

Religion Today  
October 22-28, 2006  
*Film and the Christianization of Nigeria*  
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Let's start this column with a quiz question. Which film center produced more commercial movies in 2005: Hollywood (United States), Bollywood (India), or Nollywood (Nigeria)? If you guessed Hollywood, guess again. America produced only 611 commercial films in 2005. Ok, Bollywood then. Nope. Although India outshone the United States, producing 964 films, they produced less than half the output of Nollywood, which released more than 2000 films. (Hollywood comes out on top when the criteria is gross sales income.)

Admittedly, the Nigerian film industry operates on different principles from those of America and India. Most films are low-budget, often costing less than \$30,000 to make. They are shot in 10 days or less by hand-held video cameras, and distributed directly to DVD without ever seeing the light (or is it the "dark"? of a movie theater. Most films made in Nigeria sell for about \$3 and rent for 50 cents.

What is interesting about Nigerian films is that one of the most popular plot lines features the clash of religions, old and new. The key characters are villains who use aspects of traditional African religions, often characterized as witchcraft or voodoo, to work their wicked ways.

In the end, however, Christianity triumphs by redeeming the victims and vanquishing the evil doers, although they may be forgiven upon conversion to Christianity. Make no mistake, this plot-line may be camp and hackneyed, but it usually is played down and dirty for all it is worth.

Although *The Guardian* (London) recently characterized this genre as the "voodoo horror flick," this really describes the films for the benefit of Western film viewers. Within Nigeria itself, these films echo the historical transformation of southern Nigeria from its traditional religions to Christianity.

While Islam entered northern Nigeria as early as the 11th century, Christianity arrived in the south with the Portuguese in the 1500s and the British in the 1700s, along with the slave trade.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, after the end of slavery, Britain established direct rule of Nigeria through a series of conflicts. They brought trade with the West, and with it, education—largely through mission schools. Christianity was seen in the south as enabling

upward mobility (as had Islam in the north) and so Anglicanism took hold among the Yoruba in the southwest, while Catholicism became rooted among the Igbo in the southeast. Both worked to eliminate the practices and beliefs of traditional religions. This was so successful that by the 1990s, less than 10 percent of Nigerians followed traditional ways and Christianity had become the religion of nearly 40 percent of Nigerians (nearly all in the south), with the remainder being Muslim (in the north).

The traditional religions of the Yoruba and the Igbo differ in important ways, but they both emphasize the existence of spirits, particularly the spirits of the deceased and of ancestors. These spirits have the power to affect the living. Being morally neutral, they can be used for good and evil, depending on the purpose of the person trying to access their power.

With traditional southern Nigerian religions dying out under the onslaught of Christianity, the theological structures in which spirit worship existed have been forgotten. The activities of communicating with spirits and using their power is now seen in a Christian perspective as witchcraft.

It is not surprising, then, that the popularity of Nollywood films is almost entirely limited to southern Nigeria, for the common Nollywood film plot described above reinforces the social and religious transformation of southern Nigeria from its traditional religious practices to Christianity.

Furthermore, this transformation progresses across the generations unevenly. Older Nigerians are more likely to practice elements of traditional religions, while members of the younger generation often know little about traditional religions beyond superstition. Given the film industry's cutting-edge character in Nigeria and its popularity among younger Nigerians, these Nollywood plots help solidify Christianity's increasing hold on the populace.

Nollywood films, with their religious themes, have a broad appeal outside Nigeria, especially where similar religious transformations have taken place. South Africa now has a satellite TV channel devoted to Nollywood films, and BSkyB, Rupert Murdoch's British pay-per-view satellite company, is adding a Nollywood channel for Nigerian and other African expatriates in Europe.

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