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# Reflecting the Nigerian Society in Nollywood Movies

Habsat Joyce Imhanobe

Corresponding author E-mail: [habsatjoyceimhanobe@gmail.com](mailto:habsatjoyceimhanobe@gmail.com)

Department of Mass Communication, Igbinedion University, Okada, Edo State, Nigeria

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**Abstract:** *Film art is relevant in the development of every nation's image. Around the world films speak volumes. This notwithstanding, the movie industry is faced with serious challenges. The concern of this study is Nollywood exploration of ritualism as a dominant feature of the Nigerian society. The Magic Bullet theory is used as conveying external stimuli that can condition anyone to behave in whatever way a master propagandist wants. The Qualitative method is used for the collection of data for analysis. The result of the study shows that ritualistic crimes highlight in the analyzed movies are not Nollywood invented but are rather constant features of the Nigeria culture. We therefore recommend that Nollywood filmmakers should be encouraged to de-emphasize the celebration and glamorization of ritually acquired wealth.*

**Keywords:** Nigerian Society, Nollywood Movies

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## INTRODUCTION

Nigeria home video industry, popularly known by its sobriquet - Nollywood is the third largest film industry in the world after America's Hollywood and India's Bollywood (Alozie, 23). Nollywood has over the years become a world phenomenon, as its movies are watched in Ghana, Gambia, Togo, Cuba, Kenya, Uganda and South Africa as well as Jamaica, USA and -the United Kingdom to name a few. Nollywood actors are welcomed as stars virtually throughout the African continent. Nollywood is unarguably a major cultural force not just in Nigeria but in continental Africa and the world at large, influencing both the ways Nigerians see themselves as well how outsiders perceive the Nigerian world. From its humble beginning as a mere experience in film screening in 1903 at the Glover Memorial Hall (Uchegbu, 48) when it was sustained by the combined efforts of the colonial administration and the Church (Ekwuazi, 1), and its golden age spanning the 1970 and 1980s when Hubert Ogunde blazed the trail with the celluloid technology, to its transmutation into the burgeoning economic force it has become since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Nigerian movie industry's potency as influencer of culture has always been easily discerned.

The British colonialists used it for their "civilizing" mission as well as to indicate the blessedness of being colonized while the Church used it for spreading the Christian gospel (Opeyemi, 282). Likewise, the films made by Ola Balogun, Eddie Ugbomah, Sanya Dosunmu,

Ladi Ladebo, Brendan Shehu, Hubert Ugunde, Adamu Halilu, Afolabi Adesanya, among others, were essentially steeped in the cultural nationalism of the immediate post-independence era. In other words, like other movie industries in the world, Nollywood is significantly involved in the framing, reflection and identity construction of Nigeria and African society through its cultural representations (Alawode & Fatonji, 11).

Furthering the above viewpoint, Uwah (21) states that the use of movies as a meta-narrative in exploring the religious identity of Africans is something of a revelatory process towards understanding not only the religious culture of the people but the efficacious use of indigenous languages and communalism as practiced in Africa. Nollywood is arguably at the vanguard of this tradition, serving as a window through which the world sees Nigeria and Nigerians. It is for this reason that most harsh critics of Nollywood blame the industry for much of the negative perceptions of Nigeria abroad. Added to this is the belief that the industry constitutes a negative influence on youth behaviour, especially in their disposition to materialism. This paper is a defense of the Nigerian industry's narratives as distinct and apt reflections of the Nigerian socio-cultural reality and therefore is neither responsible for any negative perceptions of the Nigerian image nor corruption of youth behaviour on account of such projections.

## The Problem

Film art is unquestionably relevant in the development of every nation's image. In Africa and beyond, Nollywood movies are famous and speak volumes about Nigeria (Iyorza, 2016). This notwithstanding, the movie industry is faced with serious challenges. Quality questions bothering on storylines (thematic preoccupation) and directorial vision or concept are some of the other most bugging experiences affecting the image of Nollywood (Shimsenge and Agav, 105). The concern of the present paper is Nollywood exploration of ritualism as a dominant feature of the Nigerian society. The questions that beg for answers include:

- Why and how does Nollywood constantly explore the theme of ritualistic crimes?
- Are Nollywood portrayals of ritual practices realistic representations of the Nigerian socio-cultural reality?

To be clear, ritualistic crimes in this context may involve arson, animal mutilation, child molestation, murder, kidnaping, sex crimes, vandalism, and terrorism. Many involve multiple perpetrators and multiple victims. The underlying objective is to garner material possessions.

## Theoretical Nexus

Media communication literature is replete with theories that speak for and against the supposed influence of the media over behaviour. Proponents of the All-powerful (Mass Society) Media Theories stress the influential but often negative role of the media. They argue that the media are corrupting influences that undermine the social order and that average people are defenseless against media influence. These theories emerged in the second half of the 19th Century when mass circulation of newspapers and magazines, movies, and radio came to prominence. It was a time of urbanization and industrialization spread; which in conjunction with the media altered the society's patterns of life (Obe, 32). The *Hypodemic Needle Theory* is top on this list.

This theory sees the media as all-powerful and supremely effective; and believe that all human beings respond the same way to the powerful influence from the media. In essence, the Magic Bullet theory sees the media (Nollywood content on ritualism in the present context) as conveying external stimuli that can condition anyone to behave in whatever way a master propagandist wants. People were viewed as powerless to consciously resist manipulation no matter their level of education or social status. The rational mind is viewed as a mere façade, incapable of resisting powerful messages. The movie content can thus penetrate to their subconscious mind, and transform how they think, feel and act.

Juxtaposed against the All-powerful Theories and the Social-Scientific Theories (Limited Effects Theories) which sufficiently absolves the mass media of the accusations of the former. These theories argue that the media cannot influence social conduct in isolation and

that individuals bring other socio-psychological variables to bear on the media content they consume and these variables are largely responsible for the behaviour that arise therefrom. An example of these theories is the *Post Stimuli-Response Theory*. Among other things, it argues that because people vary greatly in their psychological compositions and because they have different perceptions of things, media influence differs from person to person (Obe, 33). In other words, people learn attitude, values and beliefs in the context of experience and this result in differences in the way they understand and perceive movie content. It posits also that people's reaction to media messages is modified by their informal social relationships with significant others like relations, friends, social groups etc. That is to say, individuals who are surrounded by highly moralistic friends, kith and kin are very less likely to be induced to ritualism as portrayed in movies than individuals who are not. A related theory to this is the *Dissonance Theory* (Selective Processes).

Dissonance theory further corroborates the fact that the media are not all-powerful as believed by the mass society proponents. The idea in dissonance theory is that any information that is not consistent with a person's already-held values and beliefs will create a psychological discomfort (dissonance) that must be relieved; this is, because people generally work to keep their knowledge of themselves and the world consistent with their preexisting beliefs. What may happen at times is for a person to try as much as possible to make some things that are not psychologically nor consistently aligned (consistent) to his values and beliefs through a variety of ways. The 'ways' of doing this have become known as the selective processes.

Some psychologists see selective process as a defense mechanism used to protect ourselves (and our ego) from information that would threaten us, while others consider it as a normal means for coping with the large quantity of sensory information that constantly bombard us (Onwubere & Okuwa, 57). Whatever it may be, there is no doubt that it functions as complex and highly sophisticated filtering mechanism that screen out useless sensory data while it identifies and highlights those that are useful in the data. It thus demonstrates that Nollywood movies can increase youth predisposition to ritualistic only if such crimes are already integral parts of the youths; social reality.

## Prevalence of Ritualistic Crimes in Nigerian Society

Haynes (2006) had earlier observed that "Nollywood film characters are saturated with a depiction of witchcraft practices." Other themes that are visible in Nollywood movies are armed robbery, prostitution, wife-snatching, kidnappings, brutal vengeance, assassination, ritual killings, dubious acquisition of wealth, man's inhumanity to man, different kinds of violence and negative side of family and societal relationship among

others. Olayinka and Uduakobong (2013) informs that Nigerian cultures are undoubtedly revealed in Nollywood home videos through the storylines, themes, and lifestyles. Nollywood movies are essentially cultural products, deriving from the Nigerian cultural experience. It follows therefore, that if ritualistic crimes is explored and projected by Nollywood, then ritualistic crimes must be a feature of the Nigerian culture. According to various sources, ritual killings in Nigeria are performed to obtain human body parts for use in rituals (*Daily Trust* 21 June 2010; Osumah and Aghedo June 2011, 279; Sahara Reporters 3 July 2012), potions (*Daily Trust* 21 June 2010; *This Day* 26 Sept. 2010), and charms (*The Punch* 10 Aug. 2012; Sahara Reporters 3 July 2012). The Lagos-based newspaper *This Day* explains that "ritualists, also known as headhunters, go in search of human parts at the request of herbalists, who require them for sacrifices or for the preparation of various magical potions" (26 Sept. 2010). Similarly, the Abuja-based *Daily Trust* indicates that human body parts are brought to herbalists who perform the rituals (21 June 2010). Such rituals are reportedly motivated by the belief that they can bring power and wealth to an individual (*Leadership* 30 Apr. 2012; *The Punch* 10 Aug. 2012; *Daily Trust* 21 June 2010). Sources also indicate that charms are believed to make a person invincible (*The Punch* 10 Aug. 2012) and protect them from business failure, illness, accidents, and "spiritual attacks" (*Daily Trust* 21 June 2010). Some historical exposition on the reality and prevalence of ritual crimes in Nigeria is instructive here.

Canada Immigration and Refugee Board (2012) documented the following incidents of ritual murder that resulted in arrests from media sources:

In May 2012, in Kogi State, a convicted serial killer and former soldier killed a 22-year-old female student, intending to dismember her body for ritual purposes, before being arrested by police (APA 19 May 2012; *Vanguard* 2 June 2012). The killer had reportedly been convicted of murder and sentenced to death in 2003 but had later been acquitted and released (*ibid.*; APA 19 May 2012).

In July 2012, two men from Nasawara State confessed to killing a seven-year-old boy, the child of neighbours, and severing his head for a man who had promised them 250,000 Nigerian Naira [C\$1,591 (XE 1 Nov. 2012)] for it (*The Punch* 10 Aug. 2012; Channel S TV 24 July 2012).

In July 2012, two men were arrested in Lagos for killing and dismembering their brother and reportedly selling his body parts (*The Punch* 10 Aug. 2012; *Daily Times* 27 July 2012; *Online Nigeria* 28 July 2012).

In August 2012, in Ebonyi State, seven people were arrested for kidnapping, killing, and dismembering a young girl, reportedly for money-making rituals; two of the suspects confessed to the crime (*Vanguard* 28 Aug. 2012; *Guardian* 31 Aug. 2012).

The following cases of suspected ritual murder documented in media sources, resulted in arrests:

In 2012, in Osun State, a young man was found dead with his head and genitals severed from his body; a close friend of the man was reportedly arrested in connection with the murder (*Leadership* 30 Apr. 2012; *Nigerian Tribune* 22 Apr. 2012). One source indicates that a herbalist who reportedly performs money rituals and two other individuals were also arrested as suspects (*ibid.*).

In 2012, in Abia State, two men kidnapped and killed two children, aged four and six, removed their vital organs and buried them, before being arrested (*The Sun* 18 June 2012; *Nigeria Newpoint* [2012a]).

In June 2012, in Nasawara State, a man and a "witch doctor" were arrested for their involvement in what police suspected to be a ritual murder of the man's wife, whose body was found with some body parts missing (*The Nation* 26 June 2012; *Daily Trust* 26 June 2012).

Media sources also document the following cases of suspected ritual murder for which no suspects were apprehended:

In February 2011, near Jos, Plateau State, an elderly couple was beheaded and their grandchildren were beaten to death in what police suspected to be ritual killing because the killers had left with the woman's head (*Reuters* 12 Feb. 2011; *Press Trust of India* 13 Feb. 2011; *Leadership* 30 Apr. 2012).

In April 2012, a woman was found along an Abuja expressway with her head and genitals severed from her body (*ibid.* 30 Apr. 2012; *Weekly Trust* 14 Apr. 2012).

In June 2012, in Imo State, a woman was killed by unknown assailants (*Nigeria Newpoint* [2012b]; *Leadership*, 10 June 2012). Her head and some internal organs had reportedly been removed (*ibid.*).

Even more recently, the *Vanguard* newspaper (May 11) reported that the April 15, 2021 gruesome murder of Iniobong Umuren, a young woman in her early twenties in Uyo, was not just a case of rape and murder but that it also involved ritual killing. The same publication reported that on April 27, 2021 in Kwara State, a next-door neighbour allegedly murdered a groom-to-be for ritual purposes. According to the account in *Vanguard*, the deceased, who was said to be a devout Christian, did not know that his neighbour with whom he used to eat together was a serial killer and ritualist who has twice served jail terms. This wolf-in-sheep-clothing neighbour allegedly killed his victim, removed some sensitive body parts, and poured acid on his remains for speedy decay to prevent it from fouling the area.

Despite the fact that the year is new, 2022 has already experienced the anguish that ritual killings are causing. *Daily Trust* highlights top ritual killings cases that have shocked the country in 2022.

- **Sofiat Kehinde**

On the 4th of February, 2022, four Nigerian men were charged with the murder of a 20-year-old woman in a suspected ritual killing case. The men, who are aged between 18 to 20 years, were arrested on the last Saturday of January for allegedly killing Sofiat Kehinde and burning her head for money ritual purposes at Oke Aregba area of Abeokuta, Ogun State. According to

reports, the deceased was dating one of the killers. She was lured by her boyfriend, Soliu, to his room where she was overpowered and killed.

- **Timothy Odeniyi**

On February 1st, 2022, a suspected ritual killer, Timothy Odeniyi, was arrested by men of the Amotekun Corps in Ondo State, Nigeria. The 35-year-old man confessed to newsmen that he was promised N30m if he could produce and deliver human parts to Lagos. He revealed that the human parts were to be delivered to one of his bosses living in Lagos. Timothy confessed that he went to burial grounds to harvest the body parts from corpses buried claiming that he did not murder anyone.

- **Jennifer Anthony**

In the case of Jennifer Anthony; a 20-year-old Moses Oko was been apprehended by the police for allegedly killing her for ritual purposes. Jennifer, who was a student of the University of Jos, was found lifeless at a hotel in Jos, along Zaria Road, on New Year's Day. Some of her body parts were also missing. Moses was arrested in Benue State after he fled from Jos for committing the crime.

- **Afeez Olalere**

Another case is that of 32-year-old Afeez Olalere, who is a suspected internet fraudster. Afeez confessed to killing his younger brother for money ritual purposes. He was arrested during a stop and search operation along Itamaga, Ikorodu road in Lagos State by operatives of the Lagos State Police Command. Afeez confessed during interrogation that his mother encouraged him to kill his younger brother after a herbalist she took him to had told him to sacrifice one life which must be his sibling. He had planned with his mother to poison his 21-year-old brother to death. They harvested the required body parts and took his remains to the mortuary.

What the above exposition and other even more recent reports indicate is that ritual crimes are regular and often front burner occurrences in the Nigerian society. Against this backdrop, it becomes imperative for the film medium as mirror of society to reflect this reality in its contents. This is precisely what Nollywood has done consistently and for which it is often unjustly vilified. Unjustly in the sense that save for few instances, most Nollywood exploration of the theme of ritual crimes usually tend to condemn or show the vanity of such practices as the perpetrators usually suffer the consequences of their actions in the final analysis, as the succeeding analysis will show.

## Method

For a qualitative study of this nature, content analysis is apt for the collection of data for analysis. Content analysis is a research method used to identify patterns in recorded communication. To conduct content analysis, the researcher may systematically collect data from a set of texts, which can be written, oral, or visual: Books, newspapers and magazines Speeches and

interviews, Web content and social media posts, Photographs and films.

The communication texts examined in this study are the selected Nollywood movies – *Living in Bondage I* and *II*. Content analysis has various possible goals:

- Finding correlations and patterns in how concepts are communicated
- Understanding the intentions of an individual, group or institution
- Identifying propaganda and bias in communication
- Revealing differences in communication in different contexts
- Analyzing the consequences of communication content, such as the flow of information or audience responses

To this end, the study analyzes the selected movies for the purposes of determining

- How Nollywood explores the theme of ritualistic crimes
- Whether or not the portrayals of ritual practices are realistic representations of the Nigerian socio-cultural reality.

## Nollywood's Exploration of the Theme of Ritual Crimes

At the beginning of the Nollywood era, majority of the video films produced were replete with scenes of ritual murder, necessitated by the get-rich –quick syndrome as exemplified by the narratives. Starting with *Living in Bondage* (1992), the film that shot Nigerian video film to limelight, to *Rituals* (1997), *Issakaba* (2001) and *Living in Bondage II* even up to this day, Nollywood films, no doubt, still contain one form of ritual or the other. The following analysis of *Living in Bondage* will show the dominant frame in which Nollywood projects the issue of ritual crimes.

*Living in Bondage* (1992) was directed by Chris Obi Rapu, written by Kenneth Nnebue and Okechukwu Ogunjiofor, produced by Ogunjiofor, and sponsored by Jafac Wine. The film was shot straight-to-video, and starred Kenneth Okonkwo and Nnenna Nwabueze in their breakout roles.

In the movie, Andy Okeke (Kenneth Okonkwo) and his wife Merit (Nnenna Nwabueze) face several obstacles – redundancy, infidelity, the loss of their savings in a bogus investment, and indecent proposals from lecherous men including Merit's boss Ichie Million (Francis Agu) and Chief Omego (Kanayo O. Kanayo). Andy constantly compares his lack of fortune to the success of his peers, especially old friend Paul (Okechukwu Ogunjiofor). Despite Merit's support and patience, Andy is driven to near-depression, and determined to obtain wealth by any means possible. Paul reveals his secret – a satanic cult where members pledge their loyalty to Lucifer and kill their loved ones in ritualized sacrifices, gaining enormous wealth in return. After much hesitation, Andy reluctantly agrees to sacrifice the person

he loves the most – Merit. She dies in hospital days after the ritual, but not before she curses her husband's betrayal.

Andy's sudden affluence and subsequent remarriage three months after Merit's death raise suspicion from his former in-laws who accuse him of murdering their daughter. He also faces more problems – the paparazzi's constant interference in his daily life, his new wife Ego (Ngozi Nwosu) fleeing with his money after he collapses at their traditional wedding, and Merit's ghost haunting and terrorizing him when he least expects. Andy would later enter a common-law union with Chinyere (Jennifer Okere), another woman introduced to him by Merit's former friend Caro (Ngozi Nwaneto), but she meets her untimely death after Caro poisons her friend and attempts to escape abroad with the cash Chinyere steals from her husband. Caro is also killed by a hit-and-run driver on her way to the airport, and Paul is murdered by hit men after Andy holds him partially responsible for his involvement with the cult.

A now frustrated Andy asks the satanic cult for help, but when the Chief Priest (Daniel Oluigbo) insists he can only pacify his late wife's spirit by blinding and castrating himself, he refuses and becomes mentally deranged, living as a vagrant under a Lagos flyover until Tina (Rita Nzelu) – a former prostitute Andy had previously presented to the cult as a decoy before his deceit was exposed – takes him to her church. He finally confesses to Merit's murder, and Andy's mother (Grace Ayozie) weeps at her late daughter-in-law's grave, pleading for her forgiveness.

The movie's sequel *Living in Bondage: Breaking Free*, also known as *Living in Bondage II*, released in 2019, premiered on Netflix in May 2020. It was produced by Charles Okpaleke and directed by Ramsey Nouah. Like its prequel, the movie explores the theme of ritual crime. Twenty-five years after the events of the original movie, Andy Okeke (Kenneth Okonkwo) has become an ordained man-of-God, renouncing his allegiance to the secret cult now known as Brotherhood of The Six. The sect has expanded into an international organisation, with most Nigerian members who survived the 1996 Otokoto riots fleeing the country apart from Chief Omego (Kanayo O. Kanayo) – now an Imo state governorship aspirant – and Mike Ekejimbe (Bob-Manuel Udokwu). The film opens with Omego's son Obinna (Enyinna Nwigwe) murdering his young daughter Kosi (Charlene Chisom Ignatus) in a forest as part of a money-making ritual, and in a nod to the original story, her spirit torments her father throughout the movie, leading to his sudden death towards the end.

Nnamdi Okeke (Swanky JKA) – Andy's secret son by his late second wife Ego yearns for a luxurious lifestyle by any means possible, becomes acquainted with Omego's wife Nneka (Ndidi Obi) and Obinna who both offer to help him establish connections within the advertising industry with an introduction to wealthy businessman, Richard Williams (Ramsey Nouah).

Nnamdi is later catapulted into high society status, acquiring vast wealth and recognition, but his new life comes at a price. Unbeknownst to Nnamdi, Richard is the new leader of The Six, and on a mission to lure him into their cult, and due to Andy's past the Okeke lineage is eternally bound to the dark side.

Richard eventually initiates Nnamdi, but fails to persuade Andy back into the fold after the latter refuses. Nnamdi later regrets joining The Six, especially after falling for Kelly (Munachi Abii) whom he meets at Obinna's wedding when the latter remarries seven months after his wife's death. Richard and Omego have commanded him to present her as a sacrifice, and Nnamdi is torn between appeasing the cult and sparing Kelly's life.

Toby visits the depressed Nnamdi to get to the bottom of the latter's melancholy demeanor and passes the night at his place, but Richard possesses Nnamdi, commanding him to stab his sleeping cousin in lieu of Kelly. Unable to resist, Nnamdi resorts to stabbing himself instead and is rushed to hospital where he survives and reconciles with his biological father Andy whom he had previously rejected. Members of The Six are arrested after a recording Obinna sent Uzoma before his suicide is used as evidence.

From the foregoing analysis, it is clear that Nollywood filmmakers consciously use their movies to warn society of the adverse consequences of indulging in ritual crimes. Hence everyone involved in the despicable behaviour comes to tragic and regrettable end.

## Results

From the foregoing analysis, it can be easily deduced that ritualistic crimes highlight in the analyzed movies are not Nollywood invented but are rather constant features of the Nigerian culture. The newspapers chronicle of the prevalence of ritualistic crimes in Nigeria is a testimony to this. Nollywood only serves to highlight this reality for altruistic reasons – institute a basis for social rethink and action. Hence, what *Living in Bondage I* and *II* do is highlight the vanity of ritual crimes for money. Note that all partakers in ritualistic criminal activities suffer significantly in both movies. Thus, rather than reinforce such behavior, Nollywood kicks against it. In doing this, the movie makers reinforce what the American Hayes' Office termed "the law of compensating moralities", which allows the filmmaker to explore socially despicable themes and behavior so long as in the end, evil behaviour is punished to deter imitation. Hence, in the final analysis, all who commit ritual crimes in the movies, from Chief Omego, Andy and Obinna to Richard and others suffer grave consequences to underscore the vanity of ritual criminal activities. Given this kind of reading therefore, *Living in Bondage I & II* and all similar Nollywood productions that explore the theme of ritual crime, cannot in all honesty be said to be promoting or giving a seal of approval to ritual crime.

## Recommendation and Conclusion.

Against the backdrop of the findings of the study it is recommended that:

In the light of Nollywood's undeniable popularity among youths and its attendant potential to influence their behavior, Nollywood filmmakers should be encouraged to de-emphasize the celebration and glamorization of ritually acquired wealth, even though it is part of social reality. Filmmakers should be encouraged to use the selective mirror they hold to place more emphasis on the woes and agonies suffered as consequences of ritual crimes. The censors board and other relevant gatekeeping agencies should set a limit on how much positive projection of ritual crime is admissible in Nollywood. This no doubt will go a long way in mitigating their negative influence on youth behaviour

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