to desire for and propose a change that may not be congruent with the reality on the ground (Turner 1982, 54). Art, in this case, while it entertains, has the liberty to be subversive, to reflect what is, and propose what should be in a very gross and exaggerated manner so that the audiences can recognise the situation and identify what is operant in their society (Ibid, 40-1). In this respect, such popular art forms may offer oppositional pleasure for those peripheral to the official or mainstream culture. In the words of Fiske, popular culture 'is an accumulation of meanings and pleasures that serve the interests of the subordinate and powerless, or rather the disempowered, for few social groups are utterly without power (Fiske 1997, 18). Indeed, the emergence of this genre, with its characteristic features is a statement on the part of this social group to assert themselves and to control meaning through their creativity. Though only symbolic, this can be a liberating experience. That the films, almost always, end well for the good (who are mostly at the lower end of the social ladder) and bad for the evil (who are often in the dominant social group) is a source of pleasure for the less powerful members of society; and it acts like a religious sermon calling society to conversion before returning to the real world of social structures and classes where situations are far different. It is indeed a ritual celebration of control of meaning; for 'culture is a struggle for meaning as society is a struggle for power (Ibid, 20). The actors in these films are often involved in various forms of search and they end up facing up to some of the fundamental questions of life. Some of the films are overtly religious in title while others are not.

### **Overtly Religious Films**

Afam Okereke's *Sister Mary* (2003) and Chimdi Chiamara's *The Catechist* (2003) are examples of films that address overtly religious issues. *Sister Mary* is the story of a nun who is destined by God to be a source of blessings for her community. She is indeed the 'rejected stone' of her physical mother who abandons her as a baby to a strange woman she meets on her 'escape' from the child. This woman happens to be childless though she and her husband have tried everything possible to have children. When the woman realises that the mother of the baby has tricked her, she decides to keep and raise the child as her own. However, desperate for a child as he may be, her husband does not want to raise the child of an unknown parentage. He throws his wife and the baby out of the house. The wife, a prayerful woman, is determined to keep the child after receiving reassurance from God that the child will be a source of blessings. Reason and advice from friends finally win her husband over to repent his temper. He admits the wife back to the house. The first miracle happens when shortly after, the woman announces her pregnancy.

Sister Mary grows with an unflinching determination to be a nun: no amount of persuasion from her parents to do otherwise can change her mind. As a nun, she becomes a model for the community. Her prayer life draws many to her, many get physically healed by the power of her prayers, many are converted by the fervour of her teaching and consequently, her table is always full of gifts from grateful people. Sister Mary is pitted against Sister Ijeoma, her roommate, who is filled with jealousy and envy of her. Mary who is aware of her roommate's hatred does everything possible to draw close to Ijeoma and repay her ill-feeling with love. However, the situation does not improve. Ijeoma only pretends and conceals her real feelings. One evening, Mary and Ijeoma take a walk into the woods and walk right into a trap set by the village boys who have been annoyed by Sister Mary's moral teachings that have made the boys' girlfriends refuse their demands for premarital sex. What starts as a mere threat ends in the boys' accidentally killing Sister Mary! Shocked by this turn of event, they stealthily bury her and swear not to reveal the secret to anyone. Sister Ijeoma who escapes from the boys also pretends not to know anything about Sister Mary's disappearance.

In the meantime, the five boys, one by one, begin to suffer from strange sicknesses; but they do not confess. The fifth boy is Ekene whose mother had been raised from the dead by Sister Mary's prayers. Ekene's conscience disturbs him until he reveals the truth to the priest. When he takes the priest to the spot where Sister Mary had been buried, they do not find a grave but a spring instead! Following this discovery, Sister Mary appears in a dream to her parents and to the priest, giving instructions for the boys who had killed her to be taken to the spring so that they may be healed of their mysterious illnesses: a result of their tortured consciences. The boys are all healed. The spot becomes a place of pilgrimage and healing. On the other hand, Sister Ijeoma who does not repent until she is discovered, is dismissed as unworthy to be a close follower of Jesus.

This film activates a number of issues. One of them is the need for religious models in society. Sister Mary's life can be summarised by the word 'love'. She spent her life doing good works. Even in death she continues to be a source of blessings. The idealism with which she is portrayed represents the desires of the community and its expectations of religious persons. Implicitly it demonstrates the scarcity of such models in society. In direct allusion to John 4:10-14. Sister Mary becomes a living spring from which the community continues to draw.

In a cultural context where conflicts, revenge and moral decadence are rife, the film offers a *liminoid* space that expresses the desires and aspirations of the community. The narrative takes us from the concrete to the symbolic, parabolic and metaphysical dimensions of life. The audience is challenged to think of the transcendental values of love, forgiveness and reconciliation. These are virtues that unite and appeal to all human beings. In this film, we realise the value of art as a time of leisure in which artists, actors and audiences enjoy a special licence and

some degree of freedom from the obligations of the structured society to which they belong. In this realm they are free to let-go and 'to dream, to play, to enter into a surreal world of the imagination, to transcend social limits... Leisure is potentially capable of releasing creative powers, individual or communal, either to criticise or buttress the dominant structural values' (Turner 1982, 36-7). This is what the artist has invited audiences to do: to enter into this *liminoid* world to experience what may not be readily available in the real world. In situations where the reality may be harsh to deal with, audiences may be happy to momentarily escape (Fiske 1997, 37). This, indeed, is not different from the manner and reason for which some people resort to religion: to be saved in order to have a new perspective on the challenges of society.

*The Catechist*, on the other hand, presents the other side of the story of professed models who do not live up to the expectations of the community. This film presents an ironic twist between appearances and reality: religious hypocrisy. Unlike Sister Mary, the eponymous catechist abuses the trust of the community when he tries to 'poach' on the vulnerable widow in the neighbourhood, using as bait what faithful Christians bring as offertory. The Widow, however, stands her ground against the shocking advances of the catechist who uses his position to his advantage and whose lifestyle does not tally with what he preaches. The catechist judges his elder son unfairly for making no pretensions about his interest in girls and the other pleasures of this world. All the praises of the family are heaped onto the youngest son, a seminarian, who already cuts an impressive figure whenever he comes for holidays, always clad in a white cassock. As for his daughter, Ugomna, the catechist takes it for granted that being a catechist's daughter is enough to make her morally upright. He trusts her to be in the company of Ike, the 'good' son of the widow next door.

The youngsters who watch the catechist's secret deals learn from him: all they care for is to appear good in order to get the approval of elders. The caution of his elder son about the suspicious relationship between Ugomna and Ike does not make any impression on the catechist, until one day Ugomna declares herself pregnant. The catechist, of course, cannot take the shame. He proposes abortion. Ike, however, does not want to hear of this for he is ready to take responsibility for the child and the mother even if he is still dependent on his own mother. The catechist forces her daughter to carry out the abortion all the same. When Ike gets to know this, he blows the whistle on the catechist's behaviour which leads to his being defrocked and sacked. The consequences of his moral irresponsibility are far-reaching. His son is dismissed from the seminary. Bitterly disappointed in his father, the young boy descends into the irresponsible habit of drinking alcohol. He no longer trusts the adult world. Meanwhile, his elder son who has been dubbed the black sheep of the family is proved right for all his cautions and warnings that went unheeded.



The film is a lesson on living by example both as parents and as community leaders. To be a leader takes discipline and commitment, and the irresponsibility of parents and community leaders cost untold sufferings to their children. This film touches on a recurring theme in the representation of religious models: their failure to live up to what they represent; and the double standards they are constrained to live because of society's expectation of them and their anxiety to appear what society expects. The catechist would rather multiply his sins than let his weaknesses show in the open. The challenge for him was to own his humanity and therefore his weakness, for perfection is not expected of a human being.

In the film, the elder son of the catechist is more acceptable to the audience because he owns his weaknesses and does not claim to be what he is not. Society is more open to accept and forgive one who accepts his weaknesses than one who pretends he does not have any. The challenge for religious models in this film is to come down from the moral pedestal on which society has placed them and the expectation made of them to be perfect. They need to own that they are part of society and they also suffer the same *sicknesses* therein, even as they guide and direct it. They are, indeed, the wounded healers who bind and heal the societal wounds they themselves suffer from. This paradox is the mainstay of religious leaders and it is vital that they acknowledge it, so that when they fall, it will not be a scandal too difficult to confess or forgive. That the catechist's son is dismissed from the seminary on account of his father's sins is unfair. Such stringent measures on religious models are partly responsible for making them anxiously hypocritical. Artists 'probe a community's weaknesses, call its leaders to account, desecralize its most cherished values and beliefs, portray its characteristic conflicts and suggests remedies for them, and generally take stock of its current situation in the known 'world' (Turner 1982, 11). The very solutions artists provide through their stories may serve as invitations to further questions and search.

### **Films on Social Issues**

Social questions are essentially religious issues. Films like Andy Amenechi's *A Cry for Help I, II, III* (2001) and Ndubuisi Okob's *Buried Alive* (2003) have strong religious allusions and call audiences to review the universal, traditional and religious values of caring for the widow and the orphan. *A Cry for Help* tells the story of an orphan, Blessing, whose parents die in a car accident. This incident marks the beginning of a series of painful trials for her until she is finally vindicated by God. Blessing, like her name, is a young woman who offends nobody, though all those who take her in try to take advantage of her. She, however, sticks to her principles: she would rather walk the streets than compromise her virtues. One false accusation after another are framed against her for refusing to 'cooperate'.

One day, she gets picked up by a pastor, who on acknowledging her spiritual gifts, makes her a member of the church council. Even here she is not spared: soon, her goodness and giftedness evoke the jealousy and envy of some pastors who plot to destroy her. Accused falsely once again, she is dismissed in disgrace. Even the marriage she attempts with a businessman does not work. She is, indeed, an unfortunate orphan, plagued by one misery after another. She, however, never ceases praying and crying to God for help. She also prays for the cure of the only son of the woman who had falsely accused and thrown her out of her house; and for the son of the man who lied to have her expelled from the church council. Her positive attitude leads to reconciliation between her and those who have done her ill; and this leads to their own conversion.

Still there is no end to her tribulations. She is on the brink of committing suicide when her fortunes change. The man who had falsely accused her confesses to the pastor in charge and the latter seeks Blessing out to reinstate her onto the council. A revelation in prayer shows to the pastor that Blessing's aunt is the root cause of all her sufferings. The aunt who has a grudge against the parents of Blessing had used witchcraft to cause their deaths and to bind Blessing to a life of suffering. With the help of the pastor, the aunt's powers are destroyed together with herself. In the final showdown between the power of witchcraft and Jesus Christ, Blessing's dear uncle becomes the sacrifice that opens the door and a new chapter of happiness for her.

*Buried Alive* also hinges on social justice: the responsibility of the rich towards the poor and society's responsibility towards its vulnerable members. This is a traditional value that cuts across religions and cultures. The film tells the story of Anyumba, a rich man, who 'helps' his community by lending money at very high interest rates. Although he is not popular, it is inevitable for the hard-pressed members to borrow money from him. Indeed he has no friends: his own wife colludes with her brother to steal his money before 'anything happens to him.' The only form of relationship he has with the community is over money. One day, one of his debtors gives him a poisoned *kola* nut, and he dies. In the mysterious world of the dead, he meets his dead father who commissions him back to earth because his time has not yet come.

Meanwhile on earth, relatives and friends are busy making the funeral arrangements for the rich man. Influenced by the brother-in-law, they agree to buy the rich man the cheapest coffin on the market. They are ready to hustle him away into the coffin when the rich man resurrects. He is shocked to see the ignobility he has been treated with in death. This makes him become even more relentless with his debtors: his heart becomes stony and the cry of the widow cannot move him. He is summoned before the king to relent, especially toward the widows, but to no avail. One day, after confiscating a helpless widow's land and property he is

blighted by blindness and vanishes from the earth. The ghost of the father appears to him to teach him a lesson in kindness and forgiveness. When he returns to earth, he is a transformed man. He begins to talk the language of love and forgiveness, he returns the land and property of the widows, he allows the debtors to pay at their convenience, and he forgives those who treated him meanly when he 'died'. Harmony is restored and more meaningful relationship between him and the community begins. It is only his wife and brother-in-law who continue to relate with Anyumba in terms of money and not human values, who are punished in the end.

The film has a strong allusion to the parable of the unforgiving debtor (Matthew 18: 23-35). It presents the moral that the responsibility of the wealthy is to serve the community; and wealth should not let one lose sight of the important human values of compassion and empathy. This is purely a moral fable in which the rich man moves between the world of the living and the dead to learn the basic lesson of kindness to the poor: harmony was established only after the ground was levelled in the relationship between the poor and the rich. In a well known social story as the above, the familiar and the unfamiliar, the sacred and the mundane, the natural and the supernatural are all combined to de-familiarise the known and represent a fictional reality that is perceived as new (Turner 1982, 27). The mythic representation of the restoration of order and peace is typical of moral fables that represent traditional and archetypal values.

Films that represent similar issues of the need to merge the social gap between the rich and the poor, and of the triumph of Christianity over witchcraft, include Ndubuisi Okoh's *Cassandra* (2000); woven around a love story. Cassandra, a girl from a rich family, falls in love with a poor boy, John. This pure relationship that overcomes all odds posed by the rich family is finally headed for marriage when Jennifer, a colleague of Cassandra from the university interferes with the use of witchcraft to get John and to blight Cassandra with a mysterious, medically incurable illness. Emotionally Cassandra is also eaten up by disappointment and the feeling of betrayal by John for whom she has sacrificed so much. Jennifer, on her part, wants John only for material reasons. She takes away his credit card and throws him out of the house soon after contracting a marriage with him. The ultimate triumph for her, in accordance with the witchdoctor's orders, would be the death of John.

As John walks the street one evening, in a kind of trance induced by witchcraft, he is knocked down by a car driven by a pastor. John is hospitalised and finally recovers. Paradoxically, Jennifer's machinations and manipulations bring John closer to conversion than to death. Once under the pastor's guidance and prayers, John recovers both physically and spiritually; Cassandra also begins to recover from her mysterious illness. On the other hand, Jennifer becomes increasingly ill as

the two recover. Reconciliation between Cassandra's family and John is the physical manifestation of the healing that has taken place within the parties. The film idyllically ends with the death of Jennifer and the miraculous healing of Cassandra, reconciliation, and finally marriage between Cassandra and John. Here, Christianity is presented as the panacea to all the social problems experienced in the narrative; and evil, personified by Jennifer, is completely destroyed.

Andy Amenechi's *St. Michael* (2004) also represents a similar social drama. Michael, a young man, has an affair with a village *belle*, Helen, to whom he promises marriage. He leaves Helen pregnant when he goes to the city to look for better opportunities of employment. In the city, he begins to live a lie when he meets Edith, the daughter of a very rich manager of a firm, who falls in love with him. The rich man is not impressed by Michael's humble background and modest job as a publisher. He upgrades Michael as his future son-in-law to become one of the managers of his many businesses. Michael literally sells himself for material gain: he is surrounded by wealth and opulence at the expense of cutting off relationships with the village folks, including his own family. When Helen, who now has a baby, hears the rumours of Michael's wedding with the city woman, she becomes insane and inconsolable. She poses a roadblock to their marriage, and refuses to settle for anything less than her own marriage to Michael. Michael is trapped in this situation and does not know what to do. Edith who is impatient with Michael for failing to solve the problem takes the issue into her own hands. Armed with a pistol, she attempts to kill Helen and to kidnap her baby. The law, however, catches up with her and she is arrested and imprisoned. This acts as liberation for the indecisive Michael who now chooses to be in compassion with Helen who is recovering in the hospital. This is also the moment of reconciliation between the two and for Michael to renew his promises of marriage to Helen. After a great deal of suffering, the end is rewarding for both. The emphasis in the narrative closure is on faithfulness and love rather than social status and convenience.

### **Recurring Features and Popular Appeal of Nigerian Films**

From the foregoing discussions, there are identifiable structural and thematic features of the Nigerian home video films; and there are various possible reasons its popular appeal. The most evident among them are discussed in the following section.

The films have strong melodramatic tendencies characterised by sensationalism and strong emotional appeal: at times men weep just as much as women. Since emotions are at the base of human experience, the films' ability to appeal to them is a point of entry that draws a cross section of audiences. The protagonists are often represented as having 'tremendous social pressures, threats ... or difficulties with community, work, lovers or family. The melodramatic format allows the

characters to work through their difficulties or surmount the problems with resolute endurance, sacrificial act and steadfast bravery (Himmelstein n/a).

Characters who stick to virtue often go through plenty of suffering but in the end, they are rewarded; they finally get what they have sacrificed so much for. The characters are often stock, representing good and evil and demonstrating the triumph of virtue over villainy. An example of this is seen in Kenneth Egbuna's *Together as One* (2003), in which Prisca remains steadfast in her love and faithfulness to Jack. She is neither corrupted by the lax university morality nor by her dire need for material assistance even when Chief is more than ready to give her whatever she wants if she compromises her virtue. The same principle is eloquently illustrated in *A Cry for Help*, in which Blessing's tears and songs reverberate throughout the three parts of the film. The main protagonists in both films are young and beautiful women who stand out as different from their peers by virtue of their moral uprightness and religious convictions. These films stand to reinforce traditional virtues for women in a social setting where moral decadence is rampant and where traditional values are being challenged. In its emphasis on conservative values, the melodramatic form plays a similar role to religion in promoting virtue. These films indeed have a lot in common with the so called Women's Films or *Weepies* which gave women occasion to lament and self-pity before the narrative closure returned them to live the status quo (Haskell 1999, 21).

This same pattern is extended in representing Christianity as always triumphant over witchcraft; and those who never lose faith in the face of challenges are rewarded in the end. This theme is captured in films like Willie Adah's *Eating with the Devil* (2002), Ckika Onu's *Gone Forever*, (2001), and Ruke Amata's *Love and Lust* (2002), all of which tell stories of happy couples whose marriages are wrecked or challenged by those close to them on the account of the wives' failure to have children. Once more in these films, it is the women who are called to great sacrifice and endurance. The couples experience pressure from friends to be practical, realistic and yield to witchcraft as the easy way out of their predicament. The good wives stick to their matrimonial vows in spite of their husbands' unfaithfulness or their close relative's betrayal. In *Gone Forever*, Anne, due to her feeling of obligation to reproduce children for her husband finds him a second wife. This attempt at practical solution plunges the family into unhappiness and further conflict. The final solution for the declared barren women is their total turning to God after failing in all other means. These women are finally delivered when they become mothers; and their self-worth in the society is restored. The Christian values of faith in the power of prayer, accepting Jesus as Lord and Saviour, confessing one's sins are presented as vindicated. The 'miracle' experienced at the end stands against the machinations of witchdoctors, false prophets, and even the scientific findings of medical doctors.

On the other hand, characters who are mean, exploitative, manipulative, uncharitable, corrupt, and who engage in witchcraft are always punished or destroyed in the end. The guilty are often punished by death; the innocent children born of such marriages may also die; those misled experience conversion and finally accept Christianity. The ideal matrimonial love between man and woman is realised in monogamy: harmony in all the three films mentioned above is restored when a monogamous relationship is re-established. Though the values transmitted are mostly traditional and conservative, the values of Christianity are at times represented as challenging tradition. For instance, the husband in *Gone Forever* is prepared to stay with his childless marriage. He accepted taking a second wife only on his wife's insistence – a decision that thoroughly rocks the relative family harmony. What remains rather stable and traditional is the position of the woman in such relationships. Often, she is the one blamed for childlessness and therefore suffers the social stigma; her patience and endurance are tried as she watches her husband drift away; yet she must have the strength and courage to remain in the marriage contract as she hopes and prays for divine intervention. In such conservative and melodramatic representations, the status quo is not at all disturbed, and therefore, hegemonic power is not bothered: the films, after all, promote cohesion.

The practice of witchcraft, sorcery or the occult is a thriving business people live with in the town settings of the films. African Christian converts have never made a clear-cut disconnection with their traditional cultural heritage. Even among the educated elite, the boundary between traditional religious practices and Christianity is rather fluid, characterised by crossovers according to convenience and expediency. Consulting diviners and witchdoctors to solve practical social problems is still the norm. Thus, presenting the triumph of Christianity over witchcraft is intended to elicit specific responses from the audience.

In the traditional worldview of Africans and of Nigerians in particular, every calamity, sickness or misfortune is explained by some schemes of an enemy or a bad person. There is hardly any room for people to accept natural death. Thus, regardless of one's social status, the sense of insecurity looms large. The temptation to recourse to witchcraft and to 'fortify' oneself to undo the enemy before one is undone, is great. A lot of resources go into countering the malevolence directed against one, by the enemy. Everyday news related to witchcraft emerges in all the 36 states of Nigeria (CD 1998).

The contest in these films is, therefore, between the traditional forms of security: witchcraft and the new form represented by Christianity. Christianity, posited as an alternative force, is represented as a social panacea. Just as witchcraft is expected and claims to yield instantaneous results, so is the expectation made of Christianity. Accordingly, good characters who come to the end of the road in solving social

problems turn to Christianity for salvation and transformation. This pattern is congruent with what happens in real life in many African towns. The thriving story of Pentecostal Churches confirms this. These churches are miracle-oriented and converts expect quick solutions to their, often, social problems. Thus, most of the preachers and prophets concentrate on healing, and at times healing the very consequences of witchcraft. Theatre, art and spiritual experience are all combined in the rituals.

The Pentecostal version of Christianity shares some commonality with popular culture and African traditional religion. They are unconventional, people-oriented and problem-solving. As a church it has an empowering theology based on the experience of the Holy Spirit leading to conversion at individual level. The Word, the Bible, is the focus: it is the Holy Spirit working in the individual that guides the interpretation. This emphasis creates room, especially, for the weaker and peripheral members of society like women who, through personal experience of the Holy Spirit, can express themselves. More importantly, this form of Christianity is unmediated by a central authoritarian leadership or interpretation. This creates space for the celebration of individual charisma harnessed across race, class and gender. The popularity of Pentecostal Churches in Africa, especially in Nigeria, is noteworthy. Statistics show that Africa has the largest percentage of Pentecostal Churches in the world, with Nigeria as the leading country in Africa. This popularity can also be explained by the fact that this church offers forum for expressions which are compatible with traditional religious experience such as spirit possession, ancestral veneration and healing. In the view of the theologian Harvey Cox, Pentecostalism is the fastest spreading movement on the continent largely as a result of the compatibility of traditional indigenous religions and the doctrine of the movement. The manifestations of spirit possession under Pentecostalism and traditional African religion have a lot in common. In the same respect, the utilitarian concept of religion as manifested in physical healing is also similar (Cox 1996, 246). This very brand of Christianity shares something in common with the Nigerian home video films which is an expression of the people that cannot be control by the official aesthetic parameters.

Furthermore, the narratives in these films are mostly myths rather than parables. Myth in this respect is understood in John Dominic Crossan's sense as that which establishes the world, creates stability and reconciliation in the narrative structure, while parable subverts the structural order and harmony and reveals the limitations of myth (Crossan 1988, 42-3). To establish a solution or provide security even if it looks fabricated or made up, is more important in myth than to challenge audiences with a contradictory or paradoxical open-end that involves audiences to think of solutions, as is the case of parables. The simplistic definition and destruction of evil at the end works to reassure audiences and restore harmony. This may not be convincing, as reality is hardly that neat, but it is reassuring. At the

symbolic and psychological levels, the audience is restored as nobody wants to live with evil. Nonetheless, the audience does not lose sight of the fact that it has been through a fictional or *liminoid* experience.

To argue further, the popular, on the whole, bypasses the kind of rigorous aesthetic considerations that inform the so-called classical texts appreciated by high culture. What it evokes most is identification, comprehensibility, and the text's ability to meet, often, the emotional needs of the audience whose membership is mostly from the lower social classes. Watching these films is, therefore, a purgative experience as sanity is restored in the end. Humans live on the hope for the better; and these films satisfy this hope. Moreover, they do not fundamentally challenge or question the social structure or the status quo. This, in itself, could be an advantage for the hegemonic groups who stand to profit by such representations. In the end, the messages in the films satisfy both the hegemonic and subaltern groups. The messages could be taken lightly or seriously depending on which social group one belongs to. Moreover, the values upheld in these films, as has been discussed above, are mostly traditional. These films, in a way, could be seen as reflecting and promoting the traditional values of the society.

The hybrid nature of this genre takes care of many interests at once. It combines art and commerce, pleasure and morals, reality and fantasy, tradition and modernity, and a form of Christianity that integrates traditional religion. All these explain the popularity of these films and cater for the *metisse* culture the genre reflects.

## **Conclusion**

Although classical and neoclassical literary critical tenets continue to guide artistic judgement, it is significant to appreciate that every creative work exists in a cultural context and should be largely appreciated within that context. By its definition, the Nigerian video films belong to the popular culture tradition which employs a different yardstick from high culture. The fact that this independent, home-grown, experimental, hybrid cinema combines both art and commerce would make it difficult to satisfy Arnold's measure of artistic excellence that leaves no room for charlatanism (Arnold 1991, 359). Indeed, this low-budget, empowering industry thrives on charlatanism. It is driven by the passion to share a moral story, at times, at the expense of aesthetic considerations, though never ceasing to delight and to instruct its audience.

Nonetheless, certain artistic values are shared across genres whether they belong to the popular or high culture. The role of art in transmitting values both aesthetic and moral, in critiquing, interpreting, and evaluating the meaning of human existence just as religion does, can be realised in both popular and high art. Indeed,



the Nigerian films discussed above demonstrate that there is interface between religion and art. In the words of Arnold, 'The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry' (Ibid, 358). Religious values are communicated through stories, parables, myth (all artistic forms of expression), just as art is, itself a carrier of religious values. What really matters is that within its context, this cinema succeeds in satisfying the audiences, as the growing demand for it demonstrates. It is continually defining and refining its aesthetic principles as it goes on. What is essential is that the Nigerians are presenting their stories in their own way, and succeeding to capture audiences from the rest of the world, especially Africa. In this era of globalisation, their stamina and enthusiasm are strong statements about their identity as a nation on the world market.

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