

The role of Nollywood in the promotion of traditional religious heritage in the Akwa-Cross Region, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: The study entitled “The Role of Nollywood in the Promotion of Traditional Religious Heritage in the Akwa-Cross Region” examines the changing narratives in Nigeria’s film industry in the portrayal of tangible and intangible religious heritage with the Akwa-Cross bloc as a context. The paper identifies that over the years, traditional religious heritage has been greatly misrepresented, leading to some tangible heritage suffering extinction. However, with the changing trends in the Yoruba and Igbo blocs and more studies into the topic, new movies are produced to offer a balanced projection of traditional religious heritage. The study thus assesses whether the same energy is replicated within the Akwa-Cross bloc using the descriptive design, the theoretical framework of Agenda-setting Theory, Cultivation Theory and “meta-view” analysis of movies such as *Mutanda*, *Inyang Itiaba* and *Eka Abasi*, *Ironbar* and *Ofong Enyin Usung*. The study indicates that the role of Nollywood in the promotion of traditional religious heritage hinges on researching traditional religious worldviews during script writing; projecting the religious heritage using visuals, dialogue and monologue; producing high cinematographic content; premiering and exhibiting movies that promote Efik-Ibibio religious heritage. The paper concludes that Akwa-Cross movies should be more of a repository for Efik-Ibibio religious heritage and a channel of educating viewers in the global space. The study recommends that the Association of Nigeria Movie Directors and Producers (ANMD and AMP) in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States should synergise with the Ministries of Culture and Tourism and collaborate with Multichoice, Netflix and Amazon Prime to produce blockbusters that offer balanced beauty of the tangible and intangible religious heritage of the Efik-Ibibio people.

Keywords: Akwa-Cross Movie Industry, Nollywood, promotion, religious heritage.

INTRODUCTION

Religious heritage is categorised under the cultural heritage of a people – a canopy concept that serves as a channel through which the style of life of a people is developed collectively by the community and passed on from generation to generation. Kiriam and Onkoba (2014) share the idea that cultural heritage as a broad concept, irrespective of its form, significantly serves as a preserving link that connects the past with the present and ensures transmission of its contents and significance to future generations. Contextually, religious heritage, which is a form of cultural heritage, constitutes such great significance. Fernandez-Alvarez *et al* (2022) recognise that “religious heritage plays an essential role in people’s

identity, not only reinforcing a belief system, but also providing a sense of social and religious belonging. It can also stimulate social actions, as it reminds us of our responsibilities to our culture.” In the same vein, Aulet and Vidal (2018) cite that “religious heritage can act as a transmitter of the age-long values linked to the identity of a territory, while reflecting on the relationship between the religious value and the monumental value of a place.”

There have been increased studies in recent times that capture the intersection between cultural preservation and media. These studies are aimed at ensuring that various postcolonial societies protect their indigenous knowledge systems from the surging waves of globalisation as well as

religious influences. Within the context of Nigeria, Nollywood's expansion has positioned it not only as a channel of entertainment but as a dominant cultural industry that plays a critical role of being the agent of shaping social consciousness and preserving cultural memory. Scholars such as Onuzulike (2009) and Usua (2018) have posited that film plays a significant role as a cultural archive – this role ensures the preservation of endangered cultural heritages and at the same time, helps in the process of reconstructing the narratives about beliefs and identity of the people. Hence, how traditional religious heritage is presented in Nollywood has become an issue of ideological contestation – involving cultural misrepresentation, global rebranding of African indigenous spirituality and cultural revival.

It is the importance carried by either cultural or religious heritage that made the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2003) develop a policy framework to ensure the safeguarding of cultural heritage in 2003. The emergence of the framework is geared towards amelioration and prevention of the deterioration of traditional heritage of the peoples around the world. While many nations or cultures of the world have swung into action based on the guidelines of UNESCO (2003) framework, the researcher has observed that in Nigeria generally, and specifically in Ibibio culture, traditional religious heritage as an aspect of cultural heritage is steadily sliding into extinction due to various factors, of which the major ones are urbanisation and the negative attitude of many people to anything traditional. This observation aligns with the challenges cited by the Council of Europe (2017) that “religious heritage today faces unprecedented challenges due to changes in patterns of worship, attitudes towards religion and reductions in government spending.”

Further observation has revealed that culturally conscious individuals and organisations have employed multifarious channels to either preserve or promote their traditional religious heritage. One such channel is the use of the movie industry. For instance, the movie, *Passion of Christ* tells the story of Jesus; most of the Chinese martial arts movies portray great aspects of Buddhist philosophy and values; the Indian movie industry (Bollywood) greatly serves as a window into the beliefs and practices of Hinduism and Hindu culture, while the American movie industry (Hollywood) often drives Western-styled cultural heritage and worldview. In Nigeria, the movie industry referred to as Nollywood has been noted for churning out content that demonises traditional religious heritage, at least until recent where there has been observed a shift in the narrative. Vokouma in Onuzulike (2009) captures that “the attitude of African filmmakers toward their local religions is quite complex; some of them advocate African religions, while others reject them for their inefficacy.” Studies by Onuzulike (2008), Opeyemi (2008) and Ekenene *et al.* (2023) have captured this mixed narrative.

However, recent trends have shown a great shift in the

Nigerian movie industry – more content that promotes traditional religious heritage is being produced, but by the Yoruba and Asaba blocs of the industry. While Yoruba and Igbo movie producers are coming up with content that promotes indigenous religious and cultural heritage, the Akwa-Cross movie bloc of the industry seemingly falls short of the contemporary demands. The seeming inactivity of the Akwa-Cross movie bloc results in continued deterioration of traditional religious heritage in the Akwa-Cross region. To this end, this study examines how the Akwa-Cross bloc of Nollywood can help in the promotion of traditional religious heritage. The study employs the descriptive design and meta-view analysis approach using selected Nollywood movies. The study is necessary as it will serve as a veritable tool for reechoing the UNESCO (2003) framework – calling for the domestication of the framework that advocates preservation of traditional religious heritage.

Statement of the problem

Despite Nollywood being recognised globally as a powerful cultural industry, there are still persistent concerns and arguments about misrepresentation of African indigenous religions. In the earliest days, most of the productions portrayed traditional indigenous religious practices as diabolical, primitive, and morally inferior to Christianity and other Western values. According to Opeyemi (2008) and Onuzulike (2008), this misrepresentation continued to reinforce the stereotypes that were formed by colonial administrations and many Christian missionaries. The implication of this has been widespread cultural alienation among audiences of African descent. However, there have been observable shifts in the portrayal of indigenous religious elements in Igbo and Yoruba film industries – the shifts reveal that there are strong and emerging efforts geared toward cultural reclamation. Despite the shifts, the Akwa-Cross movie bloc seems to lag behind in the production of films that positively and accurately project the rich religious heritage of the Efik-Ibibio worldview. This identified gap raises critical questions concerning the role played by the regional film industry in the preservation of cultural heritage, the level at which the contents engage with indigenous epistemologies, as well as the capacity of the Akwa-Cross bloc to culturally-rich film that can comfortably compete within the global digital film market. Hence, this study explores whether the Akwa-Cross bloc of Nollywood can function effectively as a viable medium for the preservation and promotion of the indigenous religious heritage of the Efik-Ibibio peoples.

Conceptual Framework

The theories applied in the study are Agenda-setting

Theory and Cultivation Theory. The theories are adjudged to be apt in the study because they offer explanations of the roles the media play in transmitting cultural values or elements. The Agenda-setting Theory, according to Anaeto (2008), demonstrates the notion that through the media, the people have the opportunity to know about trending issues in the public and that the energy through which the media put into projecting issues is invariably proportional to the attention the people would give to the issue. To this end, if film producers intensify efforts in churning out content that captures and promotes indigenous religious heritage, the viewers would thus likely develop the consciousness that what is projected is significant. Usua (2018), while applying the theory to the study of how video films can preserve indigenous languages in Akwa Ibom State, reiterates that if film makers “project a certain language, through their movies, it is in the belief that the public will consider it important and will likely use such a language, thereby leading to its preservation and promotion. And if such a language is facing extinction, its projection in the films may lead to revitalisation.”

On the other hand, Cultivation Theory as developed by George Gerbner in 1969 proposes that “repeated exposure of people to the media over time will result in the process where their perceptions about social reality are changed. In a study by Vinney (2019), the idea is captured that frequent viewing of television – fictional films, for instance, would lead to the perception that what is projected reflects the real world. Mosharafa (2015) has further done a study to explain the effect of exposure to television programmes on viewers. The point demonstrated by Mosharafa (2015) is that the contents displayed by television can particularly influence the viewpoint of the viewers about specific issues – that is to say that television contents have the ability to shape the moral values and general beliefs of people about the world. The researcher in an earlier study identified that the application of the Cultivation Theory implies that “since more content has the propensity of influencing viewers’ consciousness, the negative or positive storylines or content about traditional spirituality or religion would either affect the society positively or negatively” (Ekenene *et al.*, 2023).

The researcher projects that constant and positive portrayal of indigenous religious heritage in Nollywood movies would lead to the promotion of the values embedded in it. The continuous promotion of these values would result in the cultivation of these values and knowledge in the lives of many viewers. The Agenda-setting Theory and Cultivation Theory used align with the cultural Development Hypothesis developed by Herb Schiller in 1976 as a reaction against cultural imperialism. Schiller (1976) encourages developing nations to deliberately use the media to push traditional values and beliefs onto the global stage to gain more relevance and be “adopted as part of emerging global culture” (Usua,

2018).

Beyond their explanatory relevance, the two theories used in the study – that is, Agenda-setting and Cultivation theories, offer a complementary framework for grasping the short and long-term effects of media representation. While Agenda-setting stresses the need to prioritise issues within public discourse, Cultivation theory encourages the steady, gradual internalisation of these representations to become social realities. The application of these theories in the case of Nollywood helps suggest that continuous positive portrayals of indigenous religious heritage can strategically help normalise traditional belief systems, thereby countering negative stereotypes held onto for decades. This intentional theoretical synergy further reinforces the thesis that media content should be strategic in order to facilitate cultural identity formation in African societies.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the descriptive design. The descriptive method enabled the researcher to accurately and systematically describe the role that the Akwa-Cross bloc of Nollywood plays in the promotion of religious heritage in the region. In addition, the meta-view analytical approach is used to examine the purposively selected Akwa-Cross films. The researchers sourced the movies on digital platforms and also got recommendations from film producers and actors such as Moses Eskor and Emma Owuola. The purposively selected films for analysis were *Mutanda*, *Ironbar*, *Eka Abasi*, *Inyang Itiaba*, and *Offong Enyin Usung*. The justification for using these films is based on storylines having thematic engagement with the indigenous religious heritage of the Efik-Ibibio people. Data were derived from visual narratives, dialogues, symbolic representations, and thematic constructs within the films.

The meta-view analytical framework involves a qualitative examination of films across multiple interpretive layers, including symbolic representation, narrative structure, thematic construction, and cinematographic effects. The choice of the films (*Mutanda*, *Eka Abasi*, *Ironbar*, *Inyang Itiaba*, and *Offong Enyin Usung*) was based on regional relevance to the Akwa-Cross bloc, their explicit engagement with traditional religious heritage, and cultural depth rather than mere popularity. The meta-view analysis strategy enabled the researchers to analyse the contents and synopsis of the films after watching the full length. The analysis focuses on how religious heritage is constructed, represented, and communicated to audiences, as well as the reach of the films to viewers on online digital platforms such as YouTube. Further primary data were sourced through interviews, while secondary data were also sourced from policy documents, scholarly literature, and studies on cultural heritage and Nollywood. This methodological approach enabled an in-depth

understanding of both implicit and explicit representations of traditional religious systems.

NOLLYWOOD (THE NIGERIAN MOVIE INDUSTRY)

Nollywood represents the Nigerian movie industry, a subset of the Nigerian entertainment industry styled after the American movie industry – Hollywood. The industry – Nollywood, represents the 3rd largest movie industry in the world after Hollywood and Bollywood of India. The historical antecedent points out that the Nigerian movie or film industry emerged during the colonial period – Specifically in “1903 at the Glover Memorial Hall, Lagos” (Opeyemi, 2008: p282). Irrespective of the fact that the movie industry is one of the legacies of the colonial administration, Ekwuazi cited in Opeyemi (2008), gives the impression that it was the supporting effect of the church that sustained the industry. On the part of the colonial administration, video films were used specifically for the civilisation of Nigerians, while the church used it as a tool for evangelisation.

Furthermore, Onuzulike (2009) reiterates that any attempt to explain the historical background of the Nigerian movie industry would result in streamlining the history into four periods to aid explanation and understanding. The periods of Nollywood history are thus divided into.

1. The colonial period (1903 – 1960) – when the industry emerged and was mostly managed by colonial administrators and missionary churches.
2. The Independence period (1960 – 1972) – a brief period of after independence which was heavily affected by the Nigerian civil war.
3. The indigenisation Decree Period (1972 – 1992) when Nigerians took ownership and management of many corporations and industries in the country.
4. The Nollywood Period (1992 – present) – a period ushered in by the movie titled *Living in Bondage*, which revolved around Igbo cultural worldview. From the year 1992, the Nigerian movie industry took a different trajectory which resulted in explosive growth of the industry.

Statistically, PriceWaterhouseCoopers Global Entertainment and Media Outlook of 2017 – 2021 indicate that Nollywood is recognised as the second largest producer of video films in the world. The industry has contributed about 2.3% N239 billion to Nigeria's gross domestic product in the year 2016, and as at 2020, the industry was identified as capable of fetching the Nigerian government \$ 1 billion in export revenue. The statistics align with the assertion of Enna et al. (2015) that the movie industry that “emerged from the drags” has turned out to be a global source of entertainment and a source of employment and business opportunities for many, thereby aiding the gross national income.

Akwa-Cross movies bloc

The Akwa-Cross Movie bloc is a subset of the complex Nigerian movie industry (Nollywood). Usua (2018) classifies Akwa-Cross movies as a bloc that produces films using dialects such as Ekid, Andoni, Ibeno, Itu Mbonuso, among others, alongside the major dialects such as Ibibio, Annang and Oron. Furthermore, the Akwa-Cross movie industry covers movies produced using either Ibibio or Efik language that is widely understood in Cross River and Akwa Ibom State. Usua (2018) explains that even though there are scarce data about films “produced yearly in the industry due mainly to the fact that many of the producers do not register their films with the National film and Video Censors Board” based on the low budgets the producers work with, the industry represents the largest entertainment within the two (2) states and it is estimated that the Akwa-Cross bloc is a “sizeable part of the Nigerian movie industry, having over 7 million people in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States as its main target audience” (Usua, 2018). In a nutshell, the Akwa-Cross movie bloc of Nollywood constitutes movie production where primary emphasis is the production of films indigenous to Akwa Ibom and Cross River States. The distinguishing marks of the bloc are the intentional use of indigenous language exclusively or a mixture of indigenous and English languages as well as the capturing of traditional Efik-Ibibio worldview, maintaining here that “there is a potential in the media to convey indigenous African values to the global stage just as they have done with European and American values.”

Religious heritage

The indigenous religious heritage stands as a significant part of a people's culture. Opoku (2012) shares this assertion by highlighting that the religious heritage “provides answers to questions about how humans should best relate to their environment, both physical and spiritual, in order to ensure harmony and equilibrium, and it also provides deep understanding of reality.” The traditional religious heritage comprises “accumulated experiences and sagacious reflections of our forebears, and this provides answers to the numerous questions sort to satisfy the quest of humans for meaning” (Opoku, 2012).

Indigenous religious heritage encompasses the material and non-material aspects of a religious tradition. What constitutes religious heritage includes beliefs, practices, rituals, and sacred symbols or texts that have been passed down through generations within a particular faith community. Religious heritage further includes the physical structures and objects that hold religious significance, as well as the intangible aspects such as spiritual teachings and moral values. In the guidelines of UNESCO (2008), religious heritage is synonymously referred to as “religious property” which includes any form

of property with religious or spiritual associations – whether churches, monasteries, shrines, sanctuaries, mosques, synagogues, temples, sacred landscapes, sacred groves, and other landscape features. Religious heritage constitutes an important part of a people's cultural heritage generally. Summarily, Liro (2020) points out that religious heritage destinations undoubtedly present a strong and explicit cultural imprint reflected largely in its tangible assets such as built structures, aesthetic works, archaeological remains, inscriptions and intangible elements like rituals, spiritual performances, holy congregations, practices concerning nature and the universe, religious events, etc. that survived from generations through the tradition of constant performance.

Forms of religious heritage

Religious heritage is categorised into tangible and intangible forms. The tangible religious heritage, according to Aulet and Vidal (2018), is “formed by those movable and immovable elements that make up the material heritage of a religion.” The tangible religious heritage represents, to some degree, the sacred space and reproduces, among other things, all the symbolisms of the sacred. Tangible religious heritage comprises sacred sites or places, symbols and relics. The sacred sites or places are “meaningful locations, as a way of looking or knowing and of understanding the world” (Cresswell, 2005). Shackley (2001) calls a sacred place that which carries the “the spirit of the place.” While Aulet and Vidal (2018) assert that it is not only the “location and a visible material form, it must also have some relationship with human beings and the human capacity to produce and absorb meaning.” However, Bremer (2006) clarifies that the fundamental features of a sacred place are social constructs and community-based meaning.

The 1972 Convention of UNESCO that deals with tangible heritage explains what constitutes tangible heritage to include: monuments, as well as cultural and natural sites – sacred sites (UNESCO 2022). The tangible heritage, among other things, must be of outstanding universal value and of authentic character. On the other hand, intangible religious heritage includes myths; rituals, festivals, ethics and values indigenous to a people. The criteria for qualifying a thing or practice as being tangible or intangible heritage by UNESCO (2022) include: traditionality, inclusivity, representativeness and community-centeredness.

Significantly, tangible and intangible religious heritage play a significant role in the community where they are found. To the people, tangible religious heritage “connects the people to the source of life, facilitates emotional liberation and enhances deeper dimensions of oneself and others” (Fleischer, 2000). Terzidou *et al.* (2018) believe that tangible religious heritage, especially sacred sites, is restorative by virtue of ensuring a feeling of peacefulness, mental relaxation and rejuvenation. Additionally, Liro

(2020) sees tangible religious heritage – sacred sites or symbols as being good for observation and learning about traditional religion and cultural aspects of religion. Arnold and Olsen (2012) and Shackley (2001) hold the view that tangible religious heritage stands as an attachment of a community to their past and identity. The heritage serves as a value through which there is association with deity and holy persons.

Moreover, the researcher summarises the criteria by UNESCO (2022) as follows: the criterion of traditionality captures that tangible or intangible religious heritage does not merely stand for “inherited traditions from the past but also contemporary rural and urban practices in which diverse cultural groups take part.” The criterion of inclusivity is based on whether the meanings, practices and rituals of the religious heritage have elements of similarity with other cultures, neighbouring villages or the original place of migration. Tangible and intangible religious heritage does not in any way only raise questions bordering on whether the objects or practices are specific to a culture; it goes as far as enhancing cohesion in the society and “encouraging a sense of identity and responsibility which helps individuals to feel part of one or different communities and to feel part of society at large.”

The criteria of “representativeness and community-centeredness” border on intangible and tangible religious heritage not merely being valued as a cultural good, on a comparative basis, for its exclusivity or its exceptional value. It thrives on its basis in communities and depends on those whose knowledge of traditions, skills and customs is passed on to the rest of the community, from generation to generation, or to other communities. While the community-centeredness criteria, intangible religious heritage can only be qualified as heritage when it is “recognised by the communities, groups or individuals that create, maintain and transmit it – without their recognition, nobody else can decide for them that a given expression or practice is their heritage.”

Traditional religious heritage in Ibibio worldview

The Ibibio people are the indigenous ethnic group occupying a part of the southern region of Nigeria. Udo (1983) explains that the Ibibio people are of the Kwa speaking stock of the Benue-Congo group of the Niger-Congo language. The Ibibio people have affinity with the Oron, Efik and Annang peoples who also occupy predominantly Akwa Ibom and Cross River States. Additionally, the Ibibio people share cultural practices and worldview with the Ibeno, Eki and Andonis who also inhabit the Akwa Ibom State region. In the cultural scope of the Ibibio, religious heritage borders on the tangible and intangible aspects of the religious worldview, which encompasses symbols, sacred objects and sites, taboos, ethics, spiritual beliefs, practices, and traditions that have been passed down through generations. These beliefs, symbols and practices often centre around a connection to

the natural world, ancestors, and spirits, with rituals and ceremonies playing a significant role in daily life.

The intangible religious heritage of the Ibibio people revolves around belief in Abasi - the Supreme Being, the creator of all things, including the plethora of divinities (mme ndem) who function as lieutenants to the Supreme Being. This belief in the Supreme Being, divinities and spirits serves as the driving force for the worldview of the people. The belief gives impetus to the moral and political thought patterns of the Ibibio people. The central belief drives the taboos (mme mbet) or norms of the people. Essien (2017) has established that the Ibibio society is one where the numerous activities are "characterised by externally sanctioned prohibitions, and human behaviour is not governed solitary through rational decision making alone." Specifically, cultural norms or societal values guide and regulate behavioural patterns and thoughts of their members by agreed upon expectations and rules.

Myths that are cosmogonic in nature are heritages that capture the beginning of the world. The creation of the world is attributed to the Supreme Being (Abasi), and the cosmogonic myths tell how the Supreme Being formed the world and humanity. The attribute of the Supreme Being as the Creator (Obot) is emphatically reiterated in myth, stories, sayings and proverbs. All of humanity in the traditional religious worldview in Ibibioland is directly linked to the Supreme Being. In addition to the forms of intangible religious are ethical values. The Ibibio religious heritage includes an ethical system that finds root in the nature of the Supreme Being. Opoku (2012) and Sarpong (2005) highlight that the "universal norm of behaviour" rests with the Supreme Being, who tells what is of value and what is not. The traditional religious worldview points out that the Supreme Being has implanted in the human being an inner voice which tells humanity what is right and wrong, an inner voice that disciplines humanity – discipline here stands for mental and moral training and systems of rules which enable humanity to conform to the principles of life. The knowledge of that which is good or bad (eti ye idiok) is implanted in the natural framework of humanity by the Supreme Being.

Moreover, in the intangible religious heritage communicates a strong synergy between the physical and metaphysical realms. The natural environment and spiritual world co-relate in a seismic kind of relationship. The various strata of the realms are infested with spirits and beings that comprise the complete worldview of the people. The river (idim), groves (awok), mountains (mbod), forests (akai), spiritual world (obio ekpo), and trees (mme eto) have spirits and life. The numerous deities and ancestors occupy the natural phenomenon and spiritual world. Opoku (2012: p5) captures this synergy in the traditional religious heritage in Africa thus:

A fundamental relationship is firmly believed to exist between humans and nature. Humans are part of nature; they are not above

it as masters or commanders, and they are expected to cooperate with it. Humans seek a relationship with nature in order to have partnership with and not dominion over it; the religious traditions once dubbed "worship of nature" are rather an expression of respect for the relatedness to nature.

Summarily, based on the UNESCO (2003) Convention, what qualifies as intangible cultural heritage are "practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills which manifest in numerous ways such as oral traditions and expressions of the people, performing arts, social practices, rituals, and festive events and knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe. The UNESCO (2003) Convention recognises the relevance of taking care of the immaterial and tangible aspects of religious heritage and advocates for a lived experience as well as sharing the same to continuously re-create them among the people of the communities to strengthen their identity and sense of continuity.

The role of Nollywood in promoting religious heritage

The media generally has been identified as the most powerful tool in promoting cultural elements, and specifically, Opeyemi (2018) recognises video films as being capable of satisfying the needs of the viewers partially by reinforcing the beliefs they held and going further to showcase the cultural embodiment. Usua (2018) buttresses that video films are credible means of transmitting cultural values because of "its visual-based projected motion. It brings real-life events, practices and operations, among others, to the audience."

Globally, video films are often used to drive cultural values and religious issues. The researcher observes that in Bollywood, the practices and values of Hinduism are often showcased – a typical example being the movie titled "Krishna" – an animated video film that captures the legendary works of Krishna. Krishna is the Hindu god of love, protection and compassion. The animated video film titled "Avatar" tells the story of the Sanskrit deity of the earth. In Chinawood, many Shaolin martial arts movies incorporate Buddhist principles (the four noble truths) and values. This observation agrees with the summation of Ogunleye in Usua (2018) that the "potential of the film medium has actually resulted in its deliberate use in many regions of the world to deal with national issues like strikes and in indoctrinating subjects."

Historically, in Africa, the earliest forms of movies were used for teaching morals and educating the public on political issues. Usua (2018) points out that in the defunct Lagos Protectorate, video films were used to enlighten the people about the disease outbreak of 1929. Subsequent movies during the late colonial period were scripted to aid evangelization of Nigeria. Since the 1990s, movies

undermining or mirroring the “evil” of indigenous religious tradition have been numerous. Movies such as *Living in Bondage*, produced in 1992; *Above Dead*, *Karashika*, *Last Burial* and *End of the Wicked* were produced during the last decade of the 20th century to downplay the relevance of traditional religious heritage.

In a study conducted by Nzas (2024), it is established that the shrine as a tangible traditional religious heritage is often portrayed in such a way that “deviates from its true essence. Instances of witchcraft, sorcery, rituals, and negative aspects tend to involve African indigenous religion.” Nzas (2024), judging from the depiction of shrines in movies such as *Issakaba*, *Living in Bondage* and *End of the Wicked*, believes that the authentic identity of traditional heritage such as the shrine is not adequately represented in global cinema. The Shrine as tangible religious heritage is often perceived negatively in Nollywood movies. Nzas (2024) asserts that “shrines and sacred spaces are portrayed as locations inhabited by evil spirits”, and this distorted portrayal of shrines often echoes terminologies such as juju, animism, paganism and primitive – these biased terms stand as the legacy of the European missionaries’ misinterpretation.

The shift

Observably, since the turn of the first decade of the 21st century, there has been a shift in how some Nollywood movie producers project African religious heritage. This shift is unconnected with multifarious calls made through reviews and scholarly literature on the topic. There is an observed attempt to strike a balance in the projection of traditional religious heritage in new Nollywood movies compared to the old movies produced during the last decade of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century. Kunhiyop (2021) recognises this improvement and explicates that the Nollywood movie industry has fundamentally stood out as a tool of shaping and propelling the African worldview and has been able to provide some explanations for the existence of the supernatural and its relation to existence. The industry players, especially the directors and producers, are now becoming aware of the African worldview and have exploited it. Though traditional religious heritage had almost gone underground due to people accepting new religions such as Christianity and Islam as well as due to the power of Nollywood in “demarketing,” the industry has been able to reawaken the traditional religious heritage and many African viewers are now held captive by some of the content.

In the Yoruba bloc of the Nollywood industry, more movies that promote traditional religious heritage are produced. One such movie is *Orisa*, directed by Odunlade Adekola in 2023. The movie, *Orisa*, is one of the many “Nollywood movies that shun westernised depictions of Nigerian culture” (Oladotun, 2023). The synopsis of the movie revolves around King Adefolarin, who exalts himself

to the level of a “god” – *Orisa*, and uses his position to have unconsensual sex with women – even those who are married. King Adefolarin meets his Waterloo when a group of witches inflict insanity on him at a time that a terrorist named Komokomo invades his kingdom. The king is brought to his knees by the witches’ power until he begs the gods and the witches for forgiveness, promising to turn a new leaf. Summarily, *Orisa* stands out as a pointer to the evolution of the movie industry in the exploration of the cultural and religious elements of the Yoruba culture.

ANALYSIS OF SELECTED MOVIES

In this section of the study, the analysis of selected movies is carried out. In the Akwa-Cross bloc, the movie titled *Mutanda*, as produced by Jeta Amata, stands as an epic that gives insight into the traditional religious heritage of the Efik people. Adapted from the epic written by E. E. Nkana titled *Mutanda Oyom Namundo*, the movie narrates the traditional situation in Bokondo – a fictional setting that mirrors Efik culture and worldview. The movie brings into play life in traditional Efik society as well as the religious heritage of the people. *Mutanda* portrays the numerous roles played by deities such as Anansa (goddess of fertility); Ekpenyong Abasi (god of courage), Namesenke (goddess of justice), Oboyeme (goddess of wisdom), Afiaawan (goddess of beauty), Ekanem Abasi (god of truth), and Ekpo Abasi (god of bravery). The twisted storyline of *Mutanda* deviates a little from the original story by E. E. Nkana by incorporating the killing of twins and how Anansa orchestrates the disappearance of Prince Namondo in River Bokondo on his way to Usak Edet to see his supposed bride. The disappearance of Namondo, as masterminded by Anansa, is to ensure that the people of Bokondo revisit some of their cultural and religious practices that are harmful. The strength of the movie, *Mutanda*, lies in the portrayal of indigenous religion as having the needed solution to indigenous problems. In line with Cultivation Theory and Agenda-Setting Theories used in the study, continuous exposure to culturally affirming narratives in films such as *Mutanda* leads to the normalisation of indigenous belief systems, thereby reshaping audience perception over time. In addition, the intentional crafting of the scripts by producers and scriptwriters to emphasise the religious and cultural heritage of the Efik-Ibibio people increases the chances of the people being aware of and familiar with the heritage.

Furthermore, another Akwa-Cross movie that offers a balanced projection of the traditional religious heritage of the Ibibio people is Produced by Sedater Saviour, *Inyang Itiaba* (Seven Sea) portrays the traditional taboo against rape, for which the culprits are liable to a death sentence. The synopsis revolves around Etim (Moses Eskor), whose son is sentenced to death by the king (his uncle). He is cursed by the King and left in the evil forest for the gods as a sacrifice. Etim is aggrieved because the king, his brother,

fails to substitute the death sentence with the killing of 7 virgins to break the communal sex taboo against rape. Etim, out of anger, crosses the seventh sea to consult and dedicates his soul to Abritam to obtain the dark powers to avenge his son's death. Etim assumes the priestly position of Abritam and uses the position to cause problems in his community. Etim manipulates the king's sons to rape their sister and also manipulates them to strangle the priest of the community. However, the goddess of the land intervenes and fortifies seven maidens to accompany the Princes to *Inyang Itiaba* to cleanse them. The cleansing of the princes leads to the neutralisation of Etim's power as the priest of Abritam and thus subsequently led to his death. Critically, this review does not merely narrate plotlines; the analysis explores how films construct traditional religion as either restorative or punitive, thereby reinforcing moral order within the community. In the case of the film titled *Inyang Itiaba*, the producer frames indigenous spirituality as both a system of justice and moral regulation, thereby contesting earlier Nollywood portrayals of traditional religion as solely malevolent.

DISCUSSION ON THE ROLES OF NOLLYWOOD IN THE PROMOTION OF TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS HERITAGE

From the meta-view analysis of some related epic movies, the researcher deduces that the Nigerian movie industry, otherwise referred to as Nollywood, has four complex roles to play in the promotion of traditional heritage. The identified roles include:

Researching traditional religious heritage

Scriptwriters and producers have the role of collaborating with traditionalists and custodians of traditional religious heritage to produce scripts that capture beliefs, values and the relevance attached to sacred places/sites. Legends and myths of a people can be told accurately when the scriptwriters conduct intensive ethnographic study, thereby adapting the stories into movie plots. In the Efik-Ibibio worldview, stories such as how Abasi and Abasi Atai created the world and how the first set of Efik-Ibibio ancestors were created and migrated can serve as relevant blockbusters. The beliefs, values, norms, and festivals can be adapted into blockbusters. Where the scripts are haphazardly done, this would lead to misrepresentation of traditional religious heritage. The case is backed by the assertion of Afolayan (2019) that there is a "lot of misrepresentation through our film. Some of the chants and the use of it are often misused." Ime (Pers. Comm.) (20th March, 2024) adds that the dearth of ethnographically conscious scriptwriters means that most of the scripts being produced are more fictional than capturing the real religious situation of the lives of the people.

Projection of traditional religious heritage

One of the crucial roles of Nollywood identified is the projection of meaningful and engaging content about traditional religious heritage onto the screen. This involves not just conveying a compelling story, but communicating important themes, emotions, and messages to the viewers. Ekong (Pers. Comm.) (19th April, 2024) explains that effective projection in movie production employs the techniques of dialogue, monologue, flashback, riddles, symbolism, visuals and metaphoric expressions. Eskor (Pers. Comm.) (11th June, 2025) explained that the Akwa-Cross bloc of the movie industry has been committed to promoting traditional religious values in its productions. The respondent cited movies such as *Mutanda* and *Mbopo* as some of the movies that capture the religious and cultural heritage of the Ibibio and Efik peoples. Owuola (Pers. Comm.) explained that the producers and actors within the Akwa-Cross bloc are conscious of the fact that movies, especially the epics, should be used to project the life and values of the people. Aside from the epics, Owuola (Pers. Comm.) explained that there are classics produced to promote the heritage of Akwa-Cross. Movies such as *Ekaette* and *Uyai* were produced to showcase the inner strength and resilience of the Akwa-Cross girl-child.

Production and preservation

At the third level role, Nollywood has the task of ensuring quality production of movies as well as preservation of the contents. Production of a movie entails all the processes bordering on scripting; planning, shooting and editing. The Akwa-Cross movie industry struggles in this area in that the video quality of most of the movies lacks a high level of cinematographic effects. Cinematographic effects involve visual storytelling – that is, the skilful handling and operating of the camera as well as setting up the lighting for every scene. The cinematographic effects further involve controlling what the viewers are expected to see and the way the image should be presented to them — this is hinged on choosing the appropriate shooting techniques that best convey the story. Cinematographic effects enable a story or content to effectively settle in the mind of the viewers. Ekong (Pers. Comm.) (19th April, 2024) explains that the Akwa-Cross movie industry struggles to produce movies with high-definition cinematographic effects due to the financial challenges that impede purchases or hiring of quality cameras and other equipment. Furthermore, the preservation of religious heritage in movies is crucial for accurately portraying diverse beliefs and practices on the screen. Ekanem (Pers. Comm.) (16th March, 2024) explains that the preservation of heritage in movies importantly helps to educate viewers about different religious traditions as well as promote tolerance and understanding. Ekpenyong (Pers. Comm.) (15th April, 2024) identifies that through the incorporation of elements of traditional religious content, filmmakers can create more

authentic and meaningful stories that resonate with viewers on a deeper level. Overall, the significance of preserving religious heritage in films lies in its ability to foster cultural appreciation and enrich storytelling in cinema. Attempts to represent traditional religious heritage such as beliefs, practices and values in Akwa-Cross films such as *Eka Abasi*, *Mutanda* and *Inyang Itiaba* have significantly helped in preserving and promoting traditional beliefs and practices. Themes and symbols related to indigenous religious practices are prominently featured in these movies, thereby showcasing the rich cultural heritage of the Ibibioland.

Exhibiting and premiering

A movie premiere is a specially planned event to mark the first public screening of a new film. On the other hand, exhibition of a movie entails the act of showcasing movies to the audience or viewers in a public setting - a theatre or cinema specifically. The premiere and exhibition of movies are usually attended by the movie's cast and production crew, as well as other industry players and the press. The significance of movie premieres and exhibition is much needed buzz and excitement can be generated for moviegoers and potential viewers using these methods. Observably, the researcher identifies that movies produced within the Akwa-Cross bloc generally fail to utilise the available channels for exhibition and premieres. Aside from YouTube, where the official channel of Akwa-Cross Movie Industry has 1.11k subscribers, movies from the bloc do not feature on Netflix, Cinemas, Amazon, Film Festivals and Showmax on DSTV, where there is larger viewership.

Summary of findings

From the study, the researcher deduces that promoting traditional religious heritage in Akwa-Cross region of Nigeria is greatly hinged on the application of the veritable tool of digital technology, of which the Nollywood movie industry offers. In sync with the theories applied – that is the Agenda-setting Theory, Cultivation Theory and the fringe reliance on Cultural Development Hypothesis, it is safe to assert that the implications of Nollywood's role in the promotion of traditional religious heritage are:

1. Balanced projection of traditional rituals, beliefs, practices, sacred sites and religious symbols with detailed and accurate narrative will influence viewers' negative perception about traditional religion, thereby fostering understanding of why the traditionalists practice what they practice. That is to say that unbiased presentation of traditional religious heritage in movies will help educate the people, thereby checking the spiralling of intolerance against traditional worshippers. Evidently, a great percentage of the researcher's knowledge about Igbo and Yoruba traditional religion is reinforced by exposure to epic movies produced within the culture. This summation is in line with the position of UNESCO (2003) that religious heritage, whether tangible or intangible, stands as channels of learning about a people.
2. Storytelling and visuals about traditional religious heritage in Nollywood movies are instruments of revitalisation and granting recognition of traditional religious practices and beliefs in the global space. The impact of global reach would manifest in global appreciation of indigenous religious and cultural values. This is evident in the case of the Ifa Religion of the Yoruba people, which is enjoying global recognition.
3. Cultivation of indigenous values is the third implication of Nollywood's promotion of indigenous religious heritage. Gerbner's Cultivation Theory, which serves as one of the theoretical frameworks for the study, supports that viewers' persistent exposure to content on television leads to the cultivation of the values projected. Hence, where Nollywood projects indigenous religious values such as communal and family consciousness, sex and dietary taboos, the propensity of cultivation of these values over time is likely.
4. Contents that promote why the people in Akwa-Cross region revere sacred groves, objects and sites can help illuminate present and upcoming generations that traditionalists are not idol worshippers but rather give reference to the tangible religious heritage due to the "spirit of the place" or the symbolic meanings attached to them.
5. The researcher agrees with Schiller's Cultural Development Hypothesis that emphasises that deliberate use of the media space to push indigenous beliefs and values into the global space can help in the process of decolonisation of Africa and give reasons for incorporation of traditional values and beliefs in emerging global culture to fast-track development of the world.

Summarily, the implications of Nollywood's engagement with traditional religious heritage as identified by the findings of the study go beyond just cultural preservation; it touches the issue of epistemic justice. The emerging accurate portrayals of traditional belief systems help in challenging the historical marginalisation of African knowledge systems as well as traditions in global discourse. In the presentation of indigenous religious heritage as a meaningful and coherent system of thought rather than superstition, the film industry contributes immensely towards the broader project of decolonising knowledge production. According to Opoku (2012), this effort aligns with modern African scholarship that continually advocates for the recognition of traditional

African epistemologies as legitimate frameworks for conceptualising reality.

Conclusion

The paper has carefully examined the role that the Nigerian movie industry has in the promotion of traditional religious heritage in Ibibioland. The paper, having assessed the historical evolution of the Nigerian movie industry points out that just like the industry has been used to misrepresent traditional religion for over three decades in Nigeria, the same energy can be used to promote traditional religious heritage now that many Africans have “awaken” to reject that most of what was projected on the screen do not depict the culture or values of the people. The effort to undo the misrepresentation done over the years is intensified with blockbuster movies produced in Yoruba and Igbo culture to promote the traditional religion. The paper recognises that the Nollywood movie industry has a significant role to play in the portrayal of African religious heritage. In the process of highlighting the religious heritage on screen, the industry not only educates viewers or audiences but help foster a sense of religious diversity, identity and pride.

However, as the industry continues to evolve and grow, filmmakers and key industry players in the Akwa-Cross bloc must address identified challenges that impede its optimum production of movies that can break into the global space with more accurate and respectful representations of traditional Efik-Ibibio religious heritage in their content. The implication of doing this would be the industry living up to its potential as a powerful force in shaping perceptions and understanding of traditional religion domestically and on the international scene. Through thoughtful scripts from ethnographic studies and nuanced storytelling, movie producers in the region can assist in breaking down the stereotypes and misconceptions about traditional religions, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and respectful global interreligious dialogue.

The conclusion of the study points to the thesis that Nollywood remains a tool that can either be used for distorting or preserving indigenous religious heritage. It is revealed in the study that earlier representations led to marginalisation of traditional belief systems; however, the emerging trends show a necessary shift toward more balanced portrayals. However, there is a need for the Akwa-Cross film bloc to intensify efforts in technological advancement, research-driven storytelling, and global distribution for its potential to be fully harnessed. It is in doing this that the industry can reposition itself as both a promoter and custodian of Efik-Ibibio religious heritage within the global cultural landscape. The researchers argue that the intentional and balanced use of locally based films as a medium of cultural expression will not only protect traditions or heritage that are already endangered; it will foster a renewed sense of pride, identity, and

continuity among successive generations.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher recommends:

1. Synergy between script writers, custodians of religious heritage and specialists of African Traditional Religion in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States. The study and some of the movies reviewed reveal a gap in communication of some indigenous practices and beliefs; the Association of Nigeria Movie Directors (ANMD) and Association of Movie Producers (AMP) in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States should increase collaboration with Multichoice, Netflix and Amazon Prime to facilitate production of movies that can be shown on these global movie channels. Observably, no Akwa-Cross movie has made it to Netflix or Amazon due to the content and cinematographic effects falling below the expected standard. Movies produced in the Akwa-Cross bloc are categorised as “low-budget movies” by many viewers online. The classification of Akwa-Cross films as “low-budget” is further grounded in observable production constraints such as inadequate lighting equipment, limited access to high-definition cameras, and restricted post-production resources. This assertion was even affirmed by Emma Owuola and Moses Eskor during personal communication. These challenges significantly affect cinematographic quality, including special effects, visual clarity, and scene composition. Consequently, the visual representation of sacred spaces and symbolic elements of religious heritage and rituals is often less immersive compared to productions from other film blocs in Nigeria. This technical limitation directly impedes the effectiveness of films as a medium for cultural promotion, as audiences are more likely to engage with visually compelling content.
2. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism in Akwa Ibom State and Cross River should be consistent in releasing intervention funds to movie producers in the region to enable them to compete with the budget enjoyed by many of their counterparts in the Yoruba and Igbo movie bloc of Nollywood.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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