

Emmanuel Emasealu, Ph.D
Department of Theatre Arts
University of Port Harcourt,
Port Harcourt.
Email: emmaoga@hotmail.com

A Study of the Theme of Ritual in Select Nigerian Video Films

Introduction

Film production cannot be said to be new on the Nigerian landscape as attested to by such varied titles as *Ajani Ogun*, *Mosebolatan*, *Aiye*, *Bisi Daughter of the River*, *Blues for a Prodigal*, *Kongi's Harvest*, *Black Gold and Death of a Black President* amongst others. Indeed, the long list of Nigerian film makers includes Ola Balogun, Eddie Ugbomah, Jab Adu, Francis Oladele, Moses Olaiya (Baba Sala) and Hubert Ogunde. However, apart from the recent effort of Silverbird Cinema owned by Ben Murray Bruce to exhibit films in designated places in Lagos, Abuja and Port Harcourt, the patronage of cinema/theatre has reduced drastically in Nigeria. This is as a result of the molestation of innocent cinema/theatre patrons by hoodlums as well as the country's unfavourable economy and its consequent negative impact on celluloid film production. This trend has given rise to video film production – a less powerful but more convenient form of filmmaking which relies on the use of U-matik, Super VHS, ordinary VHS cameras and, quite recently, the HD camera. Femi Shaka (2003, p.42) traces the use of the video equipment as a narrative medium of popular entertainment in Nigeria and other third world societies to two impulses:

the fascination with modern technology and the creative adaptation of such to solving pressing domestic problems, often in manners that original producer of such technological equipment never envisaged.

Although a relatively new initiative in popular culture, these video films, known in Nigeria as "home movies", have already acquired legendary proportion as well as made phenomenal impact. Hinting at the popularity of Nigerian video films, Jonathan Haynes, the editor of the seminal work on video films in Nigeria entitled *Nigerian Video Films* (1997) has, in a *Guardian* (2005) newspaper article, stated thus:

They are what is on Television in Namibia and on sale on the streets in Kenya. In Congo, they are broadcast with the sound track turned down while an interpreter tells the story in Langala or other languages. In New York, Chinese people are buying them. In Holland Nollywood stars are recognized on the streets by people from Suriname, and in London they are hijacked by Jamaicans.

To further underscore the importance of the Nigerian video film, Don Pedro Obaseki submits thus:

When Kenneth Nnebue's principally amateur and domestically shot video film *Living in Bondage* hit the streets, and homes in 1992, the diminutive man of history was unaware that the seed he had sown will blossom into a mighty baobab. Utilizing faces that have been made popular by soap operas such as Amaka Igwe's *Checkmate*, Zeb Ejiro's *Ripples*, and a few others on NTA's network, Mr. Nnebue and his "clique" of trailblazers became midwives, albeit singly and individually, of an industry that today pulls crowds, grosses billions of naira, creates stars... and feeds tens of thousands of Nigerians. Today, the Nigerian video film sector, referred to by many as the home video industry with the appellation 'Nollywood', is the most potent culture tool available to the Nigerian nation. It is, I dare say with condescending humility, Nigeria's strongest tool of cultural imperialism and colonization. The home video is shaping minds and imposing on the African world a Nigerian mindset. The Nigerian nation today is reputed in the committee of nations for... football and the home video.

Arising from the popularity and importance of Nigerian video films, this study sets out to examine the theme of ritual in select Nigerian video films.

The Concept of Ritual

Ritual could be defined as a repeated action performed particularly at a communal level in order to comprehend and dominate natural and/or supernatural forces. It has been described by Todd Shelton as "the distillation of wisdom from ages past". Shelton has equally argued that "a ritual must tell a story and touch the heart with appropriate action" and that "the appeal of ritual is its universal communication". Rituals are highly symbolic events with densely coded meanings. There are sacred rituals as there are distinctly secular rituals. However, some of the richest forms of dramatic ritual expressions take place as part of religious observances such as the enactment of the birth of Christ at Christmas in the Christian community and the observance of the seder meal at Passover in the Jewish community (Arnold, 2001, p. 5).

There are varieties of rituals in all religions and cultures. Kemdirim (1997, p. 118) observes that it is difficult to classify rituals because in most cases, there is an overlap in the intent and meaning between all the types. However, he identifies rituals to include the following: holistic or personal rituals, ritual of healing, festive rituals and rites of passage. Kemdirim's position is that "rituals create a culture of familiarity and togetherness among those who experience them" (p. 125). Offiong (2005, p. 96) corroborates Kemdirim's position when he states that "ritual is more than the expression of man's dependence on the supernatural world. It signifies the reinforcement of social solidarity". Similarly, Obuh states that ritual:

... is the practice and the essential beliefs which have reference to mystical powers and are performed at prescribed time and space in order to obtain some benefits from the mystical powers for the community (2005, p. 30)

Obuh, like Nkemdirim and Offiong, agrees that in rituals, the participants re-enact their relationship to their sacred objects and beliefs.

Alongside the personal dimensions of worship and reverence, rituals can have a more basic social function in expressing, fixing and reinforcing the shared values and beliefs of a society. Interestingly, social rituals have formed a part of human culture in

contemporary times. It is an established position that most, if not all, fraternities and sororities have rituals incorporated into their structure – from elaborate and sometimes “secret” initiation rites, to the formalized structure of convening a meeting. Thus, numerous aspects of ritual and ritualistic proceedings are infused into the workings of these societies.

Esslin (1976, p. 28) notes that in many religious rituals, the action, both symbolic and real, is for the faithful. It is in this sense that the bread and wine are both symbols of the body and blood of Christ in Christendom. According to Esslin, “ritual abolishes time by putting its congregation in touch with events and concepts which are eternal and therefore infinitely repeatable” (p. 28). The thrust of Esslin’s argument is that in ritual, the aim is to guarantee an enhanced level of consciousness, a memorial insight into the nature of existence and a renewal of strength in the individual to face the world.

Ritual may be explained as the product of a communal response to the rhythms of the biosphere in the particular locality in which the culture-whole has taken form and developed. Man, however, has the capacity to express biological responses to nature in a symbolic form. This serves as a means of communication which enables group cooperation and a collective way of fulfilling biological needs as well as meeting the everyday challenges of human existence. It is in a bid to survive by dominating his environment that man has resorted to ritual activities.

Like most third world countries, Nigeria is highly religious. This is evident in the fact that most Nigerians strongly believe in the existence of supernatural beings and that these transcendental entities can be influenced through ritual acts. Rituals constitute a part of people’s traditional religious practice as informed by their inherent communal sensibilities. The rationales for their engagement in ritual acts include the appeasement of the gods, the quest for supernatural favour or to ward off misfortune. Others engage in rituals out of the fear of unpleasant spiritual consequences for their action or inaction. There is no gainsaying therefore, that religion, expressed through theism, supernaturalism or occultism, are the root of ritual killings in Nigeria.

There have been several reported cases of individuals who were

kidnapped, killed or had their bodies mutilated by ritualists in Nigeria. The readily available examples include the case of one Chief Vincent Duru, popularly known as Otokoto, who was charged to court, found guilty and executed for ritual killings in the premises of his Otokoto Hotel in Owerri in 1996. In December 2004, the police arrested a taxi driver, Abbas, in Ibadan, who used his fourteen months old baby for rituals. It was reported that Abbas killed his child in order to secure a human head which was one of the materials listed for him by a local witchdoctor for a money-making ritual (Igwe, 2004, p.2).

In Nigeria, the belief in "ritual wealth" or "blood money" remains strong among the people and it features prominently in the emergent video film industry. Understandably, video films, like other art forms, derive their themes from happenings in the society. Notwithstanding, the thematic preoccupation and narrative techniques employed in creative writing and video/film productions should be geared towards the inculcation of moral standards in the minds of the audience so as to propel the enthronement of morally and ethically decorous values and attitudes in society. It is against this backdrop that this scholarly endeavour, which is sociological in nature, adopts the case study methodology of research in examining the theme of rituals in three contextually topical Nigerian video films namely: *Arusi Iyi*, *The Handkerchief* and *Return of my Vision*.

Synopses of *Arusi Iyi*

The video film *Arusi Iyi* revolves around the subjects of greed, materialism, poverty, villainy, divine retribution and justice. In a bid to acquire wealth and fame at all cost, Chief Danco (Kenneth Okonkwo) joins the "Asugo Brotherhood" (a secret cult). Expectedly, he turns wealthy and acquires for himself a posh apartment that befits his status. Following the instructions given to him by the capon of the Asugo Brotherhood that money from his household should not get into the pockets of his gateman, Chief Danco terminates the services of his gateman without any form of terminal benefit.

On his part, Fred (Pete Eneh), Chief Danco's gateman, finds it extremely difficult to cope with life having a wife and two children to cater for. He continues to pester Caroline, Chief Danco's wife in her husband's absence all in a bid to draw his outstanding three

months salaries. Consequently, Caroline ignores her husband's decision of denying Fred his salary and provides the money thereby putting smiles on Fred's face even though the smile is short-lived as Chief Danco meets him at the gate and orders his guards to search him. Upon the discovery of some money on Fred, Chief Danco seizes it and orders his guards to throw him out of the compound.

Unable to cope with the ill-treatment meted out to him by Chief Danco, Fred throws caution to the wind and runs to "Arusi Iyi" deity to seek justice. In order to guarantee fair hearing, Eze Udo, the Chief Priest of "Arusi Iyi", summons Chief Danco who blatantly refuses to honour the summons because of his confidence in the protective essence of "Asugo Brotherhood". At the end, Arusi Iyi overpowers Asugo spirit and Chief Danco meets a tragic and brutal demise. Before his last breath, he confesses his sins and denounces his bond with "Asugo Brotherhood". The burial of Chief Danco becomes yet another medium of conflict in the film as Asugo Brotherhood, worshippers of Arusi Iyi deity and the Christian church battle over the ownership of the corpse.

The Theme of Ritual in *Arusi Iyi*

The predominant idea in the video film, *Arusi Iyi*, is rituals. Chief Danco joins the "Asugo Brotherhood" so as to get rich quick through mystical means which involves human sacrifice and stringent conditions that negatively affect people around him. Such conditions include denying his gateman monthly salary for his services and concealing from his wife vital information and forbidding the idea of rendering financial assistance to people. As a human being, Chief Danco is kind and caring. This is evident in his initial promise to pay Fred his outstanding salary. However, when the priest of Asugo warns him against this, his attitude towards Fred changes automatically. Chief Danco does not only refuse to pay Fred his unpaid salaries but also terminates his appointment as gateman abruptly.

The Asugo fraternity is made of over-zealous, desperate, adventurous and greedy men in their quest for material wealth, fame and power. A major criterion for joining Asugo fraternity is that one must develop the mind to kill on demand someone that is dear. This implies that the Asugo spirit is blood thirsty. Little wonder

that when it dawns on its members that they have lost the corpse of Chief Danco to the Christian church, they transfer their aggression to the mourning crowd by terminating lives through mystical means thereby occasioning mayhem at the burial.

The ritualistic undertone in *Arusi Iyi* is also found in the operations of the Arusi Iyi deity. As the patron god of Apugo community, Arusi Iyi serves as the last court of appeal for unresolved disputes in the community. Arusi Iyi, like Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron, is seen as the god that is capable of creation and destruction. However, Arusi Iyi does not operate in the void. For it to swing into action, a ritual that involves the sacrifice of a white cock is performed. A similar ritual is performed upon its completion of vengeance. Fred refuses to appease Arusi Iyi after the death of Chief Danco. Expectedly, Arusi Iyi begins to haunt him. On his part, Fred repents his indulgence in fetish practice and becomes born again in Christ. During his condolence visit to Late Chief Danco's house as a mark of reconciliation, Arusi Iyi lays ambush and as it makes to strike, a crucifix from Chief Danco's tomb intercepts and destroys Arusi Iyi.

Fred Amata's *Arusi Iyi* depicts a society that is deeply soaked in fetishism as the citizens have surrendered their sense of rationality to spiritual forces. Not one of the members of Asugo Brotherhood, worshippers of Arusi Iyi or the perennial devotees of the Christian church is able to proffer solution to the lingering problem of economic depression that is staring the Apugo community in the face. Rather than think of a means of tackling the socio-economic set-backs in the community, they resort to mystical and illusive ways of acquiring undeserved wealth.

Drawing from the *Arusi Iyi* example, it can be inferred that Apugo, a symbolic representation of a Nigerian community, is a society where most beliefs are still informed by illogicality, dogmatism, retrogressive myth-making, magic, wishful thinking, belief in ghosts, juju, charms and witchcraft. Indeed, ritual, in Apugo community, is portrayed as an act of spiritual fortification.

Synopsis of *The Handkerchief*

The story of *The Handkerchief* is that of mischief, hypnotism, rituals, conspiracy and desperation. Mrs. Caroline Igwe (Patience Ozokwor) is desperate for her first son, Amobi (Clem Ohameze), to marry and

bear children so that she can attain the status of a grandmother. However, her husband, Chief Igwe (Fabian Adibe) is opposed to her desire as his oath for longevity with the Ogboni cult, unknown to others, is made on the condition that his first son, Amobi, must not get married. In default of this oath, Chief Igwe is bound to lose his life.

Purported to have been hypnotized by his father, Amobi is complacent as he enjoys bachelorhood in his early forties in spite of his mother's insistence that he be married. As a result of persistent pressure from his mother, Amobi declares his interest in Rosemary (Chioma Chukwuka), a Reverend Sister in the convent, as the only girl that can pass for his wife. In desperation, Caroline makes concerted effort in wooing Rosemary for her son but all to no avail as Rosemary maintains her stand to serve God as a spinster and Reverend Sister. As a last strategy to winning Rosemary for her son, Caroline adopts the ritual option. With the link from her friend, Julie (Chinwe Owoh), Caroline acquires the mystical handkerchief which she uses to clean Rosemary's face in a church gathering.

The mystical handkerchief works on Rosemary as envisaged by Caroline for she opts out of the convent and makes up her mind to marry Amobi. Despite her parents' disapproval of their relationship, Rosemary settles with Amobi and their union results in a pregnancy. Meanwhile, the Ogboni cult has mandated Chief Igwe to terminate the life of the unborn baby in order to maintain his oath. His inability to execute this assignment results in his death. At the end, Amobi's union with Rosemary is severed on account of undue pressure from Amobi's family. Amobi marries another woman who is cantankerous. He eventually dies in a ghastly motor accident due to distractions from his new wife. Rosemary recovers from the hypnosis and resolves to resume her selfless services to God and humanity.

The Theme of Ritual in *The Handkerchief*

The Handkerchief is yet another Nigerian video film that is replete with rituals. Chief Igwe joins a cult because he wants fame and longevity. However, to achieve his heart desires, he must make sacrifices and perform some rituals. Amidst several options, Chief Igwe prefers the condition that his first son must not marry. In

order to sustain this condition, he performs some rituals intermittently in order to dampen down Amobi's spirit towards getting married. Similarly, Chief Akukália (Ifeanyi Odikaesieme), a member of the Ogboni Cult, is not comfortable with Chief Igwe's choice of oath. He rather prefers that his first son be turned into an imbecile in order for him to acquire wealth, fame and long life. According to Igwe (2004, p.2)

Nigerians believe that magical portions prepared with human heads, breasts, tongues, eyes and sexual organs can enhance one's political and financial fortunes; that juju, charms and amulets can protect individuals against business failures, sickness, diseases, accidents and spiritual attacks.

Chief Igwe mortgages the growth and happiness of his family to his selfish desire for spiritual fortification. Similarly, his wife resorts to a mystical handkerchief in order to win a wife for his son. Here, we see the interplay of mystical forces emanating from the Ogboni Cult, the mystical handkerchief and the Catholic faith patronized by Rosemary.

Upon a critical survey, one discovers that the key players in the ritual game are extremely desperate characters. It is their desperation that eclipses their sense of logical reasoning. In his self-centredness, Chief Igwe fails to understand that the best way to immortalize his name is to ensure that his children are married and firmly established. Caroline ignores the fact that the key to success in marriage is the genuine love and affection that transpires between the couple. She does not only hypnotize Rosemary to succumb to Amobi's amorous advances but also arranges with a prophet to give her a spiritual bath so she can conceive with ease. Like her husband, Caroline is quick to manipulate situations to her own advantage. But at the end, there is a boomerang and her family is destroyed. Her husband, first and second sons die leaving her to live with Obiageli, her aged daughter that suffers protracted spinsterhood.

What we find in the video film *The Handkerchief* is a total collapse of the nuclear family where parents wallow in fetishism at the expense of the cognitive development of their children. *The Handkerchief* x-rays a society that is grappling with atavistic cultural

practices on one hand and the pangs of modernity, on the other. Amobi is that product of modernity trapped in the middle of the primordial ideologies of his parents.

Synopsis of *Return of my Vision*

Self-centred Livy (Kanayo O. Kanayo) lavishes the money for a building project in the village sent to him by his brother, Rev. Father John (Emeka Okoro), who is on a religious engagement overseas. Rather than build the house, he spends the money on his wife, Ijeoma and her mother. Chinasa (Patience Ozokwor), Livy's mother, becomes aware of this development and advises him on the need to build the house especially as Rev. Father John would, in no distant time, return home. Ijeoma evades reality and rather lures her husband to deal with his mother by presenting her (Chinasa) as a threat. Following Ijeoma's prompting, Livy evokes a spirit into his mother through diabolical means. This renders Chinasa dumb and as such unable to say the truth.

Livy neglects his extended family by denying them access to the money for their upkeep sent by Rev. Father John. In company of his wife, Ijeoma, Livy moves on to buy a house in the city. As landlady, Ijeoma imposes rules and regulations that infringe on the rights of the tenants.

On finding charms in the compound, the tenants invite Livy for a meeting. In the course of the meeting, Livy, rather than assuage their feelings, promises to deal with any tenant who complains of setbacks and spiritual attacks. Out of anger and again through diabolical means, Livy sends spiritual missiles to his tenants for airing their views. Ijeoma, her mother and Livy visit Otuobaje, the spiritualist, for more fortification.

Livy, through an evil means, inflicts sickness on his brothers, Igwe (Clement Ohameze) and Paul (Rich Oganiru). This is to enable him demand for more money from Rev. Father John as well as gain access to more property. He also eliminates two other men through diabolical means over a land dispute. With the arrival of Rev. Father John, Livy is exposed.

The Theme of Ritual in *Return of my Vision*

The theme of ritual is prevalent in the video film, *Return of my Vision*.

Chinasa, Livy's mother, advises him on the need to start the building project of Rev. Father John and also render assistance to his brothers and their wives. Out of greed and the pressure from his wife, Ijeoma, Livy decides to evoke an evil spirit on his mother so that he can have his way to all the money. This is achieved through the incantation in his bedroom where he carries a doll baby and conjures an evil spirit to attack his mother in her house. Ritual is also evident in the scene where Ijeoma visits Otuobaje, the native doctor, to protect their new land from trespassers in the village. The incantations carried out by Otuobaje and the planting of charms in the land brings about the death of two villagers who come in contact with the land. The evidence of another ritual element in the movie is the scene where Livy sends some spiritual missiles to his brother – Paul who turns into a drunk and Igwe whom he inflicts with stroke in order to acquire more money from Rev. Father John. The charm exhumed by a dog in Livy's family compound in the village has been orchestrated by him all in a bid to have a total control over everything.

Conclusion

It may be characteristic of American movies that conflicts are resolved through the barrel of the gun. It may also be characteristic of the average Chinese film that martial artists fly in fighting to end a story. These are cultural indices. Following this line of argument, it may be plausible to state that autochthonous Nigerian religious practice with its attendant belief in the gods make it convenient to invite supernatural forces to resolve conflicts in video films. This, at once, is reminiscent of the ancient Greek theatre experience where the gods are flown in using the Deus-ex-machina to resolve conflicts. However, it should be stated that borne out of the works of philosophers, literary giants and scientists in the contemporary world who posit that man is capable of controlling his destiny, it has become the responsibility of change agents such as artists (the filmmaker inclusive) to help develop man's rational thinking. In this regard, this writer is in complete agreement with Ammen, as cited in Shelton (2003, p.2) that there is the need for individuals:

to withstand sordid materialistic tendencies by insisting upon the

value of the spiritual aspirations and lofty ideals which are our people's best inheritance. Wealth is to be sought as means to [attain] comfort, education, and broad culture, but regard must be had, above all, for the intangibles, the possession of which dignifies life and gives it real value.

Consequently, this paper enjoins Nigerian video film script writers to devise new ways of conflict generation/resolution instead of the seemingly conventional but escapist approach through rituals. It is imperative that Nigerian video film script writers take delight in portraying Nigeria in a positive light since their art would invariably impact on the mentality of the citizenry instead of finding refuge in and holding tenaciously to atavistic conventions which ought to have been consigned to yesteryear. By doing this, the film maker would be properly utilizing the film medium as a veritable means for rebranding the badly battered image of the Nigerian society. This is in consonance with the stipulation in the *The Film policy for Nigeria* which states that among other reasons, the state shall through appropriate legislation:

encourage the adoption of themes which shall emphasize the desirable rather than the negative aspects of our present social existence, including belief in the capacity of our people to overcome extreme adverse conditions of nature and socio-cultural arrangement.

This paper has highlighted the prevalence of the theme of ritual in Nigerian video films. From analysis, the paper argues that these films are didactic in nature since they ultimately expose the adverse effects of over-ambition, excessive quest for materialism and greed. However, there is the need to emphasize the serious consequences of negative ritual practice for society instead of promoting and celebrating the luxurious life style that ritualistic characters enjoy before their eventual fall or death. This is because the audience may be misled or tempted to choose the option of a sumptuous life style no matter how briefly enjoyed instead of rebuffing the idea of destructive ritual practice.

References

- Arnold, S. (2001) *The Creative Spirit*. London: Mayfield Publishing Company.
- Esslin, M. (1976) *The Anatomy of Drama*. London: Temple Smith.
- Federal Government of Nigeria. *Film policy for Nigeria*.
- Igwe, L. (2004) "Ritual Killing and Pseudo Science in Nigeria". Retrieved from the web on June 17, 2006. <http://www.answers.com>.
- Kemdirim, P. (1997) "Rituals and Symbols in Religion". In E.S. Akama. (Ed) *Man and His Religion*. Lagos: Jetin's International Ltd: pp. 116-136.
- Obaseki, D.P (2004) "Production, Distribution and Exhibition – The Nigerian Imperative". Unpublished Paper Presented at the Movie Stakeholders' Conference organized by The Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation at Sheraton Hotels & Towers, Ikeja, Lagos. July 11-13, 2004.
- Obuh, S. (2005) "Oru-Owerri festival as Total Theatre". In *The CRAB: Journal of Theatre and Media Arts*. Vol. 1, No. 1; pp. 21-38.
- Offiong, E.A. (2005) "Ritual". In W.O. Wotogbe-Weneka (Ed.) *Themes in Comparative Religion*. Port Harcourt: Stepson Printing Press: pp. 92-98.
- Shaka, F. (2003) "Rethinking the Nigerian Video Film Industry: Technological Fascination and the Domestication Game". In Ogunleye Foluke (Ed.) *African Video Film Today*. Swaziland: Academic Publishers: pp. 41-50.
- Shelton, T. "The Importance of Ritual". Retrieved from the Web www.google.com, 12/05/2010.

Select Filmography

Title: *Arusi Iyi*

Screenplay: Sunny Collins

D.O.P: Solomon Nwoko

Producer: Sunny Collins

Director: Fred Amata

Stars: Kenneth Okonwko, Pete Eneh, Nnenna Nwaweze Okonta, Victoria

Inyama, rita Edochie, Gentle Jack.

Company: Great Movies Industry Ltd.

Title: *The Handkerchief*

Screenplay: Adim Williams

D.O.P.: Solomon Nwoko

Producer: Theodore Anyanji

Director: Theodore Anyanji

Stars: Clem Ohameze, Patience Ozokwor, Fabian Adibe, Chioma Chukwuka, Ngozi Ezeonu, Ejike Asiegbu, Victor Osuagwu etc.

Company: Video Field International Ltd.

Title: *Return of my Vision*

Story: Emeka Nwaigbo

D.O.P.: Solomon Nwoko

Producer: Valentine Nwabulu

Director: Chika Onu

Stars: Kanayo O. Kanayo, Clem Ohameze, Patience Ozokwor, Clarion C. Oduye, Rich Oganiru, Emeka Okoro, Paul Udensi, Obim Igweokolo etc.

Company: Valesco Ind. Ltd.