



THE EVOLUTION AND INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIAN FILMMAKING IN NIGERIA

Olakunbi-Black Tioluwalogo

Communication Arts Programme, Bowen University, Iwo.

Email: Kunbiblack1@gmail.com; Tel.: +2349023147984

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ABSTRACT: *Christian filmmaking in Nigeria has witnessed remarkable growth over the past few decades, evolving from a niche practice into a significant cultural movement within the country's broader film industry. This paper explores the evolution and influence of Christian filmmaking in Nigeria, focusing on its historical origins, ideological foundations, and the socio-cultural factors that have influenced its growth. Through a critical review of production practices, and the major filmmakers shaping this genre, the article situates Christian films within the larger context of the Nigerian Film Industry, examining how these productions balance spiritual messages with entertainment. The conceptual analysis further interrogates the role of Christian films in addressing moral, religious, and social issues, their impact on diverse audiences, and their potential in shaping contemporary Christian identity in Nigeria. In doing so, this paper contributes to the scholarly discourse on Nigerian cinema and religious media, offering insights into the dynamic intersections between faith, culture, and film in Nigeria.*

KEYWORDS: Christian filmmaking, Nollywood, cultural identity, religious media, Nigerian cinema.



INTRODUCTION

At the very beginning of the Nigerian film industry, Ekwuazi (1991; 2008) notes that documentary films were the dominant genre, available in two formats: Super 8/8mm and 16mm. These films were particularly notable for how intent, content, and style were seamlessly intertwined. The Church, through missionaries, used them for evangelism, schools adopted them for social education, and the government leveraged them for public mobilisation, all operating within the colonial framework. In other words, every aspect of film production, from policies to values, was shaped by this colonial influence.

Ekwuazi and Okome (2018) further emphasise the role of the Church, noting that European missionaries swiftly recognised the acculturation potential of film for cultural integration and acculturation, which led to the importation of Biblical and religious films into Nigeria. In affirmation, John Bardi posits that when it comes to the development of cinema in Nigeria, the Church, and the imperial authorities employed documentaries as a tool of manipulation, creating films that supported Christianity to advance their agendas (Bardi, 2010; Ehkareafu, 2018). Without a doubt, the Church now has an efficient outreach tool thanks to film technology. However, due to the upheaval in electronic civilization, every Christian revival in Nigeria now includes a film or video exhibition to win souls, meaning that the task of spreading the gospel in Nigeria has shifted to video (Okeke et al., 2017).

Christian filmmaking in Nigeria often encapsulated within the broader Nigerian film industry framework, represents a distinctive nexus of religious expression and cinematic tradition. This genre has contributed to the diversification of Nigerian films' content and played a pivotal role in shaping Nigerian society's moral and spiritual discourse. The genesis of Christian filmmaking in Nigeria can be traced back to the early 1990s, emerging almost concurrently with the foundational years of Nollywood itself. These films initially aimed to provide moral and spiritual guidance aligned with Christian doctrines, often depicting narratives of redemption, moral conflict, and divine intervention (Adeyemo, 2015). The socio-economic and political landscape of the country has significantly influenced the development of Christian filmmaking in Nigeria. With increasing secularisation and the challenges of modernity, Christian films have served as a medium for religious communities to assert their beliefs and values, offering an alternative to the secular themes prevalent in mainstream Nollywood productions (Ekwenchi, 2016). This genre has effectively utilised the power of visual storytelling to engage with complex moral and theological issues, resonating with a broad audience base within and beyond Nigeria (Oha, 2017).

The transformation of Christian filmmaking in Nigeria owes much to the sweeping influence of technological advancements. These innovations have revolutionised production techniques and expanded the thematic and narrative scope of Nigerian Christian cinema. The advent of digital filmmaking and distribution platforms has facilitated broader dissemination and accessibility of Christian films, enabling these narratives to reach a global audience. This democratisation of film production has also allowed for a more diverse representation of Christian experiences and theological perspectives, enriching the genre's narrative complexity and visual aesthetics (Johnson, 2018). Critically, Christian filmmaking in Nigeria has navigated the delicate balance between evangelisation and entertainment. Filmmakers within this genre have employed various narrative strategies and cinematic techniques to craft engaging stories that convey religious teachings without alienating the broader audience. This has included



incorporating music, humour, and local cultural motifs, enhancing the films' appeal while retaining their spiritual messages (Nwankwo, 2019).

The globalisation of Nigerian Christian films has sparked scholarly interest in the transnational dimensions of religious media. These films have found audiences across Africa and among the global African diaspora, facilitating cultural and religious exchange that underscores the interconnectedness of global Christianity. This global reach has spurred debates on how media influences religious identity and community formation within diasporic contexts (Adogame, 2020).

The discourse on Christian filmmaking in Nigeria, as delineated by scholars such as Okuyade (2011) and Olayiwola (2019), underscores the genre's thematic richness and approach to depicting spiritual warfare and evangelical outreach through cinema. Okuyade (2011) articulates a definition of the Christian film genre, alternatively referred to as religious films, that emphasises narratives centred on the existential conflict between evil (often personified by the devil) and the forces of good embodied by God and His adherents. This cinematic tradition portrays Christian protagonists enduring severe trials and tribulations, yet their faith in God ultimately leads to divine intervention and victory. While depicted as occurring in the spiritual realm, the battle manifests visibly in the physical world, with victory contingent upon the Christian's unwavering faith in Jesus Christ, often expressed through fervent prayer. Films like *Highway to the Grave* (2000) and *End of the Wicked* (1999), produced by Helen Ukpabio of the Liberty Gospel Foundation, exemplify this narrative structure. They incorporate elements of witchcraft, the occult, and the supernatural to illustrate the spiritual conflict (Okuyade, 2011).

From a complementary perspective, Olayiwola (2019) introduces the concept of the evangelical genre, which further subdivides into the sermon and the spirit sub-genres. This classification expands the understanding of Christian filmmaking in Nigeria by highlighting its evangelistic intent. The evangelical genre, mainly through its sermon sub-genre, endeavours to convince viewers of the supremacy of Jesus Christ in overcoming spiritual adversities encountered in the terrestrial realm. It mirrors the evangelical mission of drama ministers who leverage film and drama to spread the gospel, positioning their on-screen sermons as an extension of traditional pulpit preaching. This approach broadens the film's appeal and reinforces the medium's role as a conduit for religious teaching and moral instruction. Films such as *Lost Forever* (1991), *Just a Little Sin* (1998), and *The Broken Bridge* (2012) are representative of this genre, showcasing a diversity of narratives that explore themes of redemption, moral failing, and the consequences of sin, thereby illustrating the multifaceted nature of Christian evangelism in Nigerian cinema (Olayiwola, 2019).

The spiritual essence of the Christian film genre in Nigeria transcends mere entertainment, aligning closely with a higher religious calling. Such films are primarily crafted for a Christian demographic, adopting a sermon-like structure that aims to evoke a spiritual reverberation akin to the experience of listening to clergy within the sanctity of the church. A hallmark of these films is the frequent citation of Bible verses by characters, anchoring the narratives firmly within Christian doctrine and imbuing them with a reflective quality that mirrors the religion's teachings and conservative ethos. Olayiwola (2019) observes a notable de-emphasis on actor popularity within this genre—a strategic choice aimed at directing audience focus toward the characters' spiritual journey rather than the performers themselves. This absence of a defined star system, coupled with the portrayal of actors as ministers and the conservative approach to



costuming, underscores the films' spiritual objectives (Goodluck, 2023). Central to these narratives is depicting characters at moral crossroads, faced with critical choices between good and evil, often challenged by satanic figures employing deceit to sway them from righteous paths.

Parallel to the sermon sub-genre, the spirit genre explores the connections between the supernatural realm and the earthly domain, vividly portraying the impact of extraterrestrial forces on human reality. These narratives frequently depict battles within the mystical realm over the souls of earthly beings, yet they invariably reinforce the triumph of good over evil. Films like *Agbara Nla* (1993) and *Invasion from Hell* (2011) exemplify this sub-genre, showcasing the struggle between spiritual entities and the overarching theme of victory through faith (Olayiwola, 2019). Interestingly, the spirit sub-genre's appeal extends beyond the Christian audience, captivating viewers from various religious backgrounds. This broader appeal can be attributed to including elements such as physical and spiritual confrontations that resonate with themes prevalent in popular culture, including literature and mainstream cinema. Such elements provide a familiar narrative framework that engages a diverse audience while conveying the genre's core messages of faith and moral fortitude (Olayiwola, 2019).

The scholarly work of Okuyade and Olayiwola thus provides a foundational framework for understanding the complexities and dynamics of Christian filmmaking in Nigeria. Their analyses reveal the genre's thematic concerns, narrative strategies, and broader cultural and religious significance. By engaging with the spiritual, moral, and existential dilemmas faced by individuals and communities, Nigerian Christian films contribute to a vibrant discourse on faith, morality, and the power of cinematic storytelling in shaping religious identity and experience. Through their portrayal of spiritual warfare and evangelical zeal, these films underscore the medium's capacity to reflect and influence the spiritual landscape of Nigeria, offering a lens through which to examine their beliefs and the societal forces that shape their religious practices.

However, Olayiwola's (2019) insights are primarily derived from an analysis of films produced by Mount Zion Film Productions, indicating a focus on a specific segment of the Christian film landscape in Nigeria. While this provides valuable perspectives on the sermon and spirit sub-genres, further research might be needed to fully explore the breadth and diversity of the Christian film genre in Nigeria, including productions outside the Mount Zion framework. The distinct narrative strategies and thematic focuses within this genre underscore its unique position in Nigerian cinema, serving not only as a medium for spiritual edification but also as a cultural bridge, connecting viewers across different faiths through shared stories of moral dilemmas, supernatural interventions, and the enduring power of belief.

Ukah (2003) offers a perspective on the landscape of Christian filmmaking in Nigeria, positioning it as a sub-genre within the broader category of "Nigerian religious video films." His insights reveal how the simplicity and compelling nature of Christian narratives in video format have resonated strongly with the Nigerian Pentecostal community. This alignment has motivated numerous pastors and Pentecostal groups to leverage the video medium as an innovative tool for translating complex theological concepts into accessible, visual formats. This trend underscores the strategic use of Christian films by some Pentecostal leaders to augment the visibility and influence of their ministries, essentially transforming these films into vehicles for "selling God" (Okuyade, 2011).



Ukah (2003) further articulates that by framing societal ills—such as poverty, illness, and other adversities—as manifestations of malevolent spiritual forces, Christian films often depict Pentecostal pastors as pivotal agents of divine intervention. This narrative framework not only centralises the role of pastors in combating these perceived spiritual afflictions but also subtly shifts the focus of these films from Christ or Christianity to the pastors themselves. Such portrayal positions these clergy as pivotal problem-solvers, using the cinematic platform to market their ministerial or spiritual services. This dynamic hints at an underlying commercial motivation within Christian filmmaking, where films double as marketing tools for the pastors' ministries. This commercial aspect dovetails with the initial motivations behind the production of Christian films in Nigeria, particularly the drive to offer an alternative to secular cinematic content. Entities like Mount Zion and Faith Ministries International emerged with a mission to provide "healthy drama" and "safe films" for Christian audiences, positioning their work as a sanctified counterpart to the "pagan" entertainment prevalent in traditional Yorùbá dramas and films (Ukah, 2003). This objective reflects a deliberate effort to cultivate a niche for Christian-themed entertainment that aligns with its intended audience's moral and spiritual values.

Christian filmmaking's commercial and evangelistic impulses have catalysed a competitive dynamic within the Nigerian film industry. Ogunleye (2003) highlighted that Christian films' success and popularity among Pentecostal audiences have prompted secular filmmakers to adapt, producing content that taps into the burgeoning market for films with Christian or evangelical themes. This reactive strategy underscores a broader trend where filmmakers, regardless of their religious affiliation, seek to capitalise on the growing demand for Christian-themed content, thereby blurring the lines between evangelistic intent and commercial opportunism. Ukah's (2003) discourse, while primarily focusing on the commercial underpinnings of Christian filmmaking, also illuminates the complex relationship between evangelism, entertainment, and commerce in the Nigerian film industry. This relationship suggests a dualistic landscape where films are produced with the primary goal of spreading the Christian faith or exploiting the lucrative market for religious content. The distinction between these motivations highlights a nuanced ecosystem of Christian filmmaking in Nigeria, characterised by an "unintended rivalry" between filmmakers driven by divergent objectives yet united by the medium of film to engage with their society's spiritual and cultural zeitgeist.

The categorisation and understanding of the Christian film genre in Nigeria are subjects of considerable debate within academic circles. Discussions often centre on specific production houses' contributions, particularly Mount Zion Faith Ministries and Helen Ukpabio's Liberty Foundation Gospel Ministries. This focus tends to eclipse the broader spectrum of filmmakers and producers within Nollywood who also engage with Christian themes. Olayiwola (2019), building on Ukah's (2003) framework, delineates between films produced by evangelical groups like Mount Zion, which are crafted primarily for preaching and conversion, and those produced by other Nollywood filmmakers, which are seen as aiming to capitalise on the Pentecostal Christian audience's predilection for spiritual narratives. This distinction is predicated on differences in motive, casting, distribution, and exhibition patterns, highlighting an implicit hierarchy that values evangelical intent over perceived commercial opportunism (Olayiwola, 2019).

Mount Zion Faith Ministries, in particular, is characterised by its exclusive use of Christian actors, aligning with its foundational mission to evangelise through film. Rather than identifying as traditional movie stars, these actors consider themselves ministers or evangelists,



reflecting the ministry's dedication to spiritual messaging over secular stardom. Nevertheless, intriguingly, this focus on piety does not extend to behind-the-scenes roles, where technical expertise from mainstream Nollywood is often employed, suggesting an interesting approach to the intersection of faith and film production (Ukah, 2003).

While Olayiwola (2019) posits a clear distinction between evangelical and secular Christian films within Nollywood, this binary classification may oversimplify the landscape of Christian cinema in Nigeria. Not all filmmakers focusing on Christian themes articulate an exclusively opportunistic motive, as evidenced by directors like Lancelot Imasuen, who actively seeks to tell Christian stories through his dedicated production company (Goodluck, 2023). The strategy of casting well-known actors to attract a broader audience, employed by producers like Helen Ukpabio, further complicates the notion of purely evangelical versus commercial motivations in Christian filmmaking (Ukah, 2003). Including famous Nollywood actors in Christian films, as practised by entities like the Redeemed Christian Church of God's City of David Parish and Nemsia Films, underscores a deliberate effort to bridge the divide between secular popularity and religious messaging. Films such as *God Calling* (2018), directed by Bodunrin Sasore, exemplify this approach, featuring a cast of prominent actors while maintaining a faith-based solid narrative. Sasore's explanation of the film's intent reveals an ambition to explore faith within a cinematic context that appeals to both religious and secular audiences, challenging the notion that engagement with mainstream film techniques or stars diminishes a film's spiritual integrity (Ekechukwu, 2018; Thomas-Odia, 2019; Goodluck, 2023).

This broader acceptance of Christian-themed films, regardless of their production origin, suggests that the Christian film genre in Nigeria cannot be neatly categorised into binary sub-genres based on perceived motives or production practices. Instead, it reflects evangelistic intent, audience appeal, and cinematic artistry that transcends simple distinctions. The recognition of *God's Calling* by the Christian community, alongside its promotion at significant religious events like The Experience, Lagos, indicates that the essence of faith-based filmmaking lies in its ability to resonate with viewers' spiritual experiences rather than the specific religious affiliations of its creators or cast (Goodluck, 2023).

Despite its successes, the Christian film genre in Nigeria faces criticisms related to production quality, narrative depth, and the portrayal of complex theological and ethical dilemmas. Some scholars argue that the didactic nature of these films can sometimes lead to oversimplification of issues or the propagation of stereotypes (Ezeh, 2021). Moreover, the commercial imperatives of film production occasionally result in tensions between artistic expression and religious messaging, challenging filmmakers to maintain authenticity in their depiction of faith (Okoye, 2022).

The future of Christian filmmaking in Nigeria appears poised for further growth and innovation. As the genre continues to evolve, there is a growing emphasis on storytelling excellence, theological depth, and cultural relevance. This includes exploring new narrative forms, addressing contemporary social issues from a Christian perspective, and leveraging new technologies to enhance film production and distribution (Ukah, 2023). Christian filmmaking in Nigeria represents a dynamic and influential facet of the country's cinematic landscape, offering rich insights into the connection between religion, culture, and media. As scholars continue to explore this genre, there is ample opportunity to understand further how culture is portrayed in these films.



AUTHOR'S SHORT BIO

Currently, he serves as a research personnel and lecturer in Media and Communication Art Studies at the prestigious College of Computing and Communications Studies, Bowen University, Iwo, Osun State, Nigeria. Throughout his academic and professional career, he has demonstrated a profound commitment to the fields of performing arts, film, media, communication, and their significant societal impact.

His extensive experience has fostered a keen interest in exploring the intricate relationships among literature, performing arts, media, technology, society, and culture, particularly their influence on the emerging generation.

AUTHOR'S RESEARCH AREAS

Christian Film Studies and Performing Arts, Self-Identity and Cultural Studies, Media and Communication, African Consumerism, Afro-Caribbean literature and Human-Animal Studies. <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-8699-5001>

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