

## WOMEN AND EVANGELICAL MERCHANDISING IN THE NIGERIAN FILMIC ENTERPRISE

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**Abstract.** If there is any single popular art form that can be considered the most significant in the representation of postcolonial life in Nigeria today, it is, without question, *Nollywood*. *Nollywood* has become the most popular medium of entertainment and like Nigerian literature it plays an important role in articulating cultural and national consciousness. Although, the enterprise continues to defy definition because its production remains localized, it has become so popular among the people, considering the fact that Nigeria is now more of a watching society to a reading one. This essay examines the role of women in evangelical films in *Nollywood*. The films make it apt that women are very powerful tool for proselytizing, but they are also portrayed as agents of destruction employed by marine spirits and the world of the coven to wreak havoc and pain on man. Invariably, the essay articulates the strategies filmmakers employ to give expression to the notion that women are objects and not subjects in these films. *High Way to the Grave* and *End of the Wicked* are the filmic texts purposively selected for analysis.

**Keywords and phrases:** *Nollywood*, evangelism, women, God, patriarchy

Within the short span of its existence, the Nigerian video film has flowered into an incredible enterprise that defines what Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff describe as the anxiety of the postcolony. The films retell the story of the underclass with emphasis on the necessity of liberating them from the grip of poverty and spiritual backwardness, because, these films suggest, the majority of Nigerians negotiate their existence around the abject corners of society. Invariably, the films capture the existential angst that characterises postcolonial life and the anxiety of freeing oneself from such burdens. The Nigerian video film has become an extremely popular medium for a complete revisioning of the story of the people. The Nigerian video film industry has come to be referred to as *Nollywood*, a designation that points to its similarities with Hollywood (Okome 2007, 1). The major similarity between Hollywood and *Nollywood* is that they both began as populist art forms and have remained somewhat in the province of the people. Although *Nollywood* offers a postcolonial medium to narrate the joys and pains of marginalised people, it is not in complete opposition to the West. This is the case because of the ideological bankruptcy of the films.

The cardinal motive for screening the films is to make money; accordingly, producers and directors hardly consider the question of ideology. Interestingly therefore, *Nollywood* does not stand as a counterdiscourse to Western narratives. Ckukwuma Okoye (2007, 20) argues that *Nollywood* affords its filmmakers "strategies in the postcolonial agenda of constructing a sovereign framework in spite of the cultural and economic imposition of the West". *Nollywood* has tactically defined a novel and interesting space for the social and cultural negotiations of its enthusiastic public(s). This visual practice, which was initially an experiment begun in relative isolation, provides its teeming and heterogeneous enthusiasts the visual topography of localised dramas of everyday life. From a depleted economic base, it nevertheless manages to create local narratives about things that count to people and things that people want to see and hear; it also introduces ideas that give its viewers the opportunity to see themselves as they are or sometimes even to take their existence beyond the realm of the mundane to that of the exotic.

Most scholars agree that *Nollywood* evolved from Yoruba travelling troupe or itinerant theatre (Haynes 2007; Olayiwola 2007; Ogunleye 2004). The itinerant or travelling theatre was a highly popular form in the first quarter of the second half of the twentieth century. As itinerant theatre troupes multiplied, they began to broaden their horizon and scope, thereby complexifying their mode of operation and increasing their accessibility to their growing audience. To meet with the challenges of servicing their large audiences, they dabbled into the motion picture enterprise. Adesanya (1997, 14) contends that:

Involvement of the Yoruba traveling theatre practitioners in motion picture production was perhaps the most auspicious single factor in the evolution of an indigenous cinema in Nigeria.

Just like the focus of the *Nollywood* production, Jeyifo (1984, 76) avers that:

The diversification of the media of expression for the Traveling theatre troupes no doubt reflects, among other things, the commodification of popular artistic and cultural expression in order to exploit the cultural and psychological needs of the newly citified masses for entertainment diversion and even escapism.

Haynes and Okome (1997, 29), Okome (1991, 83) and Shaka (2002, 11) assert that Kenneth Nnebue's *Living in Bondage I & II* (1992) was not just the cardinal defining moment for the Nigerian video film, but the beginning of a new epoch in the video film tradition, a trailblazer. It is an undeniable fact that present filmic practice in Nigeria developed from the itinerant or travelling theatre.

*Nollywood* emerged primarily for local consumption and to make money for local entrepreneur-producers and marketers. However, the birth of *Nollywood* also marks the beginning of the gradual decolonisation of the African filmic space. The Western films that dominated African screens were unable to represent and capture the sociocultural configuration of Africa. The dominant Western filmic expression lacks the mechanics needed to integrate African cultures; hence the *Nollywood* production was a welcome development to local audiences. Most of the Western films screened in Africa make the African audience flounder in a world in which all logic and coherence dissolve and viewers hardly know on what level they are to read the image, or whether what follows is reality or fantasy. The *Nollywood* production makes available to its local audience stories of their world imaged in such unfiltered wholeness that they can only be rivalled by the dazzling temper of the Onitsha market chapbooks.

This filmic project is geared towards the task of decolonising the African filmic space and time. Over the years, the Nigerian filmic enterprise has not only ensured that the attitudes, values and beliefs of the people are taken into account, but that they are indispensable to the visual landscape. *Nollywood* also serves simultaneously as entertainment for its enthusiastic public(s) and as a means of expression, when viewers' problems are presented through the films. Some of these films serve as instrument for preserving tradition and for inculcating established values. Within this filmscape, the existential despair that defines their individualities, their agonies and the ulcerous spots in their lives are dramatised. That is, the realities of their *humanhood* stare at them "screen to face" (Okuyade 2006). This video industry showcases the chequered state of the Nigerian nation, making available a wealth of instrumental data for cultural, anthropological and sociological analysts interested in situating the common man in contemporary Africa. Though this filmic enterprise is gaining ever-increasing popularity it should be noted that it was initially a strictly domestic business to satisfy the domiciliary need of Nigerians. Although Okome (1991, 92) suggests that the *Nollywood* video film emerged as a response to "a crude zeal to satisfy the audience clamour for its own face and cultural avatars", the enterprise today has become a sinew of economic life for people involved in this commodification of entertainment.

Just as Haring Lee (1979, 177) observes about African oral performance tales, the Nigerian video film is geared towards "solving the social and psychological problems of people". This video practice bridges the yearning gap left by Western films in satisfying the domestic-cum-sociocultural needs of the audience. They are canonical texts of the postcolonial landscape in which the dramas of everyday life are localised. This visual record becomes an essential tool for capturing and relaying the socio-economic conditions of Africa. The Nigerian filmic practice continues to survive even in the absence of a formidable film industry. Haynes

(1997, 22–23) observes that this cinematic practice is "alive and kicking, and that [it] mirrors the paradoxical image of the country, expressing its ethnic divisions, its relative industrialisation, its huge market, and its current poverty, which doesn't however prevent busy, inventive informal activities". Although some scholars have asserted that nothing powerful or consistent can emerge from the crassly commercial purview of an industry concerned more with profit than art, *Nollywood* contradicts such claims by speaking to the pains of the people. For example, Anyanwu (2000, 59) criticises the financial drive of the enterprise and erroneously asserts that the entire business of filmmaking in Nigeria is inconsequential. Perhaps his contestation is informed by the fact that the enterprise does not reflect his prescriptive and moralistic values. He unequivocally doubts whether "any video *produced in Nigeria* has anything good for the family" (emphasis mine).

What is the importance and function of the entire Nigerian filmic enterprise? This cinemascapes is the site where problems and prospects of the postcolony are dramatised. It is the uneasy territory between reality and representation. This is what De Lauretis (1980, 187) describes as "a social technology, a textual machine of representation". If we take into account the mimetic qualities of cinema, we see that the Nigerian video film must be a shadow of the Nigerian nation. This is what Andrew (1983, 133) dubs "symptomatic reading". Although the video film was an instrument of colonial hegemony when it first surfaced on the shores of Africa, the video film in Nigeria currently assumes a more pragmatic stance. The video film phenomenon in a postcolonial space assumes a dual function; it privileges the postcolony and attenuates the colonial hold on it. Just as it was a formidable instrument for propaganda for the dominant colonising powers, so too has it become a tool for sustaining the indigenous belief system. Murray (2002, 235–236) amplifies the above assertion when she argues that "cinema played an important role in the elaboration of imperial propaganda as it did in its denunciation". No matter what the thrust of these films is, they remain transcripts of contemporary African life.

The subject of this essay also concerns the role of women in evangelical merchandise; as the most visible, popular and vibrant texts of Africa's postcolony in the second and third millennium, the video medium is relevant to any evangelical enterprise in this geographical area. As the thrust of the paper connected to the genre of religious film it becomes imperative to briefly discuss the evolution of religious films in Nigeria. The history of religious films in Nigeria dates back to the era of colonisation. Specifically in Lagos, where Catholic priests screened religious films as means of proselytism, most of the films are propagandistic and racist in tone. The films bifurcate the religious choices of the colonised and their colonisers. However, the cardinal purpose for screening the films was to convert souls for the Western God and to attenuate the

religious belief system of the subaltern. According to Okome (1991, 155), an anonymous reviewer enjoined the indigenous part of the church to discredit the films. One of these films portrayed Judas as dark skinned while Peter was a light-skinned person.

The religious films of the current moment still exhibit this feature. The films are long, but with a little distinction between characters. The dark face of the mischievous character, Judas, is reconstructed and made more disgusting with a visual topography of local faces that are evil and sinister—faces mobilised and manipulated by the forces of the underworld. At the other end of the spectrum are bucolic faces of submissive, unassuming and innocent characters that are persecuted for their religious belief, anchored on the theological teachings of the Lord, Jesus. The colonial religious filmic expressions are not discarded, except for slight alterations that obtain in most cases. It becomes glaringly clear that the religious films of the present are invariably indebted historically to the colonial intentions of religious films of the past.

The thrust of the religious films of *Nollywood* is the persistent struggle between the forces of evil/the devil and good/God. Though justice, the hallmark force of God, generally triumphs in the end, what matters most is the amount of suffering to which the Christian characters are subjected. The nature of agonies the just character encounters is sometimes unbelievable, improbable, even unbearable, but such suffering undeniably gives rise to the aspects that give the films their radiance: the character's strength to endure, because endurance is the major coefficient of the postcolonial identity, and that characterises the power of hope. Endurance and hope have become tropes in postcolonial imaginative constructs. This struggle between good and evil, usually inhabiting the spiritual terrain that goes beyond mortal perception, is removed from the sublime and placed in the ridiculous. This is what informs the notion that spiritual freedom can only be ensured through prayers and belief in Jesus Christ. Spiritual liberation comes only through spiritual warfare, an idea that Obododima Oha (1997, 94) designates "the war paradigm". The unending conflicts between good and evil foreground the magnitude of the battle and the helplessness of mortal man who is trapped in between, or better still, who is the subject of this warfare, which is aptly dramatised in the films. This warfare is usually waged on extra-terrestrial plains to confirm the Biblical text that states, "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against power, against the rulers of darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places" (The Holy Bible 1982). *Highway to the Grave* and *End of the Wicked*, written and produced by Helen Okpabio of the Liberty Gospel Foundation, shall be examined in order to conduct a dialectical analysis of the place of women in this filmscape. *End of the Wicked*, like several African films, employs tales from Nigeria's traditional oral heritage to evaluate current neocolonial religious politics. As Helen Okpabio delves into the

realities of contemporary situations, she recognises the power of traditional forms of knowledge as an inspiration for interpretation and critique. Besides recognising Okpabio's critique of global postcolonial and Neo-Pentecostal religious standards, it is important to appreciate the local polemics to which Okpabio responds and how her films enact a dialogue with the emerging realities of the Christian belief system. In addition to exposing modern evils, *End of the Wicked* engages in an intellectual discussion about the plight of Christians. The early Christian ministries in Nigeria banned the idea of the intervention of evil spirits in the affairs of humans. They assumed that this notion was strictly barbaric, and could not be substantiated. Okpabio's films not only oppose this prohibition, but seem to concur with indigenous religious belief in evil forces within the site of the church.

*End of the Wicked* is a gripping drama of the empire of witches and blood-sucking and flesh-eating human demons, reminiscent of Hollywood's *Hammer House of Horror* (Chibnall & Petley 2002). The narrative is woven around the domestic upheaval in the life and death of Chris Amadi (Uche Okafor). Chris's home is torn apart by the activities of the world of the coven. It is not clear why Chris is their subject of attack, but somebody within the confines of his home is responsible for these confrontations. She is Chris's mother and a member of this grotesque and sinister world. She vows to tear Chris's home apart, bringing him under serious persecution and making Stella (Hilda Dokubo), her daughter-in-law, miserable. As Chris goes through this crucible of unending pains, his mother pretends to help solve the problems by taking him to sorcerers and sorceresses to help him contend with his problems. Oral folklore in Africa is replete with stories of witches who attack because they have been sold out by their loved ones. This idea is aptly articulated in a proverb of the Urhobo, the Niger-Delta people of Nigeria: *the root of man's problems usually resides with him in the house, it is like the rat in one's apartment, it eats you and cushions the pains*.<sup>1</sup> As stated earlier, Okpabio, the scriptwriter of this film, works with popular anthropological knowledge of witchcraft. One of the aims of this film is to broaden the local audience's understanding of witchcraft trends and strategies that the forces of evil employ to reach their targets. Okpabio, once a self-professed witch, now turned pastor, captures the reality of the presence of witches in the world. The narratological devices the film employ make the epistemic tensions between the witches, wizards and just characters apt, as the narrative becomes saturated with passion. Thus Okpabio elaborately and convincingly demonstrates the inconsequentiality and nothingness of witchcraft and the evil of the coven in her films. It is the ability to reach out and capture the mind of her audience about

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<sup>1</sup> Urhobo is one of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria's Niger Delta, they use this proverb which has become a cliché to articulate the fact that one's enemy is most times a family member.

what may be considered an old belief that provides Okpabio's religious video films with the potency and visual agency of conversion.

As she enunciates discourses of fear and awe in local evil practices, Okpabio provides an alternative, the power of God. As Chris suffers different calamities, his wife is suspected of being responsible for the downward plunge of his fortune. This only accentuates the patriarchal set-up in African societies: wives are usually held responsible for the socio-religious problems of their husbands. This is a popular feature of rural secular life that has been extended to urban spaces and even the church, because it is people from the province who equally populate

The traditional image of women in this Neo-Pentecostal worldview finds a place in the evangelical films. *End of the Wicked* emphasises this image in Stella's mother-in-law's proclivity for playing with facts. For the video film maker/shepherdess, the ultimate aims are to harvest souls for God and to contest the socially constructed image of women, thereby salvaging Stella from the perniciousness of a cultural practice that is not in conformity with Okpabio's brand of Christian teaching. This purpose only restates the traditional order. Stella is exonerated from the guilt of killing her husband and her mother-in-law's role in his death becomes clear. Okpabio casts herself as Pastor Priscilla, mirroring her real life occupation, and she stands out as a kind, loving character. She is the redeemer who rescues Stella. Her role in the film is to disseminate the "Word", anchored on the theological teachings of Jesus Christ. Okpabio's decision to maintain her Pastoral status both in the filmic space and time and the social and real space becomes a filmic-cum-theological strategy of emphasising that the evangelical films are not just entertainment but a medium for selling God. Through this technique, she de-emphasises the social and domestic trappings of the film and brings it to an evangelical end. Although her character demasculinises the pulpit, she does not encourage any critical questioning of the role of women and social change. This point is very important because the pulpit is a masculine space that women are not supposed to occupy. This prohibition is urban spaces. Chris is overwhelmed by the powers of the underworld, and he eventually dies while his wife is heavily compelled through torture tormented to confess her role in her husband's death. Pastor Priscilla comes to her rescue. The pastor prays for God's intervention and a hasty reckoning. Not long after, Chris's mother confesses her guilt as the architect who engineered her son's untimely end.

an extension of African cultural belief systems, which specifically confine women to silent spaces. According to this view, the pulpit is a site of power and as such women should not have access to it. However, as a modern day preacher, Okpabio makes it clear that the pulpit is for those called by God. Women could equally be called and therefore they should be able to mount the pulpit. This is

one way Okpabio sells her God. The film privileges different sets of stereotypes about women: mother/wife as witch, the dependent woman who derives bliss from the matrimonial enterprise only if and when she has a man she calls her husband and the idea of the complete woman, beautiful, yet unequivocally submissive.

The film does not give women enough space to define themselves. Nor do they receive any special place to manoeuvre or to make necessary negotiations in a society that pushes women to the margins. It adequately captures the domestic terrain and its attendant malice. The focus of Okpabio's films is the moral teachings of the Bible. Although Chris's mother is associated with evil, women in Nigeria appear to be closer to the church than men. When enduring serious spiritual and social problems, women embrace the church as the place for solutions of such problems. Men, however, see such women as gullible. It becomes clear that most men who go to church do so because of their wives. Invariably it is women who become agents of evangelism. The film makes it apparent that Chris's refusal to follow his wife to her church complicates his problems and is the reason for his untimely death. This point is emphasised more in *Highway to the Grave*, another film produced by Okpabio. *End of the Wicked* does not challenge Western perceptions of evil and the barbaric inclinations of postcolonial people. Rather, it emphasises and celebrates the Western belief in the superiority of Western civilisation. Okpabio thus celebrates the voice of Western triumphalism.

*Highway to the Grave* elaborately dramatises the warfare between good and evil. The film begins with a nightmare that captures the circumstances that led to the birth of the main character, Sonia. Sonia's mother, whose only expressions are sobs, throws herself before the throne of the water goddess, "Mamiwata", for the fruit of the womb. Jell-Behlsen notes that the "Igbo mother water goddess, mammy water, controls the entry and exit into and from the world" (Nnaemeka 1995, 108). Thus, the water goddess is associated with birth and life. This is why the worship of this goddess still remains very popular in Nigeria regardless of the preponderance of Christianity. In Nigerian literature, the water goddess symbolises fecundity. Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* and Flora Nwapa's *The Adventures of Deke, Never Again* and *Mammywater* further demonstrate the above assertion. Other writers, especially poets, identify with Mamiwata as their muse and inspiration. Tanure Ojaide and Onookome Okome fall into this category. Mammiwater occupies an important space on their creative canvas. She provides for her worshippers as they come, but she is sometimes described as a Sphinx that is ambiguous in its interrogation and giving. However, in Nigerian films, this goddess is usually associated with evil; therefore Christians typically do battle with her through fervent prayers to God. Sonia's mother is made fertile by the sea goddess and the product is Sonia, the *femme fatale*. Sonia is spiritual,

but a mortal; better still, she is a bionic woman, a superhuman creature with mortal cladding.

The battle between good and evil is usually waged in the lives of mere mortals, most especially those who work in the vineyard of God, particularly ministers and priests. Such individuals are tempted with evil and sometimes deprived of the bountiful beauties the world offers mankind. They may be afflicted with incurable diseases, poverty, childlessness, impotence, barrenness and death.<sup>2</sup>

These temptations and persecutions are geared towards testing the power of God. Women sent from the underworld to torment the people in the terrestrial plain are usually distinguished by their ravishing beauty. Like the African novel, the Nigerian video film portrays women as objects rather than as subjects in their own right. Stella in *End of the Wicked* and Tacom's wife in *Highway to the Grave* make this clear. Men regard women as commodities that must be used, drained and discarded. Sonia is sent by the goddess to unleash terror on men. She callously sends a stream of lovers to their graves. It is here that the image of the *femme fatale* is set. The *femme fatale* engages in her job with amazing frequency. She is a mysterious, quasi-mythical courtesan. She is a maiden living and moving in the real world, but imbued with peculiarities of the river goddess. She is excessively beautiful; however, there is danger and hypnotism in this beauty. She never strikes for fun, rather only on the instructions of the goddess. Her targets are usually individuals who are threats to the force of the underworld. By this token, Sonia is not a mere instrument of pleasure for men, but also a tool for the "Mammiwata": Sonia is used by a feminine goddess driven by the traditional phallocentrism of the human world. Sonia's first victim is Pat, who drives along the street in his car with an air of aristocracy. In this film, driving becomes a motif. Olausen (2002, 67) suggests that:

The immense importance of cars for a woman in tales of urban adultery is naturally linked to the problems of public transport in African cities. Access to cars for woman in most cases indicates a connection to a wealthy man, whereas for men, ownership of expensive, new cars equals access to attractive and sophisticated young woman.

Olausen wittily connects sexuality to mobility, because men control the cars, and by extension they control women's sexuality. In cities cars are symbol of power, one who drives has agency and the connections to make things happen. The film makes it clear that women want to be associated with men of power who can

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<sup>2</sup> The story of Job in the Bible easily comes to mind here.

make their dreams a reality. This is evident in the narrative pattern of *Highway to the Grave*. Pat picks Sonia up along the road even though they have never met before. The mere fact that he drives a car is evidence that he has power and this in turn gives him enough confidence to negotiate his way with any woman. Thus, as soon as Sonia hops into his car, he begins to play with her body as he drives. But he is stunned as she disappears, and he hurriedly hops out of the car and runs hysterically. He dies later. She runs into another male character, Dave, also driving, who dies shortly after their affair in a hotel.

With these chains of deaths and triumphs, Sonia now occupies the upper echelon of the marine world, and the goddess instructs the other maidens to extol Sonia's strength of character and to emulate her unsympathetic deadliness. She is celebrated as the other maidens under the control of the goddess dance around her. The *Vaudeville act* or celebration is punctuated by the unexpected arrival of another maiden sent on a mission to the world of humans, marking a truncation of the assignment. She fails because Pastor Nicolas, her supposed victim, is a powerful man of God, who exorcises the evil spirit in her with the resources of the Holy Spirit. Sonia is once again saddled with a more deadly responsibility. This time she is not just going after an ordinary man, but a man of God. She refuses to approach this mission casually. She employs an advance seductive mechanism, with which she breaks into Pastor Nicolas's psychic network. This she achieves by invading the pastor's dreams. The pastor falls for her bait and she destroys him. She succeeds in disgracing the man of God and by extension stifling the power of God. The film constructs the image of women as instrument of male spectacle and sexual pleasures. However, the notion that it is the men who go looking for them and that these men's intention is to use them to satisfy their erotic urge is not considered. Invariably, the time-worn phallogentric convention of attributing the fall of man to woman is very popular in *Nollywood*. Nobody questions Nicholas's moral weakness; it is regarded as normal since he is a man and in the dominant patriarchal tradition, most male animals are potentially polygamist in nature, the film rather emphasises the fact that a woman is responsible for his fall and death. Women are therefore agents of destruction.

The main plot of the film emerges midway, like a thief in the night; it is woven around the battle between Chief Tacom and Sonia. Tacom sullies his reputation through his adulterous act with Sonia. Unknown to Tacom, the water goddess has decreed that he must be disgraced because of his audacity. Sonia torments him in dreams and in reality. Throughout this crisis he is advised by a sorcerer to move his wife and children from their home and to seek refuge in a village where he can hide and lead a provincial life. His wife, the stereotypically simple and meek traditional mother, redeems him with the assistance of her pastor.

These films enunciate the helplessness of women as objects rather than subjects in their own right. This belief is deeply entrenched in society. Given that art mirrors and recreates social, historical and economic realities, it becomes the medium through which negative attitudes and stereotypes of women are perpetuated and created. The Nigerian video film exhibits a discernable consanguinity with African prose narratives, particularly those by women, within its patriarchal qualities. The modes of operation and expression of African prose narratives often convey some of these biased attitudes of society towards the female gender. Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, Sefi Atta's *Everything Will Come* and Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* easily come to mind.

A contrapuntal reading of Evangelical films reveals a bifurcation of female characters. They are polarised into either the trope of the suffering good wife or that of the cynical modern woman. This is what Stratton (1994, 97) describes as "the convention of the paired women". Both Stella and Tacom's wife belong to the category of suffering good wife, while Sonia represents the cynical modern woman. Women who negotiate their existence around the prescribed phallogocentric standards of society are usually patronised by the patriarchy, but those who fail to condition themselves to the acceptable codes constructed by men are regarded as spoilt or damaged women.

Although the films are evangelical in form and content and moralistic in tenor, they portray the culture's changing expectations surrounding marriage, motherhood and wifehood. Female characters in the films become mere marginal items in the narratives because the enterprise is regulated by phallogocentric dictates. Sometimes the pains of women are adequately captured in the films only to emphasise their weakness. The video film as a medium for selling God is a tool for evangelism. With the revolution of the video culture, the site for evangelising has moved from the pulpit to the video film. It is thus no surprise that Helen Okpabio stars regularly as a thaumaturge in her films in order to drive home the moral message of the films. With the moving image, converts are rid of the boring and lengthy sermons from the pulpit and the incessant levies of the church. The films are penetrating and direct. In spite of the fact that in the pulpit the

preacher stands right in front of the congregation, sermons are sometimes distant and abstract. Film, however, brings together sight and hearing across the whole spectrum of colours and sounds and it deals with events as they occur. Sermons are translated into action and the audience captures the message with relative ease. The primary advantages of film are the possibility of using a more appealing methodology and the opportunity to reach a much larger and more widely dispersed audience. Through her films, Okpabio is able to reach people outside her congregation. Paradoxically, the video film phenomenon is not far from what the pulpit offers: the word of God is commodified, making believers purchase the films on regular basis to ensure that their faith in God is sustained.

In sum, the video film as a potent medium for selling God is effective. Portrayals of female characters as possessed sea creatures programmed for seduction and as mothers who bewitch their husbands and children become clumsy. Nevertheless, such portrayals foreground the mythical belief of women as agents of the marine world. This aspect makes the films functional; they reflect society, thereby pushing women to the periphery, perhaps to balance the politics of demand and the economics of marketing. Female characters are very important in the films because the stories are woven around them. In both films women are crucial to the evangelical message, particularly insofar as women have the capacity to rescue their family from the clutches of the devil. They are the ones who lead their men to church, the site of rescue and salvation, yet their portrayal presents a certain homogeneity of character that can be attributed to a basic reductiveness in man's notion of women. Women are not discussed in these films in any serious dialectical manner. Their characters only help to accentuate the popular belief that they make better churchgoers because of their gullibility; hence they become powerful agents for evangelism. They become symbols of evil that the Christian God must do battle with in order to entrench his authority and power. The character of Chris's mother, Sonia, the water goddess and the maiden in the marine world all represent this kind of woman. Tacom's wife, Pastor Priscilla and Stella represent women who are meek and gentle and are the means through which lost men find their way to God. However, their characters are flat and the flatness is acted with vigour, because they do not contest sociocultural issues. They only strengthen the power of the Christian God. As noted earlier, the female characters in Okpabio's films emphasise the moral teachings of the Bible. Chris's mother and Sonia celebrate the power of evil in the world, while Tacom's wife and Pastor Priscilla set the stage for the eventual redemption of the oppressed. Through these characters, the supremacy of God is proven, in checking the excesses of the devil in the affairs of mortals. The Nigerian filmscape is heavily populated with feminine presence, but the females are voiceless. The filmscape reverberates with masculine voices. In the Gospel films male characters do not seem to be very present, but it is their voices that triumph at the end. The Christian God, an extension of the power of the patriarchy, becomes the most

powerful voice in these films. This study therefore states emphatically that feminine voices are unequivocally absent or worse still, closeted.

The themes and images of witchcraft, magic, the occult, the supernatural and ways in which the Christian God rescues man from the bondage of the devil are prevalent in *Nollywood*. The iconographic and aesthetic approaches of these films are unique. Furthermore, these themes and images usually resonate with the cultural contexts in which the films are produced. These are some of the issues that attract local audiences and make the films commercially viable. As can be seen from the analyses of these texts, the power of God is celebrated through the roles of women in *Nollywood* films. Women are either agents of the sea-cum-demonised world, whom God must destroy to demonstrate his supremacy and power over the universe, or rescuers of men from the grip of powerful spirits or occult forces. The role of women in evangelical merchandising is indisputably powerful, but their position within the *Nollywood* film remains marginal, as they are mere tools used to celebrate the power of patriarchy.

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