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Changing Nigerian cultures: two films against witchcraft and an impossible dialogue

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Abstract

The prominent place of witchcraft in Nollywood films produced in the 1990s is widely acknowledged, and has prompted a number of comments from critics. While filmmakers' opinion is divided on the subject, these films obviously echo familiar situations. The dissemination of Nigerian films outside Africa and their entering new geographical and cultural areas, and the didactic nature of Nollywood, have led to a clash between Nigerian and the British cultures in the bid to fight the widespread practice of witchcraft and its attendant casualties, which now affect both worlds. This paper reflects on the difficulty of intercultural communication on the subject as illustrated by the recent controversy sparked by a British NGO's discovery of Nollywood in 2008. The film born of this culture-shock presents a novel way of dealing with screen-mediated witchcraft and its impact.

Key Words: Nigeria - Nollywood - witchcraft - intercultural - NGO - UK

Today, Nigerian video films are part of the African cultural landscape, and their “characters, plots, and themes are now part of the everyday discourse of farmers, taxi drivers, market women, urban professionals, and native doctors” (McCall, 2006: 92). The huge popular success of Nollywood is mostly due to the fact that this production is

Defined and sustained by Nigerians. The commercial success and popularity of Nigerian films stem from their stories, which the audience finds fascinating and consonant with their expectations. The thematic and aesthetic choices of Nollywood are determined to a large extent by the preferences of its audience, [...] subjects such as infidelity, treachery, lust, hypocrisy, armed robbery, marital problems, murder, cultism and occultism, witchcraft, polygamy [...]. The themes are indeed broad and mirror Nigerian society (Alamu, 2010: 166).

One of the themes mentioned above, witchcraft, based on “the belief that the spirits of living human beings can be sent out of the body on errands of doing havoc to other persons in body, mind or estate” (Idowu, 1973: 175, quoted in Awolalu, 1979: 247), has challenged scholars’ reflection. Filmmakers’ opinion is divided on the subject, but, as one of them, Emem Isong, recognizes in an interview with Okome (2000: 48): “I tried as much as possible to deviate from the normal Nigerian video films of magic, witchcraft and violence. The response from the audience tells me otherwise” (quoted in Ugor, 2007: 20). Kumwenda (2007: ii) agrees: “whilst some scholars and filmmakers criticize the prevalence of themes of witchcraft, magic and the supernatural, it is these very themes that draw local audiences.”

Yet, both in Nigeria and beyond, there are some who feel ill at ease with what they perceive as “too much witchcraft and black magic” (Onuzulike, 2010:29).¹ Some do not watch those films “because many a time they clash with [their] Christian beliefs” (Onuzulike, 2010: 36). Others fear that those storylines may reinforce Western stereotypes about Africa:

Films of this type have painted an even more negative image of Nigeria than it already has, making it appear to be a nation bogged down by superstitions and primitive beliefs. Furthermore, traditional Igbo spirituality is demonized by people who have little knowledge or understanding of it, and who are spreading this misinformation to the entire world. Isn't it bad enough for the West to demonize every aspect of our traditions, and now we are doing it to ourselves? Does anyone seriously think that all our ancestors did was sit around performing so called satanic rituals all day? (Onyiiboy, 23/01/2008)²

The dissemination of Nigerian films outside Africa and their entering new geographical and cultural areas, and the didactic nature of Nollywood, have led to a clash between Nigerian and British cultures in the bid to fight the widespread practice of witchcraft and its attendant casualties, which affect both worlds. This paper reflects on the difficulty of intercultural communication on the subject as illustrated by the recent controversy sparked by a British NGO’s discovery of Nollywood in 2008. The film born of this culture-shock presents a novel way of dealing with screen-mediated witchcraft and its impact.

¹ Martin Mangenda, a Zambian, BBC interview, 2006

² <http://www.naijaryders.com/forums/201667-traditional-igbo-religion-nollywood.html>

Nollywood's treatment of witchcraft

A cursory glance at four Nollywood films will give an idea of the various cinematic treatments of witchcraft, illustrating its definition as “a concealed practice of spiritual attack, torture, and misfortune against life in order to withhold progress of people or diminish success through misfortune on eating life out” (Iroegbu 2010: 201). Most of the video films only place this practice on the screen for all to see, forcing it into the open and punishing the culprits in a bid to trigger a public debate on it and possibly discourage the practice.³ Here are four examples:

- The Yoruba film *Alade Ikunkun* (Prince of Darkness, 1995) presents witchcraft as a skilled status passed on from one generation to the next through blood, and affecting children, presented as innocent victims: a lady doctor who is also a practicing witch sucks the blood of one of her patients' baby and so initiates the little girl into witchcraft. The girl grows to become a threat to her family but will eventually be delivered and converted.⁴

- In *Evil Men* (1998), where a group of male elders terrorize a village, holding the Chief's Council and local church to ransom in their bid to monopolise land and power, witchcraft is used separately by two elders – an uncle and an aunt - to kill a newborn baby and cause miscarriage, in order to block the families' lineage and prevent their economic and social progress.

- In *Evil Seed* (2001), the witch is a grandfather, whose activities bring death to his family and community: a young bride dies and several boys are sacrificed. The old man's syncretism will be his doom: he dies suddenly after attending mass. In the end, the priest will succeed in breaking the curse affecting the family.

- In *Tears of Love* (2007), the witch is, again, a woman, who, out of jealousy, torments her brother's wife, causing her to suffer repeated miscarriages. The wife is then accused of being a witch herself, and persecuted.

From these and other films, “viewers get the impression that witchcraft is a prevalent practice in Nigeria” (Dipio, 2008: 61). One thing is sure: it had always been regarded as “social violence” (Iroegbu, 2010: 201) and an abomination in the country because of its blood-drinking practice, as confirmed by Basden (1938: 418) who compared it with the same practice in England at the time:

The Ibos have no love towards such people, especially in respect of witches (“amosu”), and used not to hesitate to ill-treat, drive away, or even kill them. This, of course, only tallies with the prevalent custom in England up to comparatively recent times, and the fear of witches is by no means extinct in parts of Europe to this day, and there is the same tendency to penalize the witch rather than the wizard.

Yet, in Nigeria and elsewhere on the African continent, such practices remain a thriving business, as “Christian converts have never made a clear-cut disconnection with their traditional cultural heritage. Even among the educated elite, the boundary between traditional religious practices and Christianity is rather fluid, characterised by crossovers according to convenience and expediency” (Dipio, 2007: 78).

³ Someone close to us once sent us a VHS of such a film to warn us about threats at home.

⁴ Olayiwola (2011: 186) records Adesanya (1998)'s words of regret: “From the folkloric *Ajani Ogun*⁴, the Yoruba film genre metamorphosed into the witchcraft-horror thriller introduced by Ogunde's *Aiye*, leading to a spate of witchcraft flicks that gave the Yoruba film genre a bad name.”

The grave consequences of this practice determined Christian filmmakers and directors to take the crusade against witchcraft a step further, not just placing it on the screen but using the screen as “a medium in which Africans generally, and Nigerians especially, can face their fears of witchcraft” (Kumwenda (2007: 47) and offering a solution. In an interview, Pastor Ukpabio explains her use of video films: “As ministers of God, we preach the gospel by different means... and we also discovered that this video film is a new thing in Nigeria and a lot of people are watching” (Kumwenda 2007: 61, quoted from Okome, 2006:14). Mike Bamiloye “contends that most Nigerian films teach the society how to become witches and wizards apart from other vices. This conviction led him to design his films to fight what he regards as “pollutants to the society” (Ogunleye, 2003: 109).⁵

The same treatment of the theme has been adopted in a number of other films where “Christianity is presented as the panacea to all the social problems experimented in the narrative and evil [...] completely destroyed” (Dipio, 2007: 73-76). *Cassandra* (2000) stages a romance between a rich girl and a poor boy, John. One of Cassandra’s university colleagues tries to separate the two by inflicting a deadly and incurable disease on Cassandra through the use of witchcraft. Then, John is accidentally knocked down by a car driven by a pastor, who will lead both John and Cassandra to full recovery. The film ends with the witch’s death and the lovers’ wedding. In *A Cry for Help* (2001), the main character, an orphan girl, suffers continuous hardship at the hands of her aunt who had previously used witchcraft to kill the girl’s parents. With the help of the pastor, the aunt’s powers are destroyed “in the final showdown between the power of witchcraft and Jesus-Christ” (Dipio, 2007: 74). McCall (2006: 88) confirms that

Some of these movies are backed by well-financed evangelical institutions, but many simply appeal to the widespread Christian values in southern Nigeria. In these videos, the plots inevitably lead to the same Christian dénouement. An evangelist enters to exorcise the demons, whether of capitalist greed, traditional paganism, or, frequently, some noxious mixture of both. Whatever complex and cruel fate befalls the protagonists, in the end all is remedied by repetition of the phrase “In the name of Jesus!”

The End of the Wicked

One of these films is *The End of the Wicked*, directed and produced in 1999 by Teco Benson, and distributed by a Nigerian pastor from Akwa Ibom State of Nigeria, Helen Ukpabio. Kumwenda (2007: 47), who devoted some two chapters (pp.55-81) of her master’s dissertation to an in-depth study of the film, rightly summarises it as a battle between good and evil:

The story of the film centres on the Amadi family. Chris Amadi, husband to Stella and father of their two children, lives in an urban area in Nigeria. The family lives with Chris’s mother who, unknown to any member of the family, is a witch who belongs to a coven. [...] The children are influenced to join the cult. [...] The story ends with witchcraft exposed, destroyed and put to shame. The pastor and Stella triumph with their religion and beliefs. The ending of the narrative positions Christianity as morally superior, better and capable of destroying all sources of witchcraft. [...] The exposition merely achieves to portray the exposed witchcraft in *End of the Wicked* as being evil whilst

⁵ Quoted as coming from *Mount Zion Ministries* (Ile-Ife) website, www.mzfm.com

Christianity as being the answer to all the misfortunes that may be caused by witchcraft (2007: 65-69).⁶

This comprehensive reading of the film brings to the fore the mother-in-law's criminal witchcraft and reveals children as passive victims lured into the coven through shared snacks, initiated and used as hypnotised, programmed agents.

For Okome, who interviewed Ukpabio on several occasions, "*The End of the Wicked* is [...] a gripping story of the coven of witches, blood-sucking and flesh-eating vampires. [...] Chris Amadi, husband and father, now oversees a home torn apart by the forces of darkness. It is not clear how his worries began. It is not obvious either why the coven of witches is after him but the aim is to destroy all that [he] has achieved in life" (2004: 9). The film, centred around "the diabolical image of the mother as the witch of the family" (11), shows the mother-in-law and sole real culprit coaxing her son to consult a native doctor to try and solve his domestic problems, after successfully turning him away from his wife and causing him to lose his job. Okome examines this episode of the film in detail, highlighting the native doctor's potency and revered status in the local traditional society. The pastor arrives at the end and "meets Chris at that point of ultimate distress, when everything about the medicine man has failed" (11).

A third source, coming from a film review website, confirms the two readings above. For the reviewer, *End of the Wicked* shows "a firm moral compass and a distinctive West African vision of the occult":

The story focuses on acolyte Lady Destroyer's machinations to wipe out her son's happiness. [...] The coven assembles in a wooden grove of some sort around Beelzebub's wooden throne and various pots and bubbling cauldrons. The look of the witches themselves has parallels with the crones of European folklore, as they range from scraggly crones with dirt smeared faces to fresh initiates who look normal.

With the focus upon harvesting blood for the coven, two instances of blood-letting stick out mainly for linking it to the menstrual cycle. In both female characters awake from nightmares with bloody groins. Lady Destroyer rapes her own daughter-in-law with a mystical phallus she has grown in one sequence and steals the womb of her daughter in the other. As a further cruelty the stolen womb is then hung from a tree at the coven as a trophy of their wickedness. Organ stealing also happens elsewhere in one of the sub-plots where a man's eyes are stolen by the coven and the man awakes to find himself still in possession of his eyes but inexplicably blind.

Unlike many other Nollywood films, *End of the Wicked* tackles witchcraft head on in the usual popular morality tale framework. The extra blend in the mix being the introduction of Christianity as an alternative cure: a stark contrast to the casual inclusion of the occult in many other films likely caused by the religious backing of the film. [...] Its violence is akin to that of a morality play. Here blood is split and a reason however tenuous is given for it. The effect is disarmingly unsettling.⁷

⁶ For the 0.51mn movie trailer, see <http://www.libertyonlinestore.com/>. Ukpabio was once a member of the Calabar-based Olumba Olumba Obu (O.O.O.) spiritual movement, also known as the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star, and a practising witch, before she became a Christian (Okome 2004: 10). As often in such cases, her zeal in fighting witchcraft is fuelled by the inside knowledge she got on the subject.

⁷ http://www.sneersnipe.co.uk/review_title.php?id=454

Crossed wires in-between cultures

After years, and with the film now practically gone out of stock⁸, the interest in its storyline was unexpectedly revived following a chance intercultural encounter. Foxcroft, a British, now the director of a UK-based NGO, ‘Stepping Stones Nigeria’ (SSN), explains what happened:

SSN began in 2005 after I had spent three months in the Niger Delta researching community perceptions of the oil industry in 2003. I met and became friends with a local head teacher – Grace Udua – during this trip and she offered to donate her family land if I could help with building a school for disadvantaged children. It was first launched in Akwa Ibom State and is focused on the Niger Delta since there are a wide range of child rights abuses that take place in the region and very little interventions by government or other NGOs.

The NGO, trying to make sense of the child abuse reported as taking place in the region at the time, was made aware of allegations that “one of the primary contributory factors in the belief in child witches was the widely viewed Nollywood film – *End of the Wicked*.”⁹ This encounter opened a new chapter in the complex dialogue between Nollywood films and their audiences, projecting the 1999 Christian film on the international scene by proxy. A recent online commentary by Cussans (2011) on the film agrees with previous studies that it “was made specifically to promote evangelism, the Liberty Foundation Gospel Ministries church, headed by Pastor Helen Ukpabio, and to ‘reach out’ to the misguided.” But, judging from his comments, Cussans seems not have watched the same film: for him,

Here, Ukpabio and director Teco Benson use the conventions of horror filmmaking [...] to tell a moral story that warns against the evils of witchcraft, where children are the main perpetrators. Coincidentally or not, at the time of its release, the belief in child witches and wizards began to increase - particularly around the Niger Delta. The film, and films like it, have been seen by child protection organizations in Nigeria as fuelling beliefs in witchcraft that lead to ongoing child abuse.¹⁰

Having heard rumours that “many Nollywood films have capitalized on the belief in child witchcraft, with some depicting children eating human flesh and using their power to wreak havoc over communities”, the British NGO came to believe that *The End of the Wicked* “has helped to spread the belief in child witches” (Beletre,

⁸ Producers do not seem to keep the originals of their films, and after a few years, it is usually impossible to get hold of any film or order copies. Copies of the film are now only available through the Liberty Foundation Gospel Ministries church.

⁹ G. Foxcroft (2012), personal online interview, January 16, 2012. According to David Harrison (2008), “Gary Foxcroft, 29, programme director for the UK charity Stepping Stones, Nigeria, first came to the country in 2003 to research the oil industry for his master’s degree. But he was so shocked when he learned about the children’s plight that he decided to help raise money for the refuge - the Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network (CRARN) - and try to persuade the parents to take their children back. He has also helped to build a school for the children who are refused places at local schools” (Telegraph, November 8, 2008).

¹⁰ Comment on the advert for “Nollywood Free School at The Speaker Palace [Hackney, London] on Tuesday 1st March” posted on 23/02/2011 on <http://freefreeschool.wordpress.com/2011/02/23/nollywood-free-school-march-1st/>. The Kenyan scriptwriter Jane Mbiti had made a similar remark: according to her, “hitherto well-educated, progressive Christians no longer frown on notions of consulting witchdoctors, mediums or medicine men as was the case before the appearance of Nigerian videos in Kenya” (Ondego 2008: 116).

2010).¹¹ This conviction soon reached a worldwide audience through the uploading of the November 2008 TV documentary reporting their trip to Nigeria, and prompted a militant response from groups bent on using the screen and the web to wage war on child abuse through the maligning of the Nollywood film believed to be at the root of it all.¹² The same November 2008, *FalseprophetNigeria*, a UK-based website hosted by *World News* (www.wn.com) and whose aim seems to be that of denouncing deviant church leadership practices, uploaded a carefully crafted yet controversial 9:18mn horror video, markedly different from the 0.51mn original 1999 movie trailer and combining clips taken in disorder from various segments of *The End of the Wicked* part I (1999).¹³ The video ended with the following text: “In religion, the term false prophet is a label given to a person who is viewed as illegitimately claiming (charismatic authority) within a religious group. The individual may be seen as one who falsely claims the gift of prophecy.”¹⁴ This video was introduced on the website itself with these words: “Religious nut Helen Ukpabio makes these films designed to brainwash people into believing that child witches exist. In truth she makes money off the back of child suffering caused by her video as preaching.”¹⁵ This short but incriminating introduction and the sequencing of the video were clearly part of a concerted attack on the prominent Nigerian pastor’s ministry, hitherto unknown to *YouTube* viewers outside Nigeria, as Ukpabio’s expository films, sold on VCDs and DVDs in her country, have never been freely available on the Web.

The uploading of the video *The End of the Wicked* to a growing number of websites,¹⁶ and its express mention of Helen Ukpabio, provide a link between issues highlighted in the November 2008 “Saving Africa’s Witch Children” *Channel 4* documentary prepared by SSN, international bodies like the Institute for Ethics & Emerging Technologies or the International Humanist and Ethical Union, and the Nigerian pastor and evangelist who, like many other pastors, had been making use of

¹¹ <http://www.balancingact-africa.com/news/broadcast/issue-no82/content/nigeria-stepping-sto/bc>

¹² These attacks equally targeted the Christian ministry marketing the film, in a bid, no doubt, to block the sales.

¹³ Part I of the 1999 film can be divided into 25 sequences. The video used segments 1 (title page), 10-12, 14-15, 19, 21, 25, 9 and the last screen shot of 22, thereby recomposing a storyline with the children sub-plot as main plot, evacuating the main story in its entirety and planting children as culprits in incidents which did not involve them.

¹⁴ http://wn.com/false_prophet_nigeria. The same website featured a video presenting Leonardo Rocha dos Santos from UK, at that time a volunteer with CRARN (the Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network) and Stepping Stones Nigeria and a co-founder of the Brazilian NGO Ways to the Nations, talking about his work rescuing witch children in Nigeria and showing a booklet produced to correct false doctrines which led to child abuse (uploaded May 28, 2011).

¹⁵ That same video was uploaded on <http://www.youtube.com/user/FalseProphetNigeria/feed> and has since been posted on a number of other websites, resulting in its being accessed 100,737 times in three years (nearly 3,000/month), with the number of viewers growing by the day.

¹⁶ <http://ieet.org/index.php/IEET/more/helenukpabio20120212> (Institute for Ethics & Emerging Technologies 12/02/2012); <http://videosift.com/video/Children-Killed-or-Abandoned-due-to-Film-End-of-the-Wicked>;

<http://www.veoh.com/watch/v166117854yQscr6k?rank=0&jsonParams=%7b%2522numResults%2522%253A20%252C%2522rlmin%2522%253A0%252C%2522query%2522%253A%2522end+of+the+wicked%2522%252C%2522rlmax%2522%253Anull%252C%2522veohOnly%2522%253Atrue%252C%2522order%2522%253A%2522default%2522%252C%2522range%2522%253A%2522a%2522%252C%2522sId%2522%253A%2522181158818257203647%2522%7d&searchId=181158818257203647&rank=1>. In addition, articles on the same have been posted on the website of the International Humanist and Ethical Union. (<http://www.iheu.org/node/2856>, 23/11/2007), that of the Institute for Ethics & Emerging Technologies (<http://ieet.org/index.php/IEET/more/igwe20120212>, 12/02/2012) and on a parallel Wikipedia site (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Ukpabio) supported by WikiProjectNigeria and last modified on 06/03/2012.

video films to support her ministry. This video alludes to the film with the same title considered above, produced in 1999 by Teco Benson and featuring Helen Ukpabio herself in a pastor's role. Yet, regrettably, the unauthorized use of the title from the 1999 film by the authors of the video is highly misleading, as the skipping of both the beginning and the end of the film and the focusing instead on the few scenes involving children, prevent viewers from getting the intended message. This doctoring of the original film radically changes its storyline and message: the elderly woman's role (the only criminal in the film) is totally occulted, with viewers made to see children as active witches instead of involuntary actors; the role of the pastor (played by Ukpabio) as an adviser restoring the family's peace in a non-threatening way is equally occulted. The viewing of the online video had an immediate impact: repeated verbal attacks on Ukpabio were indirectly encouraged by online postings and the launching of a petition against her in a bid to prevent her from holding crusades in Akwa Ibom and the United States, fearing that this might lead to more child abuse. These postings and petition in turn seem to have led to the closure of Ukpabio's personal website, www.helen-ukpabio.com.

The 1999 film explained

On September 1, 2009, *Onlinenigeria.com* published a long interview with Helen Ukpabio, conducted by its assistant editor, Emmanuel Uffot, and triggered by the fact that, "ever since the documentary on how children branded witches by pastors in Akwa Ibom are maltreated, the evangelist has been at the centre of the storm following allegation that her movies encourage the stigmatization of witches."¹⁷ Early in the interview, Ukpabio, confronted with the comment that "there are lots of write-ups posted on the Internet saying your film, 'End of the Wicked' promoted the branding of children as witches in Akwa Ibom State", expressed her dismay at the sudden accusations against her film after nearly ten years of silence, accusations which, with hindsight, might have been explained by *Falseprophetnigeria/YouTube's* uploading of the incriminating video mentioned above and its borrowed title, coupled with the fact that, in the absence of any uploading of the film itself, viewers might have readily accepted that this video was the original trailer of *The End of the Wicked* suddenly out online.¹⁸ For Ukpabio,

It is surprising that nine years after, somebody is having a problem with a film that has delivered a lot of families. The storyline of *End of the Wicked* has nothing to do with children. [...] I didn't see the people that the film branded witches. Rather, we saw children who were greedy and were contaminated by other children who were witches in the school. That is what the film did. [...] I don't see anything in *End of the Wicked* that brands a child a witch."

She insisted: "I am not in support of the torture of witches, whether adult or children. I don't subscribe to that. I have well over 10,000 children in my ministry and they are being handled the way children should be. I have done a film called *Child Rescue* in 2001. [...] In the film, I said if you have any problem and are tortured

¹⁷ <http://onlinenigeria.com/member/content.asp?contentid=1836>

¹⁸ Cf. "The Hullabaloo About Child Witches" published in *This Day Nigeria* 7 May 2009, Lagos — "Following reports that children branded witches in Akwa Ibom were being maltreated, a couple of foreign TV stations ran a documentary which was allegedly named, styled and culled from a film made by a local foundation titled "End of the Wicked". The body claims the documentary has brought woes to the organisation." <http://allafrica.com/stories/200905080092.html>

anywhere, call me or come to this address. I put the address there at the end of the film.” She then went further and accused the leader of the Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network (CRARN), at that time SSN’s main partner on the ground¹⁹, of turning the orphanage they were running into a refuge for children accused of witchcraft – “suddenly, because the UK government voted so much money to fight child abuse over the problem that the Congolese government had with children, he decided to tap into it.”²⁰ She denied receiving money for her deliverance sessions, complained about her life being now in danger because of the British documentary and advised not to treat genuine and counterfeit coins alike. Ukpabio sued SSN for defamation, accusing the organization of misrepresenting her ministry. In March 2011, the *News magazine* ran a feature on Foxcroft, accusing him and his colleagues of being scam artists exploiting a relatively minor phenomenon to raise funds and fleece donors. Foxcroft later commented: “It is clear that our work with so-called child witches in Nigeria has upset many powerful people who would prefer that this issue had never been brought to the attention of the International community. Such people, some of them who have made a great deal of money from spreading the mythical belief in child witches, will often use everything in their power to protect their interests”.²¹

Joining forces against witchcraft

SSN then decided to further explore the use of films in the fight against child abuse. As its director said at the time, “the £200,000 that we received in donations has given us the opportunity to further expand the facilities at the CRARN children’s centre, establish another street children project in Oron [...] and produce a Nollywood film for distribution throughout Africa that strongly challenges the belief in child witches” (Foxcroft, 2009).²² Persuaded of the influential role played by Church leaders in a country known to be deeply religious, Foxcroft contacted the renown Nigerian film maker Teco Benson, the same who directed and produced Ukpabio’s 1999 *End of the Wicked*, and together they produced a typical Nollywood film, *The Fake Prophet*, intended to carry the message on child protection to every home and church in Nigeria and throughout the Nigerian Diaspora.

The film was made after we came to the realization that one of the primary contributory factors in the belief in child witches was the widely viewed Nollywood film – *End of the Wicked*. We therefore thought that we could make a similar film but with an entirely different message to reach out to community members that we may not be able to reach with other advocacy tools. We contacted Teco via *Facebook* and asked if he would be willing to work with us to develop the concept. We then worked closely with him to draft the storyline. The main content was provided by me and a scriptwriter then put this into a draft script, which was then edited by me and Nigerian partners over a period of time.²³

¹⁹ Following a serious incident, SSN ended its five-year old collaboration with CRARN on February 18, January 2011.

²⁰ <http://onlinenigeria.com/member/content.asp?contentid=1836>

²¹ <http://barthnotes.com/2010/03/12/nigerian-journalist-backs-helen-ukpabio-with-attack-on-charity-protecting-children-accused-of-witchcraft/>

²² <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/dispatches/articles/return-to-africas-witch-children-stepping-stones>

²³ G. Foxcroft (2012), personal online interview, January 16, 2012.

A crucial point made by Foxcroft, and which distinguishes *The Fake Prophet* from most of Nollywood films, is the close-knit cooperation between the British charity and the film director in the building of the storyline, with a clear and definite target and adequate facilities. In addition, and again unusually, the film was scripted and then tested on a carefully selected group of viewers.²⁴

The SSN director acknowledged that “there have been a number of challenges. These mainly relate to some people seeing the film as being anti-Christian, which we do not feel it is. Also the use of some Efik in the film has been seen by some as casting a slur on the Akwa Ibom community. This then led us to re-editing the film again in order to take much of this content out.” The trailer, which features on *Falseprophetnigeria*, first presents “the UK-based child rights charity Stepping Stones Nigeria (SSN) who works with partner organizations to prevent the abuse of innocent children who have been stigmatized as witches”, adding that “the film acts as a key component of the ‘Prevent Abuse of Children Today’ (PACT) campaign which SSN launched in 2006 in partnership with the Child Rights and Rehabilitation Network (CRARN). [...] This film is aimed at all Nigerians but particularly those non-literate communities who are unable to access billboards and newspaper articles.”

According to Cussans (2011), Teco Benson “joined forces with child protection charity Stepping Stones Nigeria [...] and made *The Fake Prophet* that perhaps can be seen as [...] an interesting homage to the belief in the power of film to change opinion. Benson considers this film, which aims to expose the truth about a widespread situation, as ‘the first truly socially responsible Nollywood film.’ ”²⁵ *The Fake Prophet* was widely advertised and premiered in cinemas, on March 12, 2011 in New York, June 14, 2011 in Abuja (Nigeria) and June 24-25, 2011 in London – a huge success every time. Information on *The Fake Prophet* is now available on many websites; *Nollywood Gossip* for example features an interview, dated May 25, 2011, with the writer Nnorom Azuonye who considers that “by supporting this film, you will be supporting African cinema, making it possible for us to bring you more world class entertainment from Africa to the UK. Most importantly, you will be helping Stepping Stones Nigeria prevent the abuse and murder of children in Nigeria and elsewhere.”²⁶

The Fake Prophet

Benson’s two films follow the same Nollywood pattern,

Socio-realist problems dramatized in a Manichean style where the good and the evil, the beautiful and the ugly, the true and the false are polarized with the intention to educate and entertain. Although there is a high degree of entertainment in these films, pleasure is never for its own sake; the moral lessons that are offered at the end of the narratives are always evident. The one who looks for entertainment in these films gets just as much as the one who looks for moral lessons. The films often end with a closure: almost always, the good characters are rewarded while the bad, irredeemable ones are punished. It is this clear characterization driven by the desire to tell a story which can be followed without taxing the audience, that is partly responsible for the popularity of Nigerian cinema (Dipio 2007: 3).

²⁴ Most Nollywood films so far have been produced based on a loose storyline and rely heavily on actors’ creativity.

²⁵ <http://freefreeshool.wordpress.com/2011/02/23/nollywood-free-school-march-1st/>

²⁶ <http://www.nollywoodgossip.net/2011/05/25/nigerian-writer-talks-fake-prophet-and-more-with-nollywoodgossip/>

Yet those two films are poles apart. Based on the premise that witchcraft did exist, *The End of the Wicked* (1999) treated the issue the traditional way and mostly from a family's viewpoint, showing how witchcraft silently wrecked both a family and an unsuspecting community, until prayer led to the witch's confession, leaving villagers in shock. *The Fake Prophet* (2010) on the other hand, while highlighting the havoc created by this traditional belief, turns the story upside down, with no description of witchcraft: all we witness is the sudden death of an elder and the ensuing public persecution of two pre-adolescents falsely accused of his death, with the self-proclaimed prophet being the only one to encourage villagers in their cruelty. As explained on the Facebook page of the film, "*The Fake Prophet* aims to [...] expose the truth behind the so-called men and women of God who have made their wealth from branding children as witches and highlight the legal consequences of child witch stigmatisation and abuse."²⁷ The text placed right at the beginning of the film clearly makes the point: "Each year, thousands of innocent children are abused and stigmatised as witches by so called men and women of God".

The storyline presents a man of dubious character involved in an international prostitution racket, who loses his 'job' after several botched 'operations'. Threatened by his boss and forced to leave Lagos, he is now faced with a question which will determine his next move: "how can I survive outside Lagos as an uneducated young man without any specific talent?" He moves back to his Akwa Ibom village to stay with his brother and, faced with hunger, decides to open a church he sees as a business. Meanwhile, in that village, two young secondary school pupils (a boy and a girl) are being accused of active witchcraft following the girl's father death after a long illness with TB-like symptoms which defied all traditional remedies. At that time, the girl is taken to the fake prophet's church, which started growing through the systematic use of deception, and nearly gets raped by the 'man of God'.

The two children are eventually forced to leave their school and homes and fend for themselves on the street. The girl ends up falling in the hands of the prophet's former boss, who trafficks her to London for prostitution, while the boy gets imprisoned after stealing bread. While the fake prophet gets fat on people's money, a true pastor arrives on the scene and starts preaching against false prophets, providing the film with a welcome balanced viewpoint. He will turn out to be the instrument used to bring the fake prophet to book, with the support of the local population, fed up with being fleeced and deceived. The film ends on the reminder that things have now changed, with the passing the Child Rights bill into law allowing the successful prosecution of child abusers. The last screen, after dedicating the film to the memory of children who lost their lives through witchcraft-related abuse, invites audiences "to take action to stop the abuse of innocent children" by contacting www.makeapact.org.

The fight continues

The Fake Prophet got "a thumbs up" from reviewers.²⁸ At the time, its producer had great plans for the exploitation of the film, with its educational attempt "to change [its] audience behaviour for the sake of the community" (Sereda, 2010: 206) in the tradition of Nollywood, and the jailing of the lead character meant as a deterrent to would-be abusers:

²⁷ <https://es-la.facebook.com/africafilms.tv/posts/110596762320031>

²⁸ <http://nollywoodforever.com/the-fake-prophet/>

I will not be satisfied with its impact until it has become a widely watched film in the Niger Delta region and there is still some way to go with this. Nollywood movies have immense moral power and huge potential to bring about positive change in the lives of vulnerable people. Unfortunately many movies do not acknowledge this and seem to actively promote messages that do more harm than good [...]. We will be distributing the movie for free throughout the region this year and will also be showing it at University campuses throughout Nigeria. We will then look to develop a training toolkit around it that can be used by community workers to help dispel the belief that children can be witches.

Unsurprisingly, since then, both films seem to have disappeared from radars. Meanwhile, for the ordinary Nigerian, not much seems to have changed:

If Nollywood truly cared about showcasing Igbo culture instead of trying to disgrace it, they would include more movies that highlight the positive aspects of Igbo spirituality. [...] We should start taking Nollywood for what it is: pure fantasy. The Church is not 100% benevolent, and will certainly not solve all of your issues. Every problem does not have evil spirits behind it. The pastor is not always right, and will not always win. Traditional religion is a lot more than just witchcraft, juju and black magic. It is a deep part of our heritage that should at least be properly understood. People should stop letting their television sets be their textbook and go out and research things for themselves. If we continue to demonize our culture and traditions, we cannot be upset when others do the same (Onyiboy, 23/01/2008).

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Filmography (Main films)

The End of the Wicked (1999) part I & II

Director: Teco Benson

Producer: Teco Benson

Executive producer: Helen Ukpabio

Genre: Horror

Length: 2h47 (part I: 49:32mn; part II: 46:40mn)

Main actors: Charles Okafor, Hilda Dokubo, Ramsey Noah, Helen Ukpabio

The Fake Prophet (2010)

Director: Teco Benson

Producer: Gary Foxcroft

Genre: Drama

Length: 80mn

Main actors: Charles Okafor and Grace Amah