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Obododimma Oha

## Yoruba Christian Video Narrative and Indigenous Imaginations: Dialogue and Duelogue

A very interesting fictional representation of two opposing forms of relationship between African traditional religion and Christianity which have persisted since colonial times in Nigeria could be found in Chinua Achebe's classic, *Things Fall Apart* (1981). In this novel, Achebe represents these relationships as those of dialogue (in which followers of the two religions try to understand and help each other), and of what one may playfully call "duelogue" (in which the adherents on both sides choose the path of offense, provocation and physical violence). Achebe (1981: 126) portrays the dialogic relationship in the interaction between Mr Brown and Ogbuefi Akunna: "Whenever Mr. Brown went to that village he spent long hours with Akunna in his *obi* talking through an interpreter about religion. Neither of them succeeded in converting the other but they learnt more about their different beliefs."

On the contrary, duelogue, which is presented as disruptive and counter-productive, could be seen in the relationship between Mr Smith (Mr Brown's successor) and the defenders of Umuofia's tradition and belief systems. Achebe writes:

"Within a few weeks of his arrival in Umuofia Mr Smith suspended a young woman from the church *for pouring new wine into old bottles*. This woman had allowed her heathen husband to mutilate her dead child. This child had been declared an *Ogbanje*, plaguing its mother by dying and entering her womb to be born again. Four times this child had its evil round. And so it was mutilated to discourage it from returning" (*ibid.*: 130; initial emphasis mine).

Mr Smith's pursuit of duelogue, which has a fanatical basis, eventually brings the church into direct conflict with the defenders of the culture and religion of Umuofia.

Chinua Achebe could, in fact, be seen as representing what in theology has been identified as the two models of relationship between the Christian

gospel and culture over time, in his own case its manifestation in the encounter in his own African (Igbo) historical context. Ernest Munachi Ezeogu in his "Bible and Culture in African Theology", identifies these models as (1) the "dialectic", which sees the gospel as being "in perpetual conflict" with culture, and that this conflict can only be resolved if culture is made to yield to "the demands of the gospel", and (2) the "dialogic" model "which views culture and gospel as two compatible entities that could and should be reconciled [...] for their mutual enrichment and efficiency" (Part One). These issues had been taken up in the Western academy too, and did form the onus of Matthew Arnold's critique of Puritanism and Victorian materialism in his famous *Culture and Anarchy* (1932). Arnold, in the work, eventually settled in favour of the dialogic model.

The binary representation (dialogue/duologue) in the relationship between two religions/cultures that possess profound narrative practices, which we have identified in Achebe's novel, appears to be available also in other cultural productions in Nigeria. One site of cultural production where this binary relationship is staged in Nigeria is the Christian video film. The Christian video film tells a fictive story as if it were factual, and so is readily a useful instrument of evangelization which shapes "attitudes in a social context of fear, uncertainty, helplessness and hopelessness" (Oha 1997a: 93-94). But what is even more significant is the way the narrative of the Christian video films has paradoxically combined dialogue and duologue as strategic postures in its reflections on, and uses of, indigenous imaginations in Nigeria. By "Indigenous imaginations" in this regard is meant constructions and frameworks of belief, which have originated from a people's world view. Indigenous imagination is part of the epistemology of a people, which is acquired along with other aspects of culture. In a sense, this imagination may be culturally relative and difficult for an "outsider" to understand, but for the indigene or "insider", it is an authentic way of explaining, comprehending, and intervening in processes of human existence.

I will argue in the present paper that Yoruba Christian video films, as instruments of evangelization, appear to be carrying out a deconstructive project in which, as always, Christianity utilizes other religious narrative traditions and semiosis to reinvent and legitimize itself in other cultures. I will first discuss briefly the context of Christian video making in Nigeria, as a way of showing its subversion and accommodation of indigenous imaginations. Precisely, I will be attempting to show that the difference between Christian and indigenous imaginations is being re-imagined in the Nigerian context. I will follow this up with my analysis of some Yoruba Christian video narratives, in which I will try to show the specific ways that these Christian narratives now strategically pour the "old" wine into "new" (Christian) bottles<sup>1</sup>, not only because this old wine is more familiar and could

1. Some secular video films in Nigeria, for instance *Living in Bondage and Scores to Settle*, also use Christian tropes of spiritual healing and conversion, partly because of the desire to find larger market for the films in a context where "born-

sharpen the thirst for and understanding of the Christian word, but also revitalizes the Christian narrative that is already suffering from stereotyping and lack of freshness.

The video films that I have selected for the study are: *Agbara Oro (The Power of Words)*, *Oro Ahon (The Words of the Tongue)*, *Ogun Atilewa (Attacks from Home)*, and *Agba Woli (The Big Prophet)*. There are, of course, several Yoruba Christian video films in Nigeria, but my choice of the four mentioned above has been informed by the special way the films engage indigenous imaginations. Narrowing the discussion to a specific ethnocultural and cosmological context may reveal, also, how the Christian Word addresses problems and beliefs which are telling of the given cultural context.

Being a non-Yoruba, my study may suffer from some limitations. In the first place, I am not competent in the Yoruba language, while the films are mainly in the language. I have therefore had to use the services of translators, who are native speaker-hearers of Yoruba, so as to have a deeper understanding of the video films. These assistants also explained other non-verbal aspects of Yoruba communication that are used in the films. Furthermore, since the study is on a cultural context other than the one I am familiar with, I have also found it necessary to complement my filmic data with ethnographic information gathered from (recorded) conversations with Yoruba Christians<sup>2</sup>, especially with regard to the issue of the relationship of the filmic narratives to Yoruba Christians' perceptions of indigenous beliefs.

In the section that follows, I explore the context of Christian acculturation and inculturation and Christian video making in Nigeria generally, as well as the context of the Yoruba culture that appears to be partly shaping Yoruba Christian video films.

## The Background Issues

Christianity is a religion that celebrates the *logos*:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1: 1);

“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us...” (John 1: 14);

“God said, ‘Mortal man, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the people of Israel’. So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. He said ‘Mortal man, eat this scroll that I give you; fill your stomach with it.’ I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey.” (Ezekiel 3: 1-2);

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again” Pentecostal Christianity is becoming a very strong force as a way of looking at and explaining the Wor(l)d.

2. These informants preferred being anonymous, although they allowed me to tape-record our conversations.

“Then the Lord stretched out his hand, touched my lips, and said to me, ‘Listen, I am giving you the words you must speak. Today I give you authority over nations and kingdoms to uproot and to throw down, to build and to plant’” (Jeremiah 1: 9-10).

Following in this tradition, Christian videos in Nigeria stage the Word of God (Oha 1997a: 94), consciously telling of the conflict between Satan and God (or between the agents of Satan and those of God) and the victory of (the Word of) God. But the Christian Word (or Word of God) seeking to contest space in a non-Western context faces some interrogations, as articulated by Eboussi-Boulaga: “How can the status and functioning of dogmas acculturated in Western Christianity and civilization still be the same when Christianity is transplanted elsewhere to a different universe?” (cited in Hecht & Simone 1994: 37). The issue, therefore, is about the familiarization of the Christian Word to the African (Nigerian) context, or about the need for inculturation, which, as Verhelst (1990: 53) explains, refers to a process whereby an indigenous culture tremendously influences and transforms a culture that is foreign in origin. Its opposite, acculturation, means a foreign culture tremendously influencing an indigenous culture; in other words, the foreign culture being dominant and seeking to supplant the indigenous. Whereas acculturation represents a colonialist and universalist tendency, inculturation, explains Tlhagale (n.d.), represents “the pluralist way of conceiving culture”.

Early Christian missionaries and adherents in Nigeria, and in Africa in general, could not (and did not want to) find alternative indigenous semiosis for the Christian Word. The indigenous semiosis/imagination was at most either declared unreal or deceptive, or was recognized as a site for Satanic operation/oppression. The Christian Word was seen as the only (valid) Word, and being converted to Christianity necessarily required a displacement/replacement of the indigenous beliefs and practices by the Christian Word and logic.

Local folk narratives, songs and dramatic performances were also seen as signifiers of the past, the dark past when Satan reigned in the life of the non-convert. The coming of the Word/Light of God, the Christian Word, was seen as requiring an abandonment of these folk narratives. Some Christian preachers openly preached against the narration of “devilish” “pagan” folkstories to children in Christian homes. There were (and there are still) cases of Christian converts in Nigeria being asked to openly denounce their links with certain cults. Some converts, in their excessive zeal, have also had to misinterpret all indigenous cultural practices as being demonic, not to talk of African Traditional Religion (ATR) which, as Ikenga-Metuh (n.d.) has rightly stated, is still held in disdain by Christian catechesis which “anchored [...] on modern European culture, has engendered in its adherents a superiority complex, which sees ATR and African cultural values which it upholds as primitive and unprogressive”. These

tendencies have intensified with the growth and evangelical work of “born again” Christian fundamentalism in Nigeria since after the Nigerian civil war.

Practitioners of indigenous folkways in Nigeria have equally tried to resist the Christian Word, especially given the latter’s posture of interrogating, violating, and disrupting indigenous practices. Basically, the resistance has arisen from the perception of the Christian Word as *the strange way*: to resist “the strange way” is to preserve the supposed familiar way.

The attitude of mutual resistance between Christianity and indigenous cultures in Nigeria has not altogether succeeded<sup>3</sup>. Both Christianity and indigenous Nigerian religious narratives have started absorbing and reinventing each other’s semiotic forms, even when pretending to be oppositional, creating, as we often find in postcolonial contexts, hybrid narratives. Some Christian songs by Obi Igwe, Brother Okwey and Patty Obassey, have interestingly appropriated indigenous chanting strategies, just as some Christian videos in the Yoruba context have also appropriated local dirges and the style of Ijala (Hunter’s) chant. Obi Igwe particularly appears to have effectively adopted the stylistic patterns of musical discourse typical of masquerade performances in Igbo culture, especially in his use of call-response strategy, voice modulation and drumming. Christian praise-worship sessions in Nigeria now closely resemble the traditional African, masquerade performances, with intensive drumming and dancing. This is particularly the case with the so-called African Churches (Aladura groups). In such worship sessions, the Holy Spirit is believed to be *moving* in the midst of the congregation, just as the ancestral spirits move in the context of traditional masquerade performances, speaking their esoteric language.

Similarly, some Nigerian traditional healers do utilize Christian symbols and religious objects, probably as means of visually persuading some of their clients (who may be Christians!) that they also identify with the Christian Word. One traditional healer whom I once visited, being my kinsman, had a Bible in his shrine. He explained that he kept the book because he saw himself as a Christian, and that it was God who was his guide and patron of his powers. In the traditional kolanut ritual that he performed to welcome me, he ended his prayers with the familiar formulaic expression, “Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen!”. Thus Jesus Christ in the postcolonial Nigerian context becomes an unstable sign, crossing imaginative boundaries and freed from its singular meaning in the Christian Wor(l)d. The Christian symbols and objects, such as the crucifix, the paintings of Christ, Virgin Mary, and the angels of God, are visual narratives of the

3. The emergence of the churches referred to as “African churches” was partly due to the tendency by the colonialists to use Christianity in constructing European/colonial superiority, and their refusal to accept African values as being Christian, as Tlhagale Buti has argued in an essay interestingly entitled, “Bringing the African Culture into the Church”. Thus such churches, too, signify the imperative of the dialogue between Christianity and African values and systems of thought.

religion which in the possession of the traditional healer, become recontextualized and transformed into meanings that are neither Christian nor indigenous; in other words, resisting identification within a cultural parole.

Generally, the conversation between Christian and indigenous imaginations appears to indicate a process of inculturation, coming especially from the Christian front. It appears to suggest as one Nigerian Christian singer, Chuks Ofojebe, who has adopted South African musical styles, would say in one of his recent songs: “Jesus *is* in Africa” (emphasis mine). Jesus *being in Africa*, being friendly *with* Africa (and African practices), being friendly *to* Africa, being Africanized, has been the major argument of many contemporary African theologians. Such a position has, in fact, been given credence by the special African Synod which, convened and presided over by Pope John Paul II, took place in Rome from 10 April to 8 May, 1994<sup>4</sup>. The Synod seriously recommended a dialogue between Christianity and African traditional cultures and religious values, asserting that “Dialogue is an important aspect of the Church’s mission of evangelisation”, and also that such dialogue does not endanger Christianity, rather “Authentic dialogue becomes witness, and a true evangelisation is accompanied by respecting and listening to one another” (“Instrumentum Laboris”, No. 77). Dialogue, as understood by the Synod, encompasses “dialogue of life, dialogue of specialists, and dialogue of religious experience” (Ikenga-Metuh n.d.). Thus, it is not only discursive exchanges as we have in the case of the Mr Brown and Ogbuefi Akunna in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* that is involved, but also a collaboration that is based on the fact that both parties, as Ikenga-Metuh says, have to work together the progress and development of humanity. In other words, both must aim at having a common life, and not necessarily to be imagined, as Shorter (n.d.) humorously describes it, as “two teams in a rugby match each making ground against the other”.

Indeed, many catholic leaders and theologians in Africa have started taking the issue of inculturation very seriously, having understood that, as Verhelst (1990: 54) would put it, Christianity can no longer be seen “as a fully grown tree to be transplanted from Rome, Geneva or elsewhere, but a seed to be scattered over the ground”. Numerous studies by Ikenga-Metuh, Shorter, Sarpong, etc., have explored and stressed this subject<sup>5</sup>. Also, with the emergence of the Internet, websites and listserves on African traditional religions and cultures and the issue of inculturation have been

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4. Similarly, in a letter from the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Vatican City, to the Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, signed by Francis Cardinal Arinze, it is stated that “Elements of a non-Christian religion and culture it influences can enrich Christian catechesis and worship and find in them their deepest fulfillment” (1988).
  5. Some of these publications on inculturation and African cultures and religions are available online at <http://www.afrikaworld.net/> and could be accessed free-of-charge. See also J. Mutiso-Mbinda’s “Basic Sources on Inculturation in Africa” at <http://www.ic.net/Africa/catholicafrica/biblio3.htm>

created, and are being moderated by Catholic priests, one interesting case being that of <http://www.afrikaworld.net/> created and edited by Chidi Denis Isizoh, a Catholic cleric. It should also be noted that many Christian missionaries and theologians have been on the vanguard of the development of African languages and cultures. Researches into African cultures and religions have been pursued extensively in Catholic seminaries in Africa. In other words, Christianity already recognises her need for African culture, which is inextricably tied to traditional African religions, and culture cannot be ignored because it reflects the feelings and thinking patterns of a people, or as Shorter (n.d.) puts it, “the shared mental package that helps to programme our perception and our behaviour”, which is why Geert Hofstede refers to it metaphorically as “the software of the mind”.

In recognition of the need for dialogue with African cultures and religions, there have been some experiments in Nigeria and in some other African countries on the “African rite” in the Catholic mass. Recognized by the papacy, this rite, which involves holding Christian worship in familiar African ways, has been experimented upon with great success in Nigeria by the Dominican Community at Samonda, Ibadan. In the Africanized catholic mass which I participated in, indigenous religious semiotics were dominantly utilized: prostration to Olodumare (God) at the altar, dancing of maidens and young men carrying ritual items to the altar, ritualized drumming, singing and dancing in local styles, etc. Although inculturation, as Bishop Bonifatius Haushiku of Namibia warned at the African Synod, “must be carried deeper than just music, drums and clapping of hands” (Reese 1994), it is obvious that Christian performances (of the Word) in Nigeria have eventually started moving toward dialogism and postmodern/postcolonial reinventiveness, in agreement with Homi Bhabha’s observation that

“The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The ‘past-present’ becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living” (Bhabha 1994: 7).

It is within the paradoxical context of the past-present of Christian performance of the Word in Nigeria that Christian video film-making in Nigeria constructs its hybrid and unstable rhetoric.

Given the general growth of video film industry in Nigeria, the site of discourse appears to be shifting from the Book to the Screen, the latter producing and imposing a magic of seeing-is-believing. The decline in the reading culture—the ghost of “the closure of the Book”—appears to be survived by the *openness* of the screen, an *openness* that may imply the liberation of signifiers from fixed meanings, or a (visual) translation and transformation of the Christian Word. If seeing is believing, then the video



becomes a more effective means of not just *hearing* God, but *seeing* Him (in action).

It should also be noted that Christian video film industry in Nigeria has grown, not only due to the need to find an alternative way of reaching the people who are becoming less and less interested in the technology of the written Word (in other words, a re-staging of the Word), but also as a way of finding a substitute for the secular films which many Christians watch to the displeasure of their pastors and religious leaders. This displeasure is often expressed in Pentecostal groups such as the Deeper Life Bible Church and New Covenant Church, with the consequence that some members begin to see the video films (and the television) as (instruments of) the Anti-Christ. But this attitude has started changing with the discovery that an alternative video culture could be created to further teach the believers the Word while entertaining them. The video films, which are cheaply produced mainly by Drama Wings of Christian Churches and ministries, and marketed in video shops and by mobile vendors, are often played on some local television stations in Nigeria on weekends, especially on Sundays, under the sponsorship of Christian individuals and groups. They are also played at Christian revival rallies as complements of sermons. In these cases they become very important visual instruments of teaching and persuasion, and it must be observed here that there is always the tendency for the films to be literalized by many uninformed people at such rallies and to reinforce fanaticism. Hardly do some of these viewers even think of the films as having been made up. This misconception of the ontology and epistemology of the religious film is also reinforced by claims made by some pastors and Christian film actors in Nigeria that their performances have been inspired, that such performances are not carnal but of God or the Holy Spirit “entering the costume”.

Teaching the Christian Word through the video film indeed belongs to what has been described as the “Electronic Media Church” (EMC), which refers to the “phenomenon of preaching on radio and television networks” (Akindele 1989). Christianity has fully appropriated the New Media, including the Internet (Ess 2001), in enhancing its capacity to recreate and disseminate the Word of salvation. Interestingly, the New Technology brings simulations of experience in ways that suggest transcendence and reinforce the Christian idea of miracle, or even God’s omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience. The New Media technologies become God’s and the Christian evangelist’s allies in doing exploits with the Word.

Moreover, Christianity itself being a spiritual force of globalization, which aims at creating not just “a global village” but a global family (of God’s people), the repackaging of the Christian Word in form of video film in a postcolonial context further creates an opportunity for globalizing the local, or what has been referred to as “glocalization” (Livingston 2001: 147). It creates an opportunity for the teaching of the received Christian Word in more familiar local images. Implicitly, the films teach ways of

teaching the Word in a changing postcolonial African world where both Christian evangelism and its methods face serious challenges.

Many of these Christian video films, however, lack profound aesthetic qualities partly due to the fact that Christian art, especially those with Puritan influences, consciously de-emphasize pleasure. What is considered more important is the *message*, while the aspect of pleasure is viewed as capable of misleading the audience, or distracting them from the message, the Word.

Apart from the purely religious objectives informing Christian video film making in Nigeria, there are also underlying economic objectives. Generally, video film making in Nigeria today has been informed by the quest for money. Haynes & Okome (1997: 24) have observed that:

“It was Igbo businessmen who understood that a large market could be opened by the retail sale of video cassettes. Kenneth Nnebue, then an electronics dealer and film promoter, led the way. He produced a Yoruba film, *Aje Ni Iya Mi*, for the late Sola Ogunisola. It was made as cheaply as possible, shooting with an ordinary VHS camera and using a couple of VCR’s to edit. Few of the actors were paid anything at all. His investment was a mere N2,000, and he made hundreds of thousands back [...] Yoruba artists like Jide Kosoko, Adebayo Salami, Gbenga Adewusi and Muyi Aromire, seeing the money to be made and unhappy with the pittance they were being paid by the Igbo producers, soon rented video equipment [...] and launched into their own production. A deluge of films followed.”

Christian video film makers in Nigeria may argue that their primary commitment is to spread the Word of God, but it may not be far from the truth to say that video film making is perceived in Nigeria as an employment and a lucrative business. Of course, the Christian film producers may also believe, as do some Christian evangelists in Nigeria, that the labourer in God’s vineyard is worthy of his/her pay. And since God must provide all their needs “according to his riches in glory” (Philippians 4: 19), there is nothing wrong with commodifying the Christian Word.

But one of the casualties in this economic quest is aesthetic quality, which cannot be excused even going by the ideological foregrounding of message in (Puritan) Christian art, as pointed out earlier. In most cases, it is simply a problem of poor video-making skills on the part of some Nigerian Christian video film producers. One example of such poverty of skill could be seen in *Obododimma*, a Christian video film made by some one-time schoolmates of mine in Calabar, Nigeria. The video film, which tells the story of Obododimma who goes to Hell for refusing to repent from cult membership, is full of lengthy and boring monologues, dull speeches, and poor costuming and make-up. Indeed, as Afolabo Adesanya (1997: 20) laments, “the battle for the minds and pockets of the screen audience may have been won and lost already! Roll camera. Sorry, roll tape. Forget it, the die is cast. One can only just hope that the gains of this decade will blossom into the next century”.

There are, however, some Nigerian Christian video films that are fairly skillfully made, such as *Out of Bounds*, *Beyond the Vow*, *Agba Woli*, etc. These are particularly characterized by the tendency of their producers to look outside the closed imaginative frameworks of the Christian performance of the Christian Word.

The Yoruba society—the specific milieu of this study—shares in the experiences and tendencies of Christianity and Christian video film making in Nigeria. But there are aspects of Yoruba life and culture one needs to note in looking at these video films. First, it should be noted that the Yorubas are a very religious people, with a deep sense of the intervention of the supernatural world in human affairs. Yoruba cultural productions reflect this inclination towards supernaturalism. Even the works of the Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka, is shot through with mysticism and spirituality, sometimes as artistic means of reading contemporary Nigerian society. More traditionally, one may perhaps find in the works of Amos Tutuola and D. O. Fagunwa more interesting representations of Yoruba sense of the relationship between the secular and the spiritual. There are already numerous published information on Yoruba spiritual life, so I would not be attempting any detailed exploration here.

However, I would draw attention here to some aspects of Yoruba spirituality and culture, which were thrown up in my conversations with some Yoruba persons. One of these is that the Yorubas have a strong sense of the past. According to one of my informants, a Pentecostal Yoruba Christian who prefers to remain anonymous, “A lot of Yorubas are aware of the past. The past has a way of exerting influence on the present. As a result of that awareness of the past, coupled with awareness of things happening in the present, they are able to understand what could happen in the future”.

The “presence of the past”, which is important to postmodern/postcolonial discourses (Hutcheon 1996: 4) characterizes many Yoruba cultural productions, including the video films.

Further to this “presencing” of the past is the Yoruba strong sense of the potency of voodoo. It is not that they necessarily encourage voodoo practice, but they are also convinced about the possibility of using voodoo to subvert evil and to do good, which aligns with Kwabena-Essem’s argument about such inclination means “taking the universal belief in the supernatural to the next logical step” whereby the powers of the supernatural are “harnessed to help the human race in their everyday existence” (“A New Look at ‘Juju’”). Thus some persons may use voodoo for protective purposes, even though some may want to do harm with it. Another informant drew my attention to the fact that there is a difference between a *babalawo* (father of the cult) who is committed to healing or saving life, and the *Onisegun* (the master of medicine), who could use voodoo to do harm or to do whatever the client wishes. Many Yoruba Christians do not doubt the power of either the *babalawo* or *onisegun*, or that *Esumare* (the Yoruba prankster-god re-interpreted by Christians as the devil) and other evil spirits

exist and carry on their traditional tasks of confusing and misleading people. Hence, many Yoruba Christians find it difficult to deny the roles of these forces in a world where good and evil are perpetually in conflict.

Apart from the traditional Yoruba perspective on voodoo and evil forces, the Yoruba, like many traditional Africans, believe in the power of the word (*Oro*). They believe that incantations of the Ifa are very powerful. One Yoruba Christian informant narrated to me the experiences of some individuals with respect to the uses of *Oro* in harming or healing people. Also, like some other Nigerian ethnocultures, the Yorubas believe that the *oro* performed by an elder, for instance by one's parents, is particularly potent, such that a curse needs to be revoked otherwise it would bring disasters on the individual that has been cursed. The Yorubas also believe that it is one's relatives that could easily be one's enemies and do one harm, as in the saying "eni moni ni seni", as we will see in the father-son relationship in *Agbara Oro*. Indeed, there is much validity in the claim made by Mbiti (1982: 197) that "There is mystical power in words, especially those of a senior person to a junior one, in terms of age, social status or office position. The words of parents, for example, carry 'power' when spoken to children: they 'cause' good fortune, curse, success, peace, sorrows or blessings, especially when spoken in moments of crisis".

The indigenous Yoruba imaginations about the powers of *oro*, voodoo, and of the existence of spirits, may have serious implications for Christian video narratives that address existential issues in the Yoruba society.

In the section that follows, I will turn to discuss the appropriations of the indigenous imaginations in specific Yoruba Christian video films in Nigeria, and the discursive strategies that underlie them in the films. What forms of these indigenous imaginations gain entry into the Christian video film narratives? How are they utilized in the narratives? What kind of intersubjectivity emerges, and/or to what extent do they dis/agree with the Christian word? Are there specific ways in which the indigenous frames transform, and are transformed in, the semiotic space of self and other-word?

### Old Yoruba Wines in New Christian Bottles

Indigenous imaginations, as explained earlier, reveal local invention and explanations about occurrences in human situations. They are therefore frameworks of knowledge that condition behaviour. In the video films under study, these indigenous imaginations are played out in the sites of verbal production or the word (*oro*), voodoo significations and causality, dream semiotics, theology of illness and death, as well as the agency of evil forces in human affairs.

*Oro* is imagined by the Yoruba as a very potent weapon that could be used in doing harm, as well as for healing. As Ayo Opefeyintinmi (1993:

27) explains, the power of the spoken word, as imagined in oral cultures like that of the Yoruba “[...] is usually traceable to two main reasons. One relates to the fact of its divine origin. It is believed that the power of *oro* began with the Almighty God Himself. It is with words (*oro*) that he created the universe. Secondly, it is believed that the spoken word(s) (*oro*) is power incarnate because of the authority of it (*ase*)”.

The healing and killing powers of *oro* are, in fact, demonstrated in all the films, with a strong emphasis on the need for the abandonment of its misuses. There is also an emerging binary structure in which the Christian (ized) word is placed at the positive pole. In *Agbara Oro*, produced by Ipile Rere Evangelical Ministry, Akure, we are shown the disasters that befall Mr Oloojegi, a banker, because of a curse placed on him by his own father. His father, who is non-literate, visits him at his place of work from the village. While waiting to be received by his son, the man sees Oloojegi paying out money to customers but does not understand that the money belongs to these customers. He thinks that his son has become very wealthy and so is giving out money out of charity. He therefore gets annoyed when his son later gives him only two hundred naira (which is quite below what he had seen Oloojegi give out). He interprets this as a demonstration of irresponsibility and lack of love for parents. So, back home, he narrates his experience to a woman (who happens to be a witch) and is encouraged to hate his son. Out of bitterness, he refers to Oloojegi as “Omodomo” (useless child) and curses him—that the latter would suffer in life.

Bewitched—through his sharing a meal with the witch—he is at night brought to the meeting of all the witches and wizards where he is initiated. On initiation, he is made *Kolaanu* (somebody without compassion). He provides his son’s name, and his son, who could not join his wife in praying before sleeping, answers (when the witches call him by name in his sleep). Two evil spirits—Akoba (s/he who implicates or puts the other in trouble) and Rayeraye (that which takes one’s wisdom/intellect away)—are sent to him, and they enter him immediately he answers in his sleep (which is based on Yoruba belief that the power of *oro* is also demonstrated through mentioning or calling somebody’s name, and as such one should not immediately answer when one hears one’s name called without seeing the caller).

From the moment the evil spirits enter him, he starts having series of problems. First, Akoba leads him into killing a goat with his car but the goat is transformed into a young girl and he is charged with murder. Released on bail later, Oloojegi is yet led into paying Akoba who appears with another customer’s tally the sum of N20,000 at the bank, instead of the real customer. He is again picked up by the police for this offence. Oloojegi’s father sends him more curses through Akoba who, transformed into a young girl, is taught the incantation she should make. Oloojegi’s problems therefore get worse, and not even a *babalawo* be approaches is able to help him, since this *babalawo* has been warned by the *Iya*, the head of the witches not to interfere. The spell on Oloojegi as later broken when he is prayed

for by a Christian group. The evil spirits are expelled from his being and he becomes normal again, but his father, who has gone ahead with evil deeds against his son, is struck with paralysis by the angel of God, and he dies.

A similar representation of the power in *oro* is seen in *Oro Ahon*, another video film made by Ipile Rere. In the film an aged mother-in-law curses her daughter-in-law, who despises her, “by her breasts” and “bad blood”! The daughter-in-law then begins to have problems with conception. A Christian prayer group later brings the daughter-in-law to apologize. The mother-in-law then revokes the curse, using water to perform the ritual as Yoruba custom demands. The curse lifted, her daughter-in-law is able to conceive and bear a child later. The curse, interestingly, is not vocalized but is communicated as “silent speech” on the mind. Indeed, in many indigenous cultures in Nigeria, thought is perceived as not just the origin of verbal expression but also as potent communication itself. Thus in Igbo culture, somebody could be referred to as “*Oji obi eghe nsi*” (One who poisons the other in his/her mind), an expression that seems to confirm the argument made by Sam Keen in his *Faces of the Enemy* (1986) that the mind is the origin and major site of human hostility and offence.

The potency of the spoken word, as illustrated in these films is recognized in many African cultures. As demonstrated in the speech acts of cursing and blessing in *Agbara Oro* and *Oro Ahon* the spoken word sets into motion a series of spiritual actions—especially as it is believed (in the traditional Nigerian context mostly) that human interactions are attended to by spirits—both the good and the bad. These spirits would therefore try to execute and actualize our utterances. Thus individuals are culturally admonished to be careful with their utterances. In the traditional understanding, therefore, one who claims to be unfortunate remains unfortunate. We are, as it would appear, (re)created by our words, a situation that reminds us of the belief that it was with words that God created the world and the entire universe and the things that are in them. With words, we also exercise the divine power, especially when it is understood that we are not just flesh and blood, but also spirit.

Of particular significance in the traditional Nigerian context is the potency of the words uttered by elders. As elders are believed to be representatives of ancestors, or nearer to the ancestors, their performances of certain speech acts such as cursing and blessing are perceived as very serious deployments of the power in the word. To be cursed by one’s father or one’s mother is believed to be source of disaster as in Oloojegi’s case in *Agbara Oro* or of the daughter-in-law in *Oro Ahon*. In the Igbo context, the words of elders are perceived to be “drizzles of rain”, a metaphor that suggests the potency of the (elder’s) word. A person drenched by this drizzle of rain, as in the case of Oloojegi, has tasted suffering in full measure.

Interestingly, the Christian producers of these videos find the traditional African belief in the power of *Oro* not totally in opposition to that of Christianity. Many Christian preachers in Nigeria have emphasized the potency of speech, and the need for *positive talking* in Christian discourses. In the Yoruba context, as one of my informants told me, Christian speech now reflects a reinvention of *oro*, especially the negative or harmful *oro*, such as the implied curse/abuse *Ori e o daa* (your head is not correct/you are mad) now being positivized as *Ori e ma da o* (your head is correct/you are well).

Following the opposition between the Christian(ized) *Oro* and the negative/satanic *oro*, therefore, cursing/blessing polarity presents two-valued modality of speaking. It is also a way of showing that from the nature of verbal behaviour we would be able to identify as well as to combat evil presences. But it should be noted that the reconstructive project which Christian video narratives are carrying out on *oro* is not new; there have always been, in the Nigeria context of cultures, a recognition that cursing and other negative uses of *oro*, especially in interactions between parents and their children, could have psychological and spiritual repercussions. So, one could say that the reinvention of *oro* in these video films has been informed by the double consciousness of the Nigerian Christian. It is necessarily a setting aside of the traditional African practice of speaking as being diabolical or being susceptible to satanic influences. It is not necessarily a situation of presence versus absence of both forms of consciousness, but that of the undecidability of absence-presence.

Indeed in the video films, the Christian Word is imagined as (the only) healing/redeeming Word, as we find in the cases of the expelling or destroying of evil presences through prayers (made in the name of Jesus) or through implied invocations of the power of Jesus—as we find in the case of a male philanderer in *Agbara Oro* who about to be killed by a ghost-lover, exclaims “Jesus!” and the ghost disappears. These are clearly based on the biblical assertion that “at the mention of the name of Jesus every knee shall bow” (Philippians 2: 10). But his privileging of the Christian Word is challenged in the video narratives by cases of revocations of curses. In *Oro Ahon*, for instance, the mother-in-law’s performance of the non-Christian ritual of revoking a curse, using water and uttering some words, principally assists in restoring the daughter-in-law to health. Water, for the Yorubas, symbolises life, and along with the *oro* uttered by the old woman, “speaks” life into the daughter-in-law. It is obvious that this indigenous semiotic presents a more meaningful and telling idea of restoration to health than the normal stereotyped use of prayers in Christian imagination. The use of the revocation ritual appears to be a way of suggesting that indigenous practices are not entirely evil as supposed in puritan circles. As I have stated, this implied meaning of the revocation ritual challenges the dominant voice of the Christian Word, and is eloquent.

This leads us into a consideration of the interplay of Christian and traditional Yoruba understandings of sickness, health and death in the video films, the cosmologies of Nigerian ethocultures strongly influence their perceptions of health, disease and death. As E. O. Babalola (1995: 5) has observed, “[...] the world view of the Africans cannot be divorced from their systems of health, be it traditional, Islamic, Aladura Christian, or medical ‘orthodox’”. The understanding of health as being multidimensional—physical, psychological and spiritual—is already a given in many indigenous African cultures, as also noted by C. I. Ejizu (1987) and Godwin Sogolo (1986), such that even some Nigerians who have acquired Western education and Christian religion may still believe that some illnesses have spiritual and mystical causes (Erinosho 1977: 59). This explains the representation of the voodoo practices (carried out by even highly educated Nigerians in the films) as being, beyond doubt, mysterious but actual causes of death and illness. In a scientific context of reasoning, there would be no discernible causal relationship between the shooting of Mr Gbolu Gbolagesin’s effigy in a shrine in Nigeria and his instant death at breakfast table in London, thousands of miles away; or the pouring of river water on the head of Mr Olabade Mayowa’s effigy in Nigeria, such that when the river is disturbed by people washing or fetching water, he is mentally disturbed in London. Shifting from the earlier colonial Christian posture of denying the power of voodoo, these video narratives rather recognize their existence, suggesting their denial as either a mistake or satanic strategy of blindfolding people for, as the Holy Bible states “we wrestle against principalities and powers in the high places” (Eph. 6:12) which demands that the Christian should be aware, not ignorant. All the Pentecostal and orthodox Christians I interviewed believed that voodoo power is not just a joke as might be supposed, but is a satanic force that must be destroyed, but they also claim that, if one is genuinely in Christ, one becomes invulnerable to voodoo attacks.

The appropriation of the voodoo imagination in *Ogun Atilewa* reconstructs the understanding of voodoo as a “powerless power”—a paradoxical Christian figuration that accepts the existence of the power but rejects its supremacy over the Christian Word. “Powerless power” suggests the presence of *differance* (opositionality and postponement of meaning) in contemporary “postmodern” Christianity in Nigeria; it speaks of the difficulty of retaining the western practice of Christianity in the non-Western context. D. Hecht & A. M. Simone (1994: 37) argue that

“Christianity in Africa is stronger than ever before, yet it’s (sic) manifestation doesn’t necessarily diminish people’s awareness of its insidious incursion. It is precisely this incessant doubleness, this unwillingness to live through and inability to shake the ambiguity of reference and influence which makes the African postcolony postmodern.”

It is important, however, to add that the persistence of indigenous African imaginations in the video narratives is a presencing of the past that has



not been entirely stimulated by cultural/religious nationalism. I should think that there are stronger aesthetic and conceptual imperatives that necessitate the incorporation of indigenous non-Christian imaginations. For me, the African and Western Christian imaginations enter into a dialogic relation, as in Lotman's semiospheric model where "the right (brain) hemisphere requires the left in order to comprehend extra — semiotic reality", particularly making the "Dialogue between the two a necessity" (Mandelker 1994: 389). Just as many postmodern narratives "are shot through with and even shaped by spiritual concerns" (McClure 1995: 143), many contemporary religious discourses have been filled with both secular and other religious voices, such that one could talk of the reinvention and postmodernization of a religious imagination.

Indeed, as Tlhagale has suggested, "It is important not to underestimate the depth of the belief in the African world view" within African Christianity, for "While this worldview is in the process of transformation, of opening itself up to the influences of other cultural forces" (as would be expected) "it nonetheless continues to have a firm grip on the minds of many Africans. Many Christian believers have an ambivalent attitude to the practices of magic, witchcraft and divination", as the films being discussed confirm<sup>6</sup>. It is clear that the representations of the initiation into witchcraft in *Agbara Oro* and the cause of mental illness in *Ogun Atilewa* originate from traditional religious perspectives that witchcraft could be given and, as Tlhagale says, the refusal to accept that one's "misfortune has nothing to do with the next person".

Realism is seriously threatened in respect of Mr Mayowa's mental disturbance (resulting from the physical disturbance of the voodoo-ed river), but not for the Nigerian/Yoruba audience for whom spiritual causation of illness is a given. Thus a critique of the video narrative essentially demands a strong reference to context—to the people who are the main consumers of the video narratives for whom these beliefs are a cultural given. Apart from using the frames the consumers are familiar with to explain and teach what they are unfamiliar with, the video narratives tend to reinforce the indigenous frames of knowledge.

Related to the voodoo imagination is the presence of dreams in the video narratives, which are themselves perceived as avenues and products of divine revelation of actual spiritual situations. As one Christian informant claimed, dreams are utilized in the narratives as reliable means of knowing/

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6. This ambivalence in African Christians has been acknowledged in the letter to the Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences of Africa and of Madagascar (1988) as follows: "Many Christians, at critical moments in their lives, have recourse to practices of the traditional religion, or go to prayer houses, healing homes, 'prophets', witchcraft or fortune-tellers. Some tend to join sects or so-called 'independent Churches' where they feel that certain elements of their culture are more respected." Such an observation is quite true of the Nigerian context.

perceiving beyond the five senses. In the Yoruba context, as in other ethno-cultural contexts in Nigeria, dreams are understood as a kind of filming of (future) situations which ought to be read with seriousness<sup>7</sup>. This cultural perspective incidentally corresponds to Christian/biblical semiotic/theology of dreaming—as we find in such cases as the angel of God appearing to Joseph (the foster father of Jesus) in dream telling him that Mary is conceived of the Holy Spirit, or the angel of God telling him in a dream to take Jesus and Mary go into exile because of Herod's search for the baby; or the case of Pharaoh dreaming of drought (according to Joseph's interpretation), etc. Here, where we find indigenous imagination agreeing with that of Christianity, the audience's understanding of dream as communicative is taken for granted. But more importantly as in *Oro Ahon*, dream revelations, which enhance the rhetoric of the potent *Oro*, internally function as means of persuasion, first as in the relationship of the video narrative to the Nigerian audience, an appeal is made to a suspension of disbelief of the Christian Word.

Perhaps even most significant in the use of these indigenous resources is the presencing of evil spiritual forces which, in earlier colonial traditions of Christianity in Nigeria, were denied as being unreal and powerless, just like in the case of voodoo. Very prominent in contemporary Christian video films in Nigeria are such evil spiritual forces as marine spirits or water spirits. Such spirits feature, regularly in Christian soap opera, for instance in *Omoge Omi* (Daughters of the River). As I have observed elsewhere, the feminization of these spirits may reflect insensitivity to gender politics (Oha 1997a: 96), although for some Nigerian feminist writers, the female aquatic spirit is reinvented to assert positive female attributes (Oha 1997b: 184). In spite of the skepticism of some scholars like Hecht & Simone (1994: 57-75), these aquatic spirits are considered real in some Christian narratives, and not as another instance of laughable primitive imagination. In *Agba woli*, the operation of these marine spirits have been associated with Aladura groups—which, incidentally, perform some of their rituals in rivers, lakes, streams, and at seashores, as one can easily notice at the Barbeach in Lagos.

However, unlike some traditional representations of the water spirit or goddess as a beautiful white woman—the type that Hecht & Simone talk about—Christian video films in Nigeria reinvent the spirit as a black woman clad in extraordinary regalia, but which is capable of changing into anything and of appearing and disappearing. Making the spirit black woman appears to further racialize the latter, but then it satisfies the reconstructive and localization project which is important to the Nigerian Christian video maker. In a sense, the localization of the spirit is a familiarization strategy; just as religious beings—even God himself—are imagined from familiar

7. The dream situation interestingly functions as a film-within-a-film, or Lotman's "text-within-a-text", providing an interpretive frame for the actual situation.

frames. God in *The Holy Bible*, for instance, is anthropomorphized and masculinized and in Christian visual art further imagined as an old man with long heard.

What sense therefore, do we make of our analysis?

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From the analysis so far, it is clear that the uses of these indigenous imaginations of the Yoruba in the Christian video films gradually relocate and transform the paradoxes and tensions to strategies of hybridization and dialogism. The meaning that emerges from the transformative uses of these aspects of indigenous cosmology tend to suggest the shifting of the performance of indigenous knowledge across cultural/religious boundaries. It signifies the challenge of “the boundary”, and indeed a return to Heidegger’s idea that “A boundary is not that which something stops but [...] that from which something begins its presencing” (cited in Bhabha 1994: 7).

In a similar vein boundaries between cultures of the written and of the spoken word, as threatened by the development of video industry, invariably collapse. Christianity in Nigeria certainly finds this collapse of boundaries, that differentiates and problematizes the performance of the Word in other —cultures, a useful development, or what Cardinal Ratzinger (cited by Tlhagale) would rightly describe as “a fruitful tension”. That also means the collapse of the phonological and semiotic boundaries between “duologue” and “dialogue” in the reference to the relationship between Christian narratives and indigenous imaginations in the Yoruba context, at least.

The deconstructive practices in the films tend to consolidate the double-consciousness of their Christian audiences in the Nigerian context, indeed pursuing a form of postcolonial cultural education that means the emergence of cultural and religious hybridity in the society. Films in Nigeria are, unfortunately, still kept outside the school curriculum (except in departments of theatre arts where they are strange newcomers), even when they dialogue with social and written discourses. Studies on interreligious and intercultural discourses in Africa obviously would find these films very useful, especially in terms of the appropriation of new electronic technologies in engaging religious and cultural issues in the postcolony.

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#### ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the deconstructive project that is involved in the appropriations of indigenous imaginations in contemporary Yoruba Christian video films, especially with respect to the idea of the power of *oro* (word). Two tendencies are identified: dialogue, which involves the “conversation” of semiotic forms, and “duelogue”, which involves the posture of hostility and maintenance non-permeable semiotic boundaries. The paper argues that the ambivalence of the Christian video rhetoric nevertheless enables the Christian text to reinvent itself as a travelling and reproductive text. Attention is also drawn to the importance of the cultural knowledge transmitted through these films, which are yet to be fully accommodated in the school curricula in Nigerian schools, even when such knowledge is very crucial for the pursuit of tolerance in the plural postcolonial Nigeria.

## RÉSUMÉ

*Le récit des vidéos yoruba-chrétiennes face à l'imagination indigène : dialogue et joute narrative.* — Cet article analyse le projet déconstructeur qui est à l'œuvre dans le traitement de l'imagination indigène par les vidéos yoruba-chrétiennes, notamment pour ce qui concerne le pouvoir des mots (*oro*). Deux tendances principales sont distinguées : le dialogue, qui implique la mise en conversation des formes sémiotiques, et la joute narrative (*“duelogue”*), qui concerne la posture d'hostilité et le maintien de frontières sémiotiques étanches.

L'article montre que l'ambivalence de la rhétorique des vidéos chrétiennes permet néanmoins au texte chrétien de se réinventer en tant que texte nomade et reproductible. On attire également l'attention sur l'importance de la connaissance culturelle qui est transmise dans ces films, lesquels attendent encore d'être pleinement adaptés dans les programmes des écoles nigérianes, même si une telle connaissance est cruciale pour le maintien d'une tolérance pluraliste dans le Nigeria postcolonial.

Keywords/*mots-clés*: Yoruba, Christian, culture, dialogue, imagination, narrative, religion, rhetoric, video/Yoruba, chrétien, culture, dialogue, imagination, récit, religion, rhétorique, vidéo.