



## **Eco-Nolly: The depiction of the gods as forest dwellers and tree nymphs in the discourse of preserving Africa's ecological richness**

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### **Abstract**

*While Nollywood, Nigeria's movie/film industry, may have had a chequered history, it has no doubt carved a niche for itself in the global space of the film industry. It currently stands as the most authoritative and authentic voice of Africa and the Black race in film discourse. Employing historical-analytic and direct observation methods, this paper examines how Nigerian moviemakers preserve the Nigerian/African ecosystem through their film locales. By building homes for the gods in the forests and on tree trunks, they preserve such trees, which would have fallen victim to modernisation by being used as planks and woods for various purposes. Unfortunately, this supposedly noteworthy effort is distorting reality and misrepresenting the way Africans relate with and treat their gods. Drawing from Gerbner's Cultivation Theory, the paper submits that Nollywood's concept of forests and tree trunks as the dwelling place of the gods might, over time, be assumed to be the norm rather than a fictitious creation of filmmakers by the viewers in contrast to reality unless it is addressed forthwith. It is, therefore, recommended that Nollywood filmmakers should not sacrifice the reality of the dwelling place of the gods in Africa for the purpose of achieving film richness and aesthetics.*

**Keywords:** *Eco-Nolly, Nollywood, ecosystem, Cultivation Theory, Gods, forest dwellers.*

## Introduction

One of the most important basic needs of humanity is shelter. Once settled comfortably in a perceived secure habitat, human beings begin to accommodate and make room for forces they believe are instrumental to their wellbeing. Such forces as the gods they serve are vital for their sense of wellbeing. It is unfair in their perception for them to enjoy the pleasures of a comfortable home while the gods (usually) of their ancestors are homeless. A germane example is David, who felt uncomfortable after building a home for himself without building a dwelling place for the God of his Fathers, the God of Israel (1 Kings 8:17; 1 Chronicles 22: 7; 2 Chronicles 6:7) . It is noteworthy that God appreciated the gesture even when it was still an intra-personal communication. It was David's son, Solomon, who eventually built the house of God. In similar circumstances, Africans, especially in the pre-colonial era, were like David in building dwelling places for their gods. And even when some were unable to build, their children always did. The example of *Obi* located in front of the compound among the Igbo of south-east Nigeria instantiates the point being made. The significance of *Obi* in Igbo land is well illustrated in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The place of the *Obi* as the first point of call in the home, which every family head must have, is similar to the place of the gods among the Igbo. It is not hidden. The thrust of this paper is to interrogate how Nollywood filmmakers represent the abode of the gods

in their movies, how they have shifted the abode of the gods from its normal position to the forests and on tree tops/trunks, thereby turning the gods into forest dwellers and tree nymphs. This study, therefore, argues that this is an outright misrepresentation of the Igbo cultural reality.

In South-East Nigeria, the abode of the gods was usually erected within the general vicinity of the family house so that man and god/s live within the same physical, temporal and spiritual space. The advent of civilisation and foreign religions introduced a shift from this man-god relationship. Foreign religions tend to undermine the African gods by spreading the notion of their non-existence (see Soyinka's *The Credo of Being and Nothingness*, 1991). The African religious nature and reliance on the gods are reflected in the desire of David to provide a home for his God. Indeed, some are so attached to their gods that they carry them about! This is, perhaps, why epic filmmakers in Nollywood deem it fit to always pay special attention to the dwelling places of the gods in their movies. This is not because they want to portray reality but to enrich their movies aesthetically!

Before the intrusion of the coloniser, every traditional African household had its shrine, a place of worship for their gods. This is just like what is obtainable in some Catholic Christian homes where an altar (Shrine) is conspicuously erected for The Sacred Heart of

Jesus, Mary and Joseph (The Holy Family), especially by members of the Sacred Heart Society. Building this shrine is a prerequisite for membership. The same is applicable to villages and the entire communities. For the individual homes, the shrine is usually located at the back of the home or close to the barn/ *oba* where the yams were staked, perhaps for protection; in some homes, it is situated beside or in front of the *Obi*, a place through which a visitor enters the compound. For villages and communities, it was usually located in strategic places at the village/community square. For the community head, it was strategically located where it was impossible not to see as one entered the village. A shrine called *Mbari* enjoyed a pride of place among the huts in the community because of its peculiar decor and aesthetic. Its maintenance and decoration were guided and supervised by the chief priest, who usually selected the women who did the decoration annually. One strong feature of these shrines, irrespective of where they were located, was the presence of some economic trees, notably Iroko, *Oha*, pear or oil bean (*ugba*), which served as recipients and bore witnesses of sacrifice through the evidence of the blood, feathers and other tell-tale signs of ancestral worship/sacrifice splashed on them.

Within the shrines at the village squares, which were generally situated at cross/forked roads, these trees grew over the years into big lumbers and attracted to themselves

climbers and also became the home of animals and reptiles of all sorts. The ones in individual homes were maintained, especially as the *Oha* is a favourite vegetable among the Igbos. But, depending on the status of their owners, they all had an intimidating presence. Women and children were admonished to stay clear as the men were the ones who handled the cooking of whatever animal was offered for sacrifice. The head of the family, the man of the house, was in charge or, in his absence, an acolyte presided. The gods were generally revered as they were consulted frequently, and the sacrifices were lavish. Such was the situation prior to the advent of colonialism and its attendant religion of civilisation and destruction, which subsequently rendered the gods of Africa homeless. To further underscore the close affinity in the relationship between the African and his gods/ancestors, Osofisan, a playwright, critic, theatre director and scholar of no mean repute while delivering the 2004/2005 University of Ibadan Lecture saw it fit to include the ancestors in his opening protocol, "...Distinguished members of the Press, Our ancestors- including the most honoured among them, Our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Prophet Mohammed," (p.11).

Filmmaking in Nigeria and Africa was meant to right the wrongs done to Africa by the White race (Ukadike, 1995; Anyanwu, 2014). The extent to which the movie industry has been able to achieve these remains to be

seen. That notwithstanding, Nollywood has projected Africa into global space. Nobody who has even a passing interest in film scholarship as a producer, director, critic, writer or viewer would claim ignorance of African films, and this is largely attributed to Nollywood. The denial of African history by the West and Europe notwithstanding (Falola, 2013), the position occupied by Africa in global filmmaking is obvious and undeniable. Nollywood has continued to blaze the trail in the preservation of Nigeria/Africa's ecosystem through its use of natural locations for its movies. Where such locations appear difficult to access, especially as is the case with the dwelling place of the gods/shrines, these were creatively and resourcefully constructed. Here lies the difference between the historian and the creative writer, as Falola makes us understand: "While the former examines every possible perspective of a historical event, the latter creates his own cosmos and operates as a god who can will his wishes and create characters that suit his fancy," (p.44). This study examines select Nollywood films: *Agabaidu 1 & 2* (Emeka Amakaeze, 2018) and *Cursed to Die* (Ken Erics, 2020), with a view to showing how the filmmakers have been able to preserve the ecological and aesthetic richness of the African ecosystem and contribute to the economy in the process of creating their own concept of a dwelling place for the Nigerian/African gods. This is done without recourse to the plausibility of such abodes.

The significance of this study is further underscored by the fact that modern man, who is a product of the Christian religion, especially of the Pentecostal extraction, tends to undermine and discountenance the African belief in their gods and all they entail. de Graft (2002, p. 1) noted thus:

In these twentieth-century days of scientific omniscience, it is easy to discount many of the threats that drove men of former times to rituals of propitiation; even those of us in Africa who live, most of us, on the remote fringes of Western scientific civilization are beginning to think that these threats have no power over man and his imagination.

Moviemaking in Nigeria is first a business venture whose major preoccupation is making a profit. Moreover, the industry has not gone corporate; it is still largely individualistic and entrepreneurial-based (Osha, 1998; Adejunmobi, 2003; Shaka, 2004; Ekwuazi, 1997). Though the industry has done well over the years and has carved a niche for itself in the global space, it has largely remained entrepreneurial, notwithstanding the contributions of the Nigerian Film Corporation based in Jos, Plateau state and Netflix. This implies that breaking even and making a profit supersedes all other considerations, including content and aesthetic richness. So, unlike Hollywood, Bollywood and other economically buoyant film industries, which invest heavily in

building and constructing sets for their films, locations and props are major concerns in Nollywood. This is because of their economic status in the film budget. Without sufficient financial strength, Nollywood filmmakers draw from the abundant natural resources of their settings with a little decor to support the extant and natural environment readily offered by the ecosystem.

The importance of locations in films cannot be quantified. Locations are central to filmmaking because of their visual appeal and because the characters who populate the films must have an existential base. Through locations, the filmmaker manipulates the viewers and directs their mental and physical vision, determines their emotional attachment and plays with their knowledge of history, geography and powers of observation. This attests to why locations are all important, as they narrate half the story in both physical and temporal space. The Nollywood filmmakers, aware of their economic limitations, struggle to make up to the viewer through locations for the lapses which they may experience in content such as dialogue, storyline, plot, and costume, among others that their film is most likely to foist on the viewer. Locations are, therefore, vital in the filmmaking decision process not only in Nollywood but also in filmmaking globally (Omoera, 2021).

**Africans and their gods** The relationship between Africans and their gods alternates

between reverence, respect, fear/awe, humility and mutual give-and-take, provided all parties keep to the rules of engagement. This is because the relationship is predicated on the promise: "Do this or that for me, and I will do this or that in return and in appreciation." That was what led this writer's father to embark on the ritual processes that involved serving *Agwu* (The Igbo god of mesmerisation and tricks whose Yoruba counterpart is *Esu*). In the bid to get a male child, his father was reluctantly forced into this cult of the god and went through the rituals, although he was to do away with it in later life in the light of the coming of Christianity.

In Igboland, as in other parts of Nigeria/Africa and the diaspora, gods are not worshipped for the fun of it. The relationship is usually on the basis of mutual understanding of what each party was expected to do in the failure of which the relationship suffers. "The people of the Niger Delta region are known for the worship of small gods. The appeasement of such gods when offended takes a lot of sacrifices, and so everybody guides against things that may offend the gods" (Joseph, 2002, p.22). Joseph further claims that, unlike the Christian God, any offence against an African god receives immediate punishment/judgement. Hence, care was taken not to violate the ordinances of such gods. Okai (2010) draws similarities in the relationship between Ghanaian and

Nigerian plays by tracing the problems of the characters to their relationship with the gods.

A major point of reference concerning the similarities between the two plays has to do with the fact that both marital bed tragedies have their origins in the problems involving the gods. In Anowa's case, she owed her birth to the pledge made by her mother to their god that her child would become a priestess. In the case of Zifa, he had been made impotent by the gods for bringing the spirit of his dead father home too early, thereby polluting the cosmic wellbeing of his community (p.16).

While still engaging in this relationship, Okai contends that writers are also "murderers of the gods" because "all these endless sacrifices and festivals made to the gods have yielded no results" (p.20). There are other examples as can be gleaned from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, when Unoka, Okonkwo's father, went to consult the oracle regarding his poor harvest. Also, when Obiako retorted that the oracle should ask his dead father what gave him the audacity to demand a goat for sacrifice when in his lifetime he never had as much as a chick! This is further substantiated by the Igbo proverb, which holds that "If a god becomes too troublesome, it becomes wood for the fireplace." Correspondingly, in the novel, the encounter between Ajofia and Mr. Smith clearly illustrates the Igbo attitude to

worship as Ajofia tells Mr. Smith, "You can worship your own god. It is good that a man should worship the gods and the spirits of his fathers," (*Things Fall Apart*, p.152).

The nature of the relationship between Africans and their gods does not warrant the abode of the gods to be located far from the homes of the worshipper since consultation can take place anytime. Some worshippers/believers in African Traditional Religion (ATR) in Benin, Urhobo, and Yoruba have their shrines right inside their bedrooms, as we also see them in movies, as experienced by this writer. Indeed, it is inconceivable to imagine the shrine of the Oba of Benin removed from his palace! Although Nollywood is doing a good job of preserving for posterity an image of African gods, it would amount to a disservice and misinformation if these moviemakers consciously go out of their way to build homes for the gods in forests and on treetops. African gods and Africans have gone beyond that misguided belief of America and Europe about Africans being forest dwellers and sub-humans.

Africans, like other peoples of the world, create and kill their gods at will. A god is as relevant and useful as the creator deems it. Hence, when its efficacy and relevance become questionable, it is discarded or replaced. Africans know the roots of some of their gods as some were deified human beings with recognisable flaws, as witnessed

by the gods of the Yoruba- Ogun, Sango, Obatala, and Esu, among others. Soyinka (1976) said: "In Achebe's work, the gods are made as an expression of the political unity (and disunity) of the people" (p.92). While enunciating the mysteries of Ogun, the Yoruba god of war, iron and steel and clarifying the concept of tragedy, Soyinka elaborates on the cyclical relationship of the Yoruba/African and their gods where the past belongs to the ancestors, the present to the living and the future to the unborn. (p.148). This, no doubt, portrays both the intimate transitional nature and almost familial connection between Africans and their gods. In the first place, the ancestor is ageless, and once an African transits at whatever age, they become an ancestor worthy to be revered (See Horton, 1981). It is this reverence that leads the living to naturally build a befitting dwelling place for the ancestors/gods. And this dwelling place can NOT be situated in the forest or on treetops! It is for this reason that the dead are usually not castigated or referred to in negative terms. For if they were dead, consulting them would be both meaningless and useless and pouring libations for their blessing and protection would, at best, amount to effort in futility.

To explain how the Yoruba religious worship was able to find its way in the Americas and West Indies and continues to survive and progress to this day. Vega (2002) cites Albert J. Rabreau thus:

The gods of Africa were carried in the memories of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic. To be sure, they underwent a sea change. African liturgical seasons, prescribed rituals, traditional myths, and languages of worship were attenuated, replaced, and altered, or lost. Still, much remained, and particularly in Latin America, the gods lived on in the beliefs and rituals of the slaves' descendants. *Candomble* in Brazil, *Santeria* in Cuba, *Shango* in Trinidad and *Vaudou* in Haiti, all attest to the vitality and durability of the African religious perspective (p. 155).

The foregoing corroborates what Young (2002) meant when he said the memories which the diaspora Africans have of their gods are "inside a we." By which he meant that the memories of their gods live within them. The statement further points to the attachment of the Africans to their gods and how time and environment have altered much of the nature of the relationship while retaining the basics. Notwithstanding the time-lapse, the African places a great premium on his gods. What the diaspora Africans did in their creation or, rather, a re-creation of their gods over the years based on recollections of early childhood, as it were, or adulthood, is what Nollywood filmmakers, not knowing any better, are doing in their films. The belief in African gods and featuring them in movies most times belie their

efficacy as, more often than not, they are portrayed as agents of darkness, radiating and exuding evil. In any confrontation with the foreign/Christian religion, they are thoroughly disgraced, thereby ceding power and authority to the Christian God (Agorde, 2007; Sutherland-Addy, 2000). Rarely do the traditional gods come out strong for justice and fairness in the movies. This is unfortunate as it misrepresents the power of the gods, who are reputed to be quick in serving justice (Joseph. 2012). It makes one wonder whether the location and abode of the gods in the movies have an impact on their powers and efficacy or lack thereof.

Africans have different values and regards for their gods. The Yoruba and the Benin of Edo State, for instance, have more respect, reverence and regard for their gods (Omoera, 2014) than the Igbos. Indeed, it could be argued that the Igbos have less regard and tolerance for their gods than any other set of people in the world. That notwithstanding, the Igbos still have special consideration and position for their gods with regard to their abodes. In Clark's *Ozidi*, Ozidi's shrine is within his compound. So it is in Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and Laye's *The African Child (L'Enfant noir)* that he narrates the relationship his family has with their snake and many other literary works of African origin. They keep their gods close to their abodes to 'monitor' them better and quicker to do away with them should such gods fail to measure up to their expectations. Once a

god is perceived as unproductive and weak, the worshipper or adherent quickly changes loyalty! And the value of such a god becomes less than the value of the wood from which it was carved! (Horton, 1981).

The abode and location of a god have a lot to say about its relevance. To situate a god where it is inaccessible would naturally affect the patronage of such a god. This is why the locations of such shrines as Okija shrine in Okija, Anambra State and Long Juju of Arochukwu in Abia State are within the communities where they can easily be accessed for consultation and patronage (Onu, 2019). The foregoing testifies to the fact that by situating shrines in the deep forests, Nollywood filmmakers are unconsciously changing the narrative. This they do by introducing a new abode of African gods, a representation which may become the norm over time as those who knew the truth pass on and become ancestors.

### **Theoretical prodding**

Theories are academic postulations and projections designed to guide an academic discourse (Omoera & Anyanwu, 2020). The theories of media effect are signposts that the media use to support arguments to make their claims stronger and more significant. This paper is anchored on George Gerbner's (1967) media cultivation theory, which believes that media users, over time, cultivate the views that the media project and use



them as their own original ideas, thereby negating the idea of mediation. The theory stresses that heavy media viewers (television/film) tend to imbibe and cultivate the ideas portrayed on the screen and, over time, accept them as reality rather than mediated reality. For such viewers, the images and ideas projected on the screen become their realities since, for them, the media are their most reliable source of information. The relevance of this theory to this study is underscored by the fact that Nollywood practitioners, in their bid to maximise profit, shy away from research and rely instead on their imagination. They have created a new reality for film viewers as it relates to the abode of the gods in real space and time. Interestingly, most of these practitioners are 'Christians' who, in real life, do not believe in the efficacy of the traditional gods they project. They have these images drawn from their childhood memories based on folklore and stories, from observing their fathers or from other media and make up the rest. In this case, the filmmakers are not unlike the diaspora Africans, whom Young (2002), while writing on Ntozake Shange's choreo poem, *For colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, quotes from Nana Peasant's *Daughters of the Dust*, when he says:

We carry these memories inside a we. Do you believe that those hundreds and hundreds of Africans brought here on this side would forget everything they once knew?

We don't know where the recollections come from. Sometimes we dream of them. But we carry these memories inside a we (p. 296).

The above statement from a diasporan African aptly captures the 'source' of Nollywood moviemakers' concept of the abode of African gods as they situate such dwellings in far-flung forests and treetops/tree trunks contrary to reality. As already adduced, the reason is that being predominantly Christians, these filmmakers appear to have lost touch with reality because Africans do not, in reality, live far from their gods. Since they don't have recourse to research and history, they are guided by their intuitions, childhood recollections and other sources while portraying the home for the gods in movies. Unfortunately, over time, this may become the reality, at least for Nollywood movie patrons. While not condemning the filmmakers for their innovative and inventive attempt at preserving the African/Nigerian ecosystem, there is the need to ensure that the right information and the proper situation of things are preserved and propagated for the future. This is because failure to do the right thing would amount to a situation where the abnormal becomes the norm. An Igbo proverb says that "when a taboo is tolerated for long, it asserts itself as the norm." This is partly the objective of this study: to ensure that the proper information is relayed in Nollywood epic movies, especially as it affects the abode of the gods

and how the people relate with such gods. Media users, especially film viewers, would, over time, regard what they see as reality, especially given the frequency with which epic movies are churned out and shown on the Epic Movies Channel of African Magic Network on DSTV (Direct Satellite Television). This happens because the viewer has the tendency to trust the evidence of their eyes while negating the fact of mediation (Ekwuazi, 1991). The above claim is substantiated by the report of Ghanaians' attack on Nigerian residents in Ghana over the content of Nigerian movies which they related to real-life events in their country (Anyanwu, 2000).

The cultivation theory becomes significant because uncritical viewers believe what they see and hardly question it. The problem is compounded when the media content encoder, the filmmaker, in this case, is ignorant of the true context of their message. They cannot, therefore, effectively guide or educate the ignorant viewer, who is the target and end-user/receiver of the message. The only persons in a position to correct this anomaly, if they know, are the film critics. This is why one decries the absence or near lack of research in some Nollywood movies. Too much reliance on fictitious materials is a very dangerous practice in the industry, especially as they make use of real settings. These real locations they use give the impression that the few made-up ones, like the living places of the gods are all real. That

viewers tend to substitute made-up events for reality was amply demonstrated in the early years of Nollywood when Ghanaians attacked Nigerians resident in their country because they saw the corpse of a murdered child and concluded that the child was used for ritual by Nigerians because that is what they do in their movies, as mentioned above (Anyanwu, 2000). Not too long ago, Nigerian girls borrowing from what they see in movies imbibed the habit of asking their fiancés if their (the fiancé's mother was late before agreeing to marry them). Ordinarily, no normal person would ask such a question because it amounted to wishing one's mother dead as well as being a sacrilege, but the movies entrenched this as one of the pre-marital enquiries that helped in the decision to accept or reject a marriage proposal. The audience has the unfortunate habit of putting the blame for societal misconduct on Nollywood and other Nigerian artistes. Filmmakers should guide against such. The minister of information and culture, Lai Mohammed, during President Buhari's administration, made such a statement and the Managing Director of the National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB), Thomas Adedayo, had to correct him by putting the blame on parents instead. "The internet is replete with stories of ritual killings usually attributed to Nollywood as a consequence of its content. "Nigeria's minister of information recently blamed Nollywood for featuring money rituals in some of its movies," according to Onu (2022).

The NFVCB is unfortunately not living up to its responsibility as many films get away without their being aware of such production. Strangely, some of these films get aired on television. Many private broadcasting houses are less concerned about the quality of the films they air/broadcast since they are only bothered about filling their programme schedules. The filmmakers are, therefore, at liberty to do whatever pleases them, provided they avoid political subjects and some other sensitive issues of concern. Unfortunately, the subjects which seem innocuous and may appear innocent have greater and longer damaging effects on both the morals and culture of the people. Following the cultivation theory discussed above, these images, over time, may gradually take the place of reality. When this happens, the real images become permanently displaced in the viewers' memory, and the images created by movies become the reality. Consequently, society becomes the loser.

### **Methodology**

The nature of the study in the arts and humanities affects the research method adopted (Anyanwu, 2022). The research methods for this study are historical-analytic and direct observation approaches. These methods enable the researcher to appreciate the works (movies) in this instance, with a view to understanding how they are portrayed by the filmmaker. While the

historical analytic approach traces the history and analyses the movies, the direct observation provides support from experience in the industry.

### **The ecosystem and the danger of environmental degradation**

The health and wellbeing of the environment/ecosystem have been and have continued to be of concern to the World Health Organization (WHO), governments, environmentalists, and individuals. The importance of a safe and healthy environment cannot be quantified. Hence, the concern of environmentalists is to ensure that for every felled tree, there must be a replacement. Gana (2012), having highlighted the dangers posed to the environment by nature and some man-made problems such as soil erosion and deforestation through tree felling for fuel, says that "tree felling is rapidly aiding deforestation and desertification of the ecosystem, and so an unbalance (sic) ecology" (p. 126). He further notes that "the extraction of these trees for the purpose of fuel wood especially in the northern part of Nigeria have (sic) left the lands prone to desert encroachment, erosion, soil destabilisation and increase in reflected solar radiation" (pp. 124-125). Drawing from several sources Jarikre et al. (2019, p.93) submit that "human population growth and the activities that are associated with modern technological development continue to place a great burden on the environment which has led to global warming. There is the

fear that if man does not care for the environment, the destiny of man on the face of the earth will be chaotic, if not disastrous." The authors cited above all agree that tree planting would help to nurture a healthy and friendly environment conducive to man's overall wellbeing. This conscious or unconscious action of using these locations for movie production fits into the goal of preserving the ecosystem with an emphasis on trees and some ancestral forests.

Agbasiere (2014) contends that the environment includes the air, water, minerals, organisms and other external factors. The gods play a significant role in the life of the artist, especially the theatre artist. Asika (2014) observes that the concern for the wellbeing of the environment has engendered the birth of environmental literature, also called eco-lit, whose main focus is how to achieve an environmentally friendly society. This is particularly relevant in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, where the activities of multinational oil exploration companies have led to much environmental degradation and abuse (Omoera, 2019; Anyanwu, 2021). Beyond the use of the physical environment by Nollywood filmmakers, they also engage the animals and reptiles in their films. One recalls the use of the chimpanzee (Haruna) and the python in the University of Ibadan zoo by filmmakers to enrich their content. Unfortunately, both animals are now late, but others are being reared to replace them. All these constitute the ecological content of

Nollywood movies, along with the gods, deities, gnomes and other such creations of Nollywood film directors and scriptwriters. Some of these gods, when deployed as props in the movies, also attract the attention of art collectors who either bid for them or request a replica to be produced for their collection. This helps to perpetuate the life span of such gods and also makes them an international commodity.

### **Selected Nollywood movies and the abode of the gods**

Nollywood movies in recent times acquired a measure of aesthetic richness and sophistication in terms of their locations. It has, however, not always been like this. This applies to even those set in rural areas but which nevertheless have some scenes tucked in the cities, perhaps for contrast. Moreover, films set in rural areas always create room for city scenes, usually to underscore the migration from rural areas to the cities in pursuit of greener pastures. One of the major flaws in Nollywood, as it affects the setting/locale, is mostly on the temporal plane, where it is almost difficult, if not impossible, to determine the period in which films were set beyond a vague reference to a distant past or pre-colonial era. Naturally, the costumes and make-up belie such claims. Another problem with locations in Nollywood has to do with the sparse and weak financial base of the producers, which makes them take recourse to nature for their locations. This becomes advantageous to them as

viewers develop a close affinity with such movies as their interest peaks when they identify such locations. But it also affects the story as care is taken not to mess things up. For instance, having received a hotel gratis for a location where shootings and destructions may take place, the filmmaker, mindful of their finances, avoids any damages. This leads to a situation where one sees massive shooting taking place, but not so much as a window blind is torn or any wall getting blood stains. This enables them to avoid costs, but the reverse effect is that it kills plausibility as the viewer knows that it is impossible for such 'miracles' to occur where bullets are flying and not even a glass window gets shattered, whereas a recourse to some special effects would have made all the difference.

In *Agabaidu 1* and *2* (2018), produced and directed by Emeka Amakeze, we see concrete instances of the issues being discussed. It must be noted that this analysis is basically as it relates to settings and not necessarily about general content. Even at that, the main focus is in relation to the abode of the gods in the general outlay of the movie. Thus, in *Agabaidu*, there are two main settings which relate to the gods. The first is the palace of King Agabaidu himself (Pete Edochie). The second is that of the chief priest. While the king hosts his god within his premises as it should be, the chief priest has his shrine situated in the forest, thereby making his god(s) forest dwellers. Strangely, unlike what

was obtained in pre-colonial Africa, in which period the movie is apparently set, no other male adult in the community has a shrine. This is against the norm as every male adult of the era has his shrine as a right and sign of manhood and independence, without which he has no claim to being a man. In this film, however, the chief priest has his shrine located in a forest outside the community, from where he comes to relate with the king who has gone astray in his bid to be a god and make his subjects worship him.

The location of Agabaidu's shrine, right in the middle of his compound and close to his palace, is quite appropriate as it makes consultation easy. One does not need to travel long distances as if they are going to consult a foreign god. This makes the relationship between man and god smooth and cordial. In Igboland, for instance, kola nut presentation is impossible without recourse to the gods. So, the close proximity in the dwelling places of man and god makes the relationship and interaction effective as libations are poured, kola nut offered, and blessings are received in return. But in a situation where the gods have their abodes on tree tops or in the forests, it becomes difficult to consult in emergency situations if one has to travel long distances or at night. Yes! The gods are omnipresent, but going to their dwelling places for consultation has its own appeal and potency. Hence, their closeness matters. Moreover, the gods are usually accessed through their

priests/priestesses, who serve as mediators between man and god. In a situation where even the mediators are difficult to reach because of the terrain or location of the abode of the gods, things may not augur well for both parties as communication would be affected as a consequence of problems of consultancy. *Agabaidu* can, therefore, be said to be midway in its compliance and violation of the proper placement of the abode of the gods in African consciousness.

The foregoing substantiates the fact that the greatest medicine man/native doctor in my community, Nwaoguala, who took my father through the processes and procedures of initiation into *Agwu* (the trickster god of the Igbo and head messenger of other gods), had his shrine in the front of his compound beside his *Obi*. It was not hidden; it was not located in the bush or forest. Yet, it had the aura, the reverence and the fear of all who came for consultation. The abode of the gods need not be located in the forest or on tree tops for efficacy. By so doing, Nollywood is effectively changing the narrative of African cultural/traditional space for the gods. In the near future, given the way our children are distancing themselves from African languages, norms and values in preference to those that are far flung from their immediate community, Nollywood would probably remain the only 'dependable and reliable' source of documentation. This is because the old men and women who serve as griots and custodians of African culture and value/belief

systems are dying and becoming ancestors. When this occurrence becomes a reality, as it would soon be, the most reliable source of information would then become Nollywood.

Movie directors consciously instil fear in the viewers by aesthetically embellishing their content and pandering to Western stereotypes of African backwardness. They do this by locating the gods deep into the forests or on tree tops, sometimes even deep into the hollows of some trees. One wonders who would be climbing trees, endangering his life or risking being mauled by wild beasts just to consult a god that was better off domiciled in one's bedroom! The good aspect of this newfound home for the African gods created by Nollywood filmmakers is the preservation of these trees, which would otherwise have been hewed down long ago and used for sundry purposes.

The movie, *Cursed to Die* (Eric, 2020), discusses the challenges and humiliations which Prince (Ken Eric) has to go through because of a curse placed on him by an envious and jealous uncle. The abode of the priestess is located deep in the forest. One wonders about the reason behind this concept of locating the gods away from their worshippers or patrons. Is it to instil fear in the viewer? Is it designed for the purpose of aesthetic embellishment or a conscious attempt to create and invent a new film narrative, thereby creating a new idiom in Nollywood? It is difficult to provide answers

to such questions beyond the effort of cloaking their movies in the garb of epic, as epic movies are known to be steeped in quest and adventure. This negates the norm. It is unlike what obtains in Benin movie culture, a sub-genre of Nollywood. In Peddie Okao's *Ikoka* (2007), the Oba's shrine occupies a pride of place within the palace. This is a true reflection of the Benin way of life and underscores the nature of the attachment and relationship they have with their gods. Indeed, the majority, if not all, of the African Traditional Religious (ATR) worshippers in Benin and elsewhere in Africa have their shrines right inside their bedrooms to make room for intimacy and ease of consultation. The shrines located within or in front of the compounds are mainly to serve external clients and not for the owner of such shrines. Among the traditional Yoruba, Benin, Urhobo, and other parts of Nigeria, even Africa, that is what obtains. The shrine/abode of the gods is situated and in close proximity to their worshippers, not located in forests as if the worshippers are afraid of identifying with their gods. The truth is that, like other religions, the practitioners of ATR are very proud of their calling and are, indeed, dreaded, though reviled behind their backs. The filmmakers are acutely aware of this and, notwithstanding their attraction for and reliance on natural settings, generally avoid deploying real shrines and would rather construct their own. This idea of situating the abode of the gods far from humanity is

prevalent and associated with epic filmmakers who believe that epic movies must have such settings to measure up to their billing.

### Conclusion

The African and the African diaspora, like other peoples of the world, have great attachment to their God/gods and, as such, reserve a special place in their hearts and homes for such supernatural/spiritual forces. No doubt, Nollywood epic filmmakers have been doing a great job in preserving the African ecosystem, especially landmark trees and other forms of forestation which they use for their movie locations. They are, however, inadvertently misleading and misrepresenting Africa and the Black race as people who like to distance themselves from their gods. This is true. The abode of the gods should not be sacrificed for movie aesthetics and considerations to appeal to misconceived ideas about African gods. Africans enjoy intimate relationships with their gods and prepare a special dwelling place for them in their homes. If this misrepresentation is not corrected now, in the very near future, African gods will be seen and regarded as forest dwellers and tree nymphs, whereas it is what some epic filmmakers have devised to beautify their films and appeal to primordial tendencies.

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