

ILARI MOVIE: A RELIGIOUS METAPHOR FOR CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN POLITICAL SPACE

By

OGUNBIYI, OLATUNDEOYEWOLE (PH.D)

Department of Religions, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria

Email: olatundeogunbiyi@gmail.com+2348035785432

Abstract

That the Nigerian movie industry often referred to as Nollywood is one of the world's most producing movie industries is no longer news. The fact that its prolific productions often address one religious theme or the other is interesting. Many of Nollywood movies come from Southwest, Nigeria, a region noted for her rich inventory of parabolic words to express present truths. From the repertoire of their innuendoes they often bring out issues of relative importance for all and sundry in different literary formats. *Ilari iMovie* is a 2015 movie of a traditional genre aimed at mirroring the court politicking of a particular town called Ankoko. This is set against the backdrop of the present political scene in Nigeria. At present, Nigeria is undergoing a transition from the military to democratic governance. The political space is filled with so much intrigues, assassinations, permutations, new breed versus old breed, political godfathers and above all former military juntas trying to vie for political positions. The interactions of these variables are intertwined with the activities of the three main religions practiced in the nation. The ripple effect of these is that Nigerian political space is set for new horizons. This paper attempts a hermeneutical examination of the *Ilari Movie* with a view to interpreting the Nigerian contemporary political space. In the final analysis it mirrors the positive and negative use of religion for personal aggrandizement of the political class.

Keywords: Nollywood, *Ilari*, Ankoko, Political space, Aggrandizement

Introduction

Nollywood, the Nigerian movie industry has attracted attention both within and outside Nigeria. As a result of its proliferation and acceptability, the industry ranks one of the best in the world (Alawode, 2010: 2, Alawode and Uduakobong 2014:1, Unesco, 2021:1). In Nollywood's several presentations which number over a thousand per year, are genres that focus on several areas of human endeavours. This has culminated in the critical evaluation of the contents of the works. The relevance of these movies to contemporary developments have engaged the attention of many works. An area that has elicited observation in many of these works is the place of religion in these movies. This paper seeks to assess the place of African Religion within the contemporary political space in Nigeria through the utilization of movies. Here, movies will stand as nexus in apprising the subject of enquiry. Utilizing the *Ilari movie* (2013), focus will center on the utilization of religious metaphors in the light of interpreting the present day politics and politicking. Nigeria is a multi-religious and multi-ethnic geographical space undergoing an unusual and

unprecedented transition from military dictatorship to democratic governance. The fact of this unusual and unprecedented transition lies in the unalloyed interest of the vast array of retired military officers preferring to take on political positions. Since the beginning of the third attempt at changing into democracy, it is worthy of note that since the military took over the governance of this nation, Nigeria has only produced a president who never had a military background in the name of former president Goodluck Jonathan. This assertion is corroborated by Obioha (2016: 5) when he identified the various military rulers who merely changed their military uniforms for the civilian gowns. In addition to this, the transition is stalling and not much has been achieved by the common man who should benefit from the revolution. It is interesting to note that either positively or negatively; religion plays a vital role in the transition to enduring democracy. This paper intends to look at the functional role of religion is playing in the political development within the geographical enclave called Nigeria. The questions that this work seeks to answer include:

- how do religious values and beliefs motivate the actions and interactions of individuals in politics?
- how do religious organizations influence the people's choice of representatives?
- In what manner do faith communities interact with growth actors and how has this influenced the change imperatives that will move the nation forward?
- how has movies contributed to better democratic principles as critics of corrupt politicians and conscience of the nation?

The work is a multi-disciplinary engagement that ranges from film studies to politics, sociology and religion since movies will serve as a spectrum for the interplay of religion, politics and governance. In the light of this, the work posits a contemporaneous interpretation of Karl Marx's theory of religion as it relates to the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in Nigeria against the backdrop of an understanding of Emile Durkheim's position that religion has a functional role to play within the society. The methodology adopted is the qualitative academic engagement featuring the analysis of data collected through observation of the political space, appraisal of the movies and interview. Contemporary comments in the media will form a core of the work in addition to materials available in the libraries and on the internet.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Political Space

Politics in the context of this paper will refer to the chain of activities and ideologies connected with attaining and utilizing power within a given territorial geographical space, either within a country, local government area, city, village or even within wards. The word can also be understood within the context of profession where a person has chosen politics as a career, demonstrated by his intension to contest for one elective position or the other. As a result, the politician joins a political party where he/she believes that his ideologies are consistent with

the aspirations of that political party. He /she may be elected as president, congressman/congresswoman, senator, governor, or even as a counselor. Membership in this political party will remain in so far as it fulfills the political interest and aspirations of the politician. The politician is not under any compulsion to remain in that party if it does not or no longer align with his ambition or ideological idiosyncrasies. Therefore, within the multi-party political space of a particular country like Nigeria, a politician has the liberty to renounce his present party either to join another or meet others to form a new party. Aside from the above, politics is also used here to cover salient variables of democracy, governance, equity, justice and their concomitants. As seen above, the political space in the context will refer to Nigeria and her political actors across the nooks and crannies of the nation. The space is active with the old and young, the rich and the poor, Nigerians primarily in Nigeria but also spread abroad in the Diaspora.

There exist a minimum of twenty-six registered political parties in Nigeria though the number of political parties are over sixty. Out of this number, two of the parties have gained prominence over the years. They include All Progressive Congress (APC) who successfully wrestled power from the second most popular political party, the People's Democratic Power (PDP) in 2015. The other are purely ethnic parties that have won a few seats in the upper and lower Houses of Assembly. The election that led President Mohammadu Buhari to power was keenly contested and nothing was spared to win the election. Apart from the unbridled spending, thuggery, campaign of calumny, blackmail, assassinations, kidnapping, religion was a weapon that was used by both parties in their bid to win the election. The election was fraught with intrigues, party cross carpeting on an unprecedented level. It witnessed the emergence of political godfathers and an era of where corrupt politicians were exposed in so far as the politicians are no longer a member of the party that seeks to expose him/her.

Within this nexus of political space of Nigeria, is the interplay of various variables that are intertwined and jostling assiduously in a symphony of confusion. These capricious factors include religion, ethnicity, nepotism, corruption, military, police and the media to mention a few. These unpredictable dynamics become tools in the hands of the politicians who are the primary movers, shakers and determinants of the political space. They use these variables for personal aggrandizements or for the politician's party gains. The resultant effect of these distortions and deliberate manipulation of the above mentioned factors is an orgy of confusion and flagrant disrespect for the constitution of the land.

Nigerian political space is today characterized by two interconnected features. The first is the rapid changes witnessed in urbanization as a result of the gains of the past. The second is the entrant of new breed politicians, many of who are corrupt and do not reflect the patriotism of the older politicians like Tafawa Balewa in the north, Obafemi Awolowo in the west and Nnamdi Azikwe in the east to mention a few. Nigerian has gone through several republics punctuated by military juntas who have added their own quotas to the space. Currently,

Nigeria is still ruled by former military officers though the number is gradually reducing to allow politicians without military background to be at the helms of affairs.

Religion in Nigerian Contemporary Society

Today, religion is as difficult to define as it has been for those attempting to put it in definitive moulds for centuries. Most of these scholars' attempt have fallen under either of two challenges; some of them are either extremely constricted to the extent that many religious beliefs are left out of their definitions. On the other extreme are the definitions that are rather ambiguous that most of what is seen is religious. It is in the light of this that a working definition of religion will be appropriate for this paper. In addition to this, the multi-religiosity of Nigeria will require a melting point to be able to properly elucidate the thrust of the subject matter at hand. For the purpose of this paper, and except where necessary, all religions that are practiced in Nigeria will be taken together as one religion. This is not to assume homogeneity of these faiths but rather to present a common front. It will also be pertinent to say here that a way to properly appreciate religion is to examine the general components of the concept, as these constituents are shared together and when taken together will give a better meaning to the understanding of the notion of religion. According to Biernot & Lombaard (2017: 13), one of the components of religion is the idea of religious experience which eventually leads to other visible signs of religious expression. Closely following this is the belief in the existence of the Ultimate Reality and other Supernatural beings variously referred to as God and gods known by different nomenclatures in every language. Added to the above, is the moral and ethical codes that are believed to be enacted by the Supernatural being(s). The fourth characteristic inherent in religion is the perception of the sacred as different from the profane which identifies matters like times, objects and even places as either sacred or profane. The fifth element of religion is concerns the ritual acts carried out in consequence of the adherents' perception of their faith. Attached to the fourth element of religion is the communion between the worshipper and the Deity. Here, issues related to rituals of sacrifices and prayers become relevant. Other aspects of a better understanding of religion include the sense of the communal which also gives the idea of the a people's worldview. Embedded in these worldviews are such religious concept like ancestors, texts, symbols and covenants that are virtually present in most religions.

Metaphor

Basic to this paper is the notion of metaphor. This word has been the preoccupation of linguists and philosophers but has gradually been object of other scholars who have given it a more liberal interpretation than the earlier narrow perception of the word. Metaphor has been regarded as a word that belongs to the realm of linguistics and the poetics, influencing people to conclude that it is such an abstraction that may not engage people's interest. However, Lakhoff (1980), a person who has devoted quite a lot of energy on the topic of metaphor, strongly disagree with this opinion. According to him,

Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in

language, but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. The concepts that govern our thought are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning, down to the most mundane details. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. If we are right in suggesting that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, then the way we think, what we experience, and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor.

In another vein he and Johnson (2003:4) further explain metaphor as it relates to ordinary usage by people

Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish—a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language. Moreover, metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. For this reason, most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor.

A metaphor, from the above can be seen as a creative description of a thing, an event or a person using something that has the quality of the object one wishes to describe. It is a figurative language that permits a direct comparison of two seemingly opposite words. In the light of this, metaphor plays vital roles in the communicative process subsisting between individuals. A metaphor dynamically produces words which assist in the comprehension of what the word seeks to describe.

Nollywood as Critics of Corruption

It is no longer strange that Nigeria is one of the world leading producers of movies. The Nigerian movies industry is labeled Nollywood and comes after Bollywood, the Indian movie industry which is next to Hollywood the American movies industry. However, the prolific production of movies of the Nigerian industry is due to economic reasons. The productions are shot and produced using cheaper means of production as against the American or the Indian productions. However, this cheaper means of production has actually served to endear their productions to the audience in that it is cheaper to procure and relatively gets to more end users. Apart from this, the modern technologies have further open vistas of access to these productions. Many of the satellite stations air these movies, while it is also possible to

download from computer interfaces and even on phones.

It is worthy of note that many recent movies produced in Nigeria are satires produced to critique one societal error or the other. However, this is not a strange phenomenon because many earlier theatrical drama, celluloid movies and videos films have addressed similar topics. In fact, Herbert Ogunde had a running battle with the colonial government over his production of *Bread and Butter* which criticized the colonial government of the day. The likes of Alamu, Olagoke. (2010:163-171), Chimbuto, J.G.S(2016: 36-54) and Nkiru, Ezech(2015: 18) are among the researchers whose conclusions are that Nollywood movies have, for a long time, been used as a subtle weapon against the contemporary political class with a view to making them change from their evil practices

Analysis of Ilari Movie

Ilari movie is from the stables of FathiaBalogun who is also credited with the writing of the story. The movie is a 2013 production with AbiodunOlanrewaju and Tope Adebayo as directors. The movie is a traditional genre that highlights the escapades of an ambitious king who stops at nothing to get to the throne and continue to occupy the space even when he knows that he does not have the requisite qualifications to rule his people. He was able to manipulate his erstwhile friend, whom he used to procure a child in order to qualify as king of Ankoko land. The other people he manipulated to get to the throne he also dealt with so as to fully establish himself on the throne. He killed the only son of Oduyoye because he flirted with his new wife and used medicine men for his personal aggrandizement. As he continued to betray his friend, nemesis caught up with him and he had to pay the price with his life. His wife who had earlier died became a victim of his callousness when he refused to release his friend from prison. That is how his son came to know his biological father. The herbalists worked assiduously to ensure that this evil king is removed from the throne and the land purged from his evil deeds.

Religious Themes in Ilari Movie as Metaphors in Nigeria Political Space

Quite a number of religious themes are either implicitly or explicitly embedded in the plot of the movie. For the purpose of this exercise, the religious themes will be discussed under four topics viz: rituals of oath taking, role of sacred specialties in the community, and godfathers within the community.

Oath taking is one of the explicit religious themes developed in Ilari movie. In fact, it formed the basis on which the plot of the movie rests upon. Two strains of oath taking are contained in the movie under discussion. This theme is so central to the movie that if they are removed, the movie will have not much of a meaning. The first as portrayed in the movie, concerns the ritual preparation to becoming an Ilari (king's messenger) oath, the culmination of which is the castration of the would-be initiates. The oath taking ritual is divisible into three major areas. The first concerns the ritual head shaving of the Ilari which must be done in the iledi(shrine), a type of traditional court where only the initiates have access. The members of the Ilari in this movie are three necessitating three white dressed herbalists who were saddled with the

responsibility of the shaving. After the ritual entry and exchange of cult tools, they proceeded to shave the men. They have to keep their hair shaven throughout the period of their servitude. Immediately following this is the entry of three women dressed in the red clothing holding pots containing pieces of meat that were offered to the Ilari. The women, one after the other explained the ingredients expended in the production of the pieces of meat given to them to eat.

Eranahunti a fiwe ahun se
Ahun (tortoise) meat cooked with ahun
leaves
egbogioroti a jo moewuroatiororoedio
oro roots burnt with bitter leaves and the liver
of antelope
Niwonigbati e banmitiesinmi e ogbodo da
Kabiyesi, ai je be omi a kojulasi yin.
As long as you breathe and exist, you must
not betray the king, otherwise water will fight
you.

The intention of these IyaAwo (cultic women) is to impress upon the would-be Ilari, the need for utmost loyalty to the king. The first statement is a blessing, while the second is the use of bitter ingredients in the preparation of the meat. If they betray the Kabiyesi, then they will have a bitter experience that will lead to their untimely death. The third is also a warning to loyalty otherwise they will have to contend with water as their enemy. The final ritual to becoming an Ilari is the castration process which will turn an Ilari to a eunuch. The initiates were tied to a tree in a way that the Baba Awo could have access to their private parts. They then castrate them which will make them permanently unable to procure children. Closely following the oath of service is the oath of secrecy which subsists between Oduyoye, Okunade and Ojuolape. These were shown through the theatrical use of flashback, hence it happened before all of them played their roles as Ilari, Kabiyesi and Olori respectively. The purpose of the oath was for secrecy. Incidentally, Okunade and Oduyoye were childhood friends. While Okunade is a descent from the royal family, Oduyoye descended from the lines of herbalists. Okunade, in his desperate search for the royal throne lost his productive ability due to ritual acts. After several years of barrenness, it was discovered that Oduyoye could not father a child and the law of the land stipulates that a prince must have a child before he is made the king. Okunade and Ojuolape went to Oduyoye with the intention of using him to raise the needed child and therefore qualify to be the king and queen of the land. After several attempts, Oduyoye conceded and Ojuolape became pregnant. In a bid to keep the secret, Okunade made them to swear an oath of secrecy between the three of them. This, coupled with the fear that Oduyoye might reveal the secrets between them, made them to offer him the position of an Ilari, which will further ensnared him.

Oath taking as depicted in the movie becomes a religious metaphor for the Nigerian political

space in the light of the many rituals reported in the Nigerian media. It is reported that politicians often take oaths of secrecy, oaths to bequeath their positions to others after their terms in office and oaths to give a particular percentage of fund coming into the state to their beneficiaries. When these oaths are broken, the politicians are either removed from office or are made to face the consequences of tied to the non-compliance to the oath. A case in point is Ngige in 1999 polls who was kidnapped, though later released. Oaths are also used by the ruling class to subvert the will of the electorates. Okunade was seen roping Oduyoye with series of oaths that were favourable to him as a king but he was not ready to fulfill his part of the promise. He persuaded Oduyoye to be an Ilari which entailed castration yet he killed his only child. This is the height of insensitivity and betrayal of their friendship. To make matters worse, he had Oduyoye imprisoned with the hope of killing him as a criminal. This is similar to the politicians' behaviours who claim that they love their people but are quick in dispatching them as soon as they win the election.

Another portrayal of religious themes is the copious representations of sacred figures in the movie. The sacred persons here are the herbalists or medicine men as presented in the movie. Four sets of medicine men and women are depicted in the movie. These include, true, false, hidden and manipulative medicine men and women. The medicine men and women who ministered at the service during the oath ceremony, the ones who were used to cleanse the community in times of crisis can be regarded as true sacred specialties. Apart from these, there are the ones who were used by the king to subvert justice. In this category are IyaAlaro and the Awo that was used to determine the paternity of Adelana, the prince. These exhibited manipulative tendencies. The hidden sacred specialists are those who did not show themselves to be members of the Awo cult but are actually practicing the trade. IlariOduyoye is a representative example of this. Despite the fact that he was a descendant of medicine men, he did not show himself as proficient in the trade. The king was not even aware that he could not harm Oduyoye who is adept at the Ifa divination. Finally, it is clear that there can be networking among the medicine men and women of a town and between those of one town with other places. When Oduyoye could not proceed due to his incarceration, he called a medicine man in another village that was able to mobilize others of their profession to destroy the power of the evil king.

The portrayal of sacred figures is reminiscence of the priests of all the religions within the Nigerian political space. Prominent among these are the priests of Christianity, Islam and African Religion. Many of these clergies flirt with the politicians for personal aggrandizements. It is worthy of mention that religion has become a pun in the hands of the politicians. They give the clergies financial handouts, pilgrimage slots and promises of giving jobs and appointments to those who support them. They also use affinity to religion as campaign strategy rather than performance. During the 2015 election, Christians were informed to vote for Christians as Buhari was going to Islamize Nigeria while Muslims were told to vote for Muslims so that Islam will not be underrated. Today, the wanton corruption that has been uncovered has exposed many politicians as ungodly.

Worthy of mention among religious themes in the movie is the position of the king. Among the Yoruba, the king is regarded as second to the divinity. He has the ability to do and undo. In theory, he has absolute power. His power is such that he is supreme and absolute over the land in which he governs. Kings are placed in such positions among the Yoruba that even when they die, they are not believed to be dead but have simply translated into the sky,

oba'waja. The implication here is that some politicians often turn themselves into godfathers. Godfatherism is a political terminology that is gaining ground in Nigeria. The word godfather is one that means a person is playing the role of a father to another not necessarily his biological son and god as one who can make or unmake the child in such relationships.

Conclusion

The foregoing has exhibited the fact that religion has very little role to play in governance. While it can play and does play a supportive role, it is not directly concerned with the day to day affairs of governance. It is a ploy employed by the ruling class and the elites as a manipulative tool to rob the citizenry and becloud them from seeing the truth. Public funds are utilized to support the citizenry. The politicians often extend opportunities of pilgrimages to the supporters and palliatives are handed to the people during fasting and religious ceremonies. Yet the corruptive tendencies of most of the politicians are enough proofs to show that they are not god-fearing. The media, both print and electronic are awash with the misappropriation of money meant for fighting the terrorists for campaign purposes. This paper on the basis of it advocates a divorce between religion and politics. It must be said however, that the electorate are getting wiser as some media now report altercations between the political class and the proletariat on sacred spaces.

References

- Akbar, S. Ahmed (1992). *Bombay Films: The Cinema as Metaphor for Indian Society*. Politics Modern Asian Studies, Cambridge University Press Vol. 26, No. 2 pp. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/312677>. Accessed: 15/09/2021
- Alamu, Olagoke. (2010). Narrative and Style in Nigerian (Nollywood) Films. *African Monographs*, 31(4).
- Alawode, S. O (2007). "Nigerian Environment in the Eye of Nigerian Home Videos," *Journal of Communication and Language Arts*, University of Ibadan.
- Alawode, S. O, Sunday, Uduakobong. (2014). "Home Video Films and Grassroots' Relevance in Nigerian Political Process" in *Journal Of Humanities And Social Science*. Volume 19, Issue 1
- Biemot, D. & Lombaard, C., (2017). 'Religious experience in the current theological discourse and in the church pew', *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 73(3).
- Chimbuto, Joseph George Salijeni. (2016). *The representation of women in Nollywood: an investigation of its impact on audiences in Malawi*. Doctoral Thesis presented to the University of Roehampton
- Lakoff, G., and Johnson, M. *Conceptual Metaphor in Everyday Language*. (1980). *The Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 77, Issue 8, pages 453-486.
- Lakoff, G., and Johnson, M. (2003). *Metaphors We Live By*. London: University of Chicago Press
- Nkiru, Ezehe et al, (2015: 18). *The Influence of the Portrayal of Godfatherism in Nollywood Films on Nigerian Voter Behaviour*, *New Media and Mass Communication*, Vol.36.
- Obioha, W. (2016). *The Role of the Military in the Democratic transitions and Success in Nigeria* in *International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanity Studies*, Vol.8, No 1
- UNESCO Report, (2010) <https://en.unesco.org/creativity/news/unesco-promotes-african-cinema-launch-new-report> Assessed on 5th May, 2022.
- Movies Cited**
- Ilari. (2013). Producer. *Fathia Balogun*. Directors. *Abiodun Olanrewaju and Adebayo*. Language. Yoruba