

Nollywood: The Nigerian film industry

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Sick and dying, the pagan African king knew that he could save himself only by the sacrifice of another human being. Following the king's orders, servants kidnapped a young Christian boy, Deola, with a view to killing him. Eventually, though, the faithful Deola was able to show the king that his health problems all stemmed from a pagan curse. Even better, Deola was revealed to be the king's long-lost grandson, and the whole family was reconciled and brought to Christ.

That particular story, *Apótí Erí* ("Ark of the Covenant"), was written not in the seventh century but within the past decade, and it survives not in an ancient manuscript but in a straight-to-video production. It is a splendid example of one of the largest and most influential forms of Christian media in the emerging churches, namely the evangelical or charismatic video production that stands at the forefront of evangelism in Africa.

Insofar as they know such films at all, Americans will be familiar with the legendary *Jesus* video of the late 1970s. In the past 15 years Nigeria has produced thousands of such films—part of the astonishing cinema boom that has become known as Nollywood, the world's third-largest film industry, after Hollywood and the Indian Bollywood.

Some 300 Nigerian producers churn out around 2,000 each year, serving a market of almost 150 million people. The films go straight to DVD or VCD and sell cheaply. The megahits can easily sell hundreds of thousands of copies in Nigeria alone, not to mention their circulation among the Nigerian diaspora in North America and Western Europe. Because videos are freely passed on from hand to hand, the actual viewership is impossible to determine.

What we can say is that explicitly Christian videos make up a large part of the output, which is not surprising when we realize that perhaps 45 percent of Nigerians follow this faith. Made largely in a mixture of Yoruba and English, Nigerian Christian videos enjoy a continentwide distribution through satellite networks and cable channels. These films have also helped spawn imitators in other countries, such as

Ghana and Kenya, and many have been subtitled for use in French-speaking Africa. So influential have they been that Nigerian Muslims are now producing their own versions in a desperate attempt to play catch-up.

For many Americans, the Nigerian videos create a sense of paradox, in that modern technology is used to present ideas that appear to be stubbornly premodern. One of the best-known studios is Mount Zion Faith Ministries, founded by evangelist Mike Bamiloye. It is the firm that produced *Apótí Erí* and several dozen more popular films. Central to Mount Zion productions is Christian spiritual warfare against the forces of evil. West Africa, in this studio's view, is uniquely subject to the assaults of evil because of the recent history of pagan and animist faiths in the region, the very bloody history of sacrificial worship, and the widespread survival of those practices; in consequence, demonic influences permeate the land and people. Typical Mount Zion titles include *Ide Esu (The Devil's Bondage)*, *The Haunting Shadows* and *Blood on the Altar*.

If these films warn of dangers, they also offer solutions, and they have been amazingly effective in popularizing biblical and charismatic messages. For the vision of serving God by purifying the land, believers find extensive justifications in the texts of the Old Testament: the high places *must* be removed. The curses on the land can be combated and removed only by charismatic Christian prayer, worship and exorcism, usually led by a faithful pastor. The films teach doctrines of deliverance and sanctification while constantly reminding believers of the dangers of the occult.

As artistic productions, these films vary enormously, and they rarely offer real surprises. Some are simple morality tales; the viewer knows that the minister will triumph – possibly at the cost of his life; that the curse will be lifted; and that the survivors will give their hearts to Christ. Production values are not high, and special effects are crude. Sometimes, though, the films do achieve a real historical vision, which is perhaps seen at its best in Mount Zion's *Esin Ajoji (Strange Religion)*, a stark portrait of the generational clash between old and new religious values in Yoruba society.

For Northern world observers, these films make their greatest contribution in opening a door to understanding the beliefs and grassroots concerns of the growing churches of West Africa. Films like *Esin Ajoji* and *Apótí Erí* offer a much fuller picture than any number of academic studies or perhaps any written texts could. Put another way, trying to understand the thought worlds of African Christians without

taking account of such films is like trying to grasp the character of American Protestantism while ignoring its hymns.