

**RITUAL CULTURE PHENOMENON IN IGBO FILMS:  
A STUDY OF *MONEY IS MONEY***

**\*Teddy Thaddeus HANMAKYUGH, Ph.D.**

**Abstract**

*Film as a means of communication is a very potent instrument for image making, cultural diplomacy, propaganda, education, information and entertainment. The Nigerian film industry (Nollywood) ranks among the first three top world filmmaking industries in terms of the quantity of productions, popularity amongst Nigerians and the transnational audiences. Culture is the bedrock of Nollywood's thematic film expositions. One can, therefore, conclude that Nollywood is Nigeria's cultural ambassador. Although Nollywood films are quite potent in celebrating and promoting Nigerian cultures, some of these films have come under thematic criticisms as they glamourize negative, ritual themes in the name of culture. It is against this backdrop that this article examines the occult ritual of cultural phenomenon in Prince Emeka Ani's *Money is Money* (2005) and the negative image it portends for Nigeria globally. The film depicts Andy (Kanayo O. Kanayo), an Igbo youth who deploys occult means as an instrument for making money even at the cost of his life. This paper uses content analysis and literary methods as tools to interrogate the preponderance of the occult themes in Nollywood movies. The findings show that Nigeria has several acceptable cultures as raw materials that could positively portray Nigeria's cultures globally. However, the unceasing preoccupation with "juju", the relentless celebration of dark rituals and diabolical cults could make viewers cultivate the perception of reality portrayed by these films. *Money is Money* celebrates the non-attractive side of Nigeria. Therefore, it is recommended that the Nollywood film professionals tell the global audience acceptable culturally based value themes about Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Igbo land, Ritual culture, Nollywood film professionals, Igbo film, Nigerian cultures

---

\***Teddy Thaddeus HANMAKYUGH, Ph.D.** is of the Department of Theatre & Film Arts, University of Jos, Jos, Nigeria  
**Email:** [thamaque@gmail.com](mailto:thamaque@gmail.com)

## Introduction

The Igbo are considered as one of the greatest nationalities in Nigeria, occupying the eastern territory, with common cultural characteristics including language. The ancient Nri Kingdom is unarguably the origin of the Igbo and the epicentre of Igbo culture, tradition and civilization. The Igbo are known throughout Nigeria to be very hardworking businessmen and women who engage themselves in various trades such as automobile spare parts, electrical and electronics products, building materials and retail of consumable goods. The average Igbo man is industrious and has a determined spirit to make money by any means to ensure his survival. Okenwa, a full blooded Igbo man from Anambra confirms that:

The Igbo's generally are known primarily as a very hardworking and brutally ambitious race, one whose industrious resolve and spirit of survival are hard to break. The average Igbo man knows how to make money by hook or crook and how to make best use of it when acquired. Sometimes the issues of the day as they concern money boil over and are settled with blood and iron.  
[http://www.nairaland.com/60836/problems\\_igbo](http://www.nairaland.com/60836/problems_igbo)

In Nigeria, there is an aggressive manhunt for materialism no matter what source; because riches place one at the echelon of the society. So, some people go to the extreme just to get rich. Besides their rich credentials and acclaimed business acumen, the Igbo have a strong romance with culture and modernization. The rich customs and traditions of the Igbo even though still in existence have over the years experienced a gradual evolution as a result of contact with other cultures. The customs and tradition of the Igbo are preserved in their arts, language, food, clothes, dance and music. The occupation of the rural Igbo is farming and petty trading while the urban Igbo are essentially either businessmen, skilled workers or employees at different establishments. Irrespective of their area of domicile, all Igbo have a strong competitive spirit and hold the view that all men/women have equal social and political rights. The Igbo believe in God as the creator of all human beings and attribute all goodness to Him. "Chukwu ge kepe" which means 'God will judge.' This is a common belief among the Igbo that God will judge every good and every evil. Many Igbo names have God as prefixes or suffixes as in 'Chukwudi'- God is alive; 'Chidinma'- God is good; 'Chukwuma'- God knows it all; 'Arinze

Chukwu'- Thank you God. These names are used by parents in appreciation of God's intervention in their lives.

In ancient times/traditional Igbo society, Igbo had personal 'chi,' a lesser god as protector and when things went wrong sacrifices were offered to appease the 'chi'. Ikenga-Metuh confirms that "in some parts of Igboland, altars are built and direct sacrifices are offered on them at two great festivals of seed-time and harvest. The sacrifice consists of a white fowl tied to a long pole together with some yams, eggs and an eagle's feather (110). Some of the most important rituals in the Igboland today include 'Iri-ij' new yam festival; 'Ime-oji' presentation and breaking of 'kolanut', widowhood rituals and funeral rites, worship and religious sacrifices. Uwah notes that there are other lesser gods that play an enormous role in the life of the traditional Igbo person. These are:

- Ala- The earth goddess, the spirit of fertility for humans and land
- Igwe- The sky god responsible for rain
- Imo miri- The river spirit where this spirit dwells, fishing is forbidden
- Mbatuku-The spirit of wealth, "ego" money
- Agwo- A spirit envious of someone's success, wealth
- Ahanjuku or Ifejioku- The yam spirit
- Ekwu- A woman's domestic spirit. (68)

Some themes in Igbo films derive from the above subjects. The ritual phenomenon in Igbo culture has taken a different dimension as life is no longer regarded sacred but a necessary tool for ritual sacrifices to become wealthy.

### **The Quest for Money**

The successful urban Igbo person likes to enjoy a good life. He/she may not necessarily own a building in the city but he/she is proud to put up an edifice of comparable standards in his/her village. This, no doubt, is a big challenge to age groups domiciled in the village who believe that the rural urban drift is the ultimate way to make their dreams come true. This belief finds its roots in the various video films depicting the lifestyles of affluence the Igbo enjoy in the cities by employing any diabolic means to become wealthy. As important as money is in the world, human life is sacred and cannot be sacrificed in the quest for a legal tender of exchange – money. Money rituals have simply diminished the culture of hard work and ingenuity that is an integral part of the Nigerian ethos. Sadly, it is just unimaginable to

hear derogatory statements such as these: "Nigerians will do anything for money;" "Ah, Nigerians love money too much;" "Them even fit kill their mama for money." ([http:// www.nigeriancuriosity.com/2008/05/money-rituals.html](http://www.nigeriancuriosity.com/2008/05/money-rituals.html)).

The love for money and the extent which people appear to go in order to acquire wealth as portrayed in many Nigerian movies only go to corroborate the statements made above. The Igbo were late in the history of motion picture development in Nigeria, but they have made such remarkable impact that their contributions can hardly be ignored. It was Ola Balogun, a Yoruba filmmaker with good command of the Igbo language, who produced *Amadi* (1975), an indigenous full length feature film in Igbo language. Other attempts to showcase the Igbo culture were made on television drama epics such as *The Masquerade* and *Things Fall Apart*, an adaptation of Chinua Achebe's novel. ([http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Things\\_Fall\\_Apart](http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Things_Fall_Apart)).

### **Ritual Culture/Phenomenon in Igbo Films**

The release of *Living in Bondage* (1992), an Igbo language film by Nek Videos resulted in the explosion of cheaply produced video films which arguably gave birth to the Nigerian video film industry. Hussein claims that in 1992, actor and producer Okechukwu Ogunjiofor, aka, Paulo, approached movie marketer Kenneth Nnebue of Nek Video Links Limited with a proposal to invest in the popular home movie in Igbo language, *Living in Bondage*. He and indeed Nnebue could not imagine that the experiment will throw up a phenomenon that movie making has now become (30). This megahit movie tells the story of a man who achieves tremendous wealth by killing his wife for money rituals. In the end, he repents as the woman's ghost begins to haunt him. The emerging stars from this film are household names in Nollywood today. They are Kanayo O. Kanayo (KOK), Bob Manuel Udokwu, Francis Agu, Ngozi Nwosu and Nnena Nwabueze. Subsequently, the Igbo businessmen continued to churn out movies such as *Glamour Girls* (1994), *Rituals* (1997), *End of the Wicked* (1999), *Battle of Musanga* (1996), *Died Wretched* (1998), *Endtimes* (1999), *I Hate My Village* (1999), *Osuofia in London* (2003) and many others. Despite public criticism as to the negative narratives of these films, it is also acknowledged that these films promote the culture of the Igbo people. Shaka collaborates that:

The majority of the films produced in Nigeria are sponsored by Igbo traders selling electronics or motor parts at either Idumota street Lagos, Upper Iweka road/Main Market at Onitsha. These merchants/executive

producers also constitute the marketers, and by virtue of this fact, they dictate what goes on in the industry. (184)

Today, most Nollywood films are made by Igbo. Nollywood has become a big business enterprise as well as a medium for the promotion of Igbo culture and traditions. The use of the supernatural theme in films where ritual sacrifices are offered in exchange for instant transformation from rags to riches is evident in Igbo films. Amobi affirms that in spite of the importance of the supernatural in the socio-cultural and socio-economic existence of Nigerians and Africans as a whole, local video film have been criticised for excessive utilization of the supernatural theme, where rituals and grotesque characters are used to generate contexts in which wealth and riches transport the characters from normal reality to a world of fantasy (188). The Igbo film, *Occultic Battle* (2005) depicts Anakwe in abject poverty and humiliation but his fortune brightens up when he turns to the supernatural as an alternative means to riches. It is only when he joins a cult group that his dream for wealth comes true. Similarly in *Hot Money* (2005) that features Kanayo O. Kanayo, Norbert Young, Keppy Ekpeyong, Clems Ohameze, we see the portrayal of people who are driven by poverty, greed and over ambition to sacrifice their loved ones as Obieze, Buchi and Ugo sacrifice their mother, son and brother respectively to become stupendously wealthy. Correspondingly, in O.J. Productions entitled *South Connection*, Ojiofor Ezeanyeche's hit movie starring Pete Edochie, Enebeli Enebuwa and Kanayo O. Kanayo exposes Okija gods where twenty human skulls and fifty decomposing corpses are discovered. Okwori states that:

The dominant refrain in these movies is the utilization of rituals of sacrifice to generate contexts in which wealth and riches transport characters from a normal reality to a world of fantasy. The ritual sacrifices required to achieve this 'success' are almost always humans. This "success" however, usually turns out to be temporary, an aberration of reality rather than a new reality. The stated moral intent of the films is to present a form of bad behaviour in order to discourage people from engaging in it; yet, rather than anything else, the video films validate the efficacy of rituals in the way and manner that the characters in the filmed rituals are

portrayed; fabulously rich and successful.  
(7-23)

Proponents of the ritual film genre may argue that it is mere entertainment aimed at exposing and criticizing the ills of the society while concluding with strong moral lessons for positive change. However, the audience believe that these films reflect the Nigerian culture where the supernatural beliefs and superstitions are very much alive in their consciousness. The Igbo films are mostly shot in the South-Eastern region using locations, costumes and settings as a deliberate attempt to promote the Igbo culture and tradition with utmost glamour. Hussein notes that Enugu otherwise called the 'Coal City' is reputed to have provided the nest for the production of the bulk of the movies that have been released in recent time... Inhabitants of the Coal City freely allow the use of their properties as location and props; hotels are cheap and so is the cost of post production and cost of engaging the talents that are liberally called 'waka pass' (22).

Nwafor encapsulates the common traits in an Igbo home video film as it relates to culture thus: the Igbo and their way of life are so exemplified in the stories that you can't but recognize it at all times. The storyline, characters, locale, language, music, costumes and make-up are always traced to the South-Eastern part of the country (1). Rituals obviously have their source in the traditional past when people worshipped the gods of their fore fathers such as *Sango* (the Yoruba god of thunder) and *Mbatuku* (the Igbo spirit of wealth). This ancient practice when dramatized in a Nigerian film to reflect on the past as well as to chronicle the contemporary Nigerian society has its negative effects as viewers from other parts of the world begin to view Nigerians as money ritualists. Our selected film for analysis in this study *Money is Money* is a typical example.

### **The Story and Analysis of *Money is Money***

The story begins in a market situated in Nnewi where various types of television sets, DVD, VCD, VHS cassette players and other audio equipment are elaborately displayed for sale along narrow pathways. The hero, Chukwudi (K.O. K.), is a typical hustler, an Afikpo boy who earns a living by bringing customers to the traders for a commission. As a struggling man, he faces many hardships doing all kinds of odd jobs in the market to survive. His encounter with Ejiofor (Charles Okafor), an electronics business mogul, leaves him with the painful memory of a man wrestling with his life for survival. When Obinna's shop is burgled, Chukwudi becomes a prime suspect and he is detained at the local police station for some days after which he is released on bail. Chukwudi's meeting with Madam Edna at the restaurant is a turning

point in his life. Madam Edna is a highly successful restaurateur. Edna's search for riches brings her face-to-face with the witch doctor "dibia," Baba Osho, played by Emmanuel France who initiates her into cultism. "You will never lack customers in your restaurant. They will come even at night. The great evil one will grant all your requests". Towards the end of the ceremony, the witch doctor gives a bottle of concoction to Edna and instructs her to "use it to cook everything, when it finishes come back here." While other women's restaurants are without patronage, Madam Edna's is overflowing with customers. Chukwudi summons enough courage to approach Madam Edna for help and this is best expressed in the dialogue below:

**Chukwudi:** Money has been disgracing me everywhere. You can't understand, I do not have anyone to help me. People that I used to give money to now dash me money what kind of life is that?

**Edna:** You must have the mind and the willingness to make it

**Chukwudi:** I've.

**Edna:** Do you want to make money? I mean real money?

**Chukwudi:** Of course. I want to make money. I want to make so much money that everyone in my community will know me very well.

**Edna:** You can make the dream come true yourself if you've the power and the will to make the necessary sacrifice.

**Chukwudi:** I've the heart and the will to make the necessary sacrifice. I can even stake my life to make money. I can die tomorrow. What can I tell my mother in the village, that I cannot make money in the city?

Madam Edna now introduces Chukwudi to the witch doctor for 'strength.' The witch doctor tells Chukwudi that "whatever you hear, whatever you do here remains with you. You are sacrificing the lives of your children for the wealth you are about to receive." Chukwudi responds that he would rather be a king for a short while and die than to be a wretched nuisance all his life and still die one day. With the wave of a magical wand, Chukwudi is transformed into a vulture to remain there for three days then success follows. Once transformed to his original state, Chukwudi sets up his own business selling electronic equipment at the Nnewi market with a 'big bang' that takes the other traders by surprise. His fame, growth and enormous wealth become a source of envy to other electronic dealers such as Ejiofor (Charles Okafor), John (Emeka Okoro), and Ikenna (Chuks Okparaocha). Chukwudi now owns a big mansion, fleet of expensive

cars with an extremely successful electronics business booming. He instantly becomes a force to reckon with in the community; even the church congregation are excited at his generous donations. The security around him is tight and his source of wealth still remains a mystery to his friends and business competitors. This is well captured in the song which advances the story:

*Chukwudi is now a big man  
A senior boy  
Chukwudi don become big man  
I don't understand  
Wetin he do  
Me sef I wan do am  
Imagine Chukwudi of yesterday  
He could hardly feed himself  
Feeding from hand to mouth  
Now a big man, a big boy  
E don become big man  
Wetin him do, I don't understand  
Me sef I wan do am.*

Chukwudi receives the news of Baba Osho's death with shock. He drops his walking stick, falls to the ground and weeps. He recalls Baba's warning "you will be coming here every last day of the sixth month to drink the calabash of the rich and famous, failure to do so will result to disastrous consequences. Do you understand?" Chukwudi finds this very disturbing because he has failed to keep his appointment with the witch doctor. Likewise the news of Baba Osho's death strikes Madam Edna like lightening as she regrets her past actions saying "so Baba is dead, what will I do now? Where do I run to? I believe it is not too late to run to God almighty but will He accept me? I have wasted so many souls, even my restaurant cannot move again." The village has suddenly turned into a carnival, a tourist attraction of sorts as people from far and near gather to see human beings turned into vultures because of their greed and excessive love for money.

### **Manifestations of Igbo Culture in *Money is Money***

The Igbo culture is showcased throughout the movie via the actions of the electronic dealers in the market. The setting for the film is highly commendable and so is the use of Igbo language, which is often code-switched with English, a typical practice of the Igbo people. The quest for money, which the Igbo are linked with as earlier mentioned in this paper by Okenwa is a universal thought as the Igbo are known to be



globe-trotters, looking for every available market to buy and sell different products.

As a successful business man, Chukwudi's dressing has significantly changed from a pair of trousers and shirt to elaborate Igbo traditional outfit with a black cap to match. Similarly, the Igbo man of same age bracket as himself who is also a member of the 'Global Club' dresses in Igbo regalia adorned with several beads and a matching red cap. Usually the Igbo traditional title holders use a horse tail, cow tail, hand fan or a walking stick as a symbol of authority. The 'Global Club' members use walking sticks to exemplify this in the film. This film reflects the Igbo culture and belief in the supernatural which is still very much alive in Igbo land today. Okwori explains further that: 'The rituals are brought into a seemingly vivid reality on the screen, which reifies, consolidates and materializes both their putative existence and potency' (12). Amobi's interview with actor/producer St. Obi explains that:

Nigerian home video movies celebrate evil through the display of ritual murders and sacrifices, worship of the devil and witchcraft. The stated moral intent of the films is often to present these practices as a form of bad behaviour in order to discourage people from engaging in it. Yet more than anything else, it validates the efficacy of rituals which produce fabulously rich characters who are not only unpunished but rewarded. (197)

The Igbo believe in God, 'Chukwu' as their creator, a moral being who cannot do evil nor be the source of evil. The Igbo also hold in high esteem the African concept of the sanctity of life. What a paradox for the Igbo to believe in the excellent attributes of God and at the same time employ diabolical rituals of human sacrifices as a means to acquire wealth. In all cases, poverty, greed, over ambition, ostentation and the ultimate drive to become wealthy and gain recognition in society are propelling factors particularly with Chukwudi's statement, "I rather be a king for a short while and die than be a wretched nuisance all my life and still die one day".

Yet in another part of the film when Chukwudi becomes a rich man, he snobs his friends, "If you want to address me, address me as Chairman." The storyline of *Money is Money* is one of such recycled common narratives that explore the theme of the supernatural with much emphasis on witchcraft, poverty and the celebration of malevolent wealth. This film exposes to the viewer the mysteries and truths about why people join cult groups and stumble into sudden wealth. It also

brings the audience face to face with the realities of poverty amidst wealth in a corrupt society. There are various opinions why Igbo writers and producers continue to explore occult themes in their films. Adejunmobi avers that film directors and producers impelled by both professional and commercial considerations, work with national audiences in mind and create narratives crafted to respond first and foremost to the perceived interests and shifts in orientation of national publics (91). Agorde corroborates that these movies provide the viewers with information regarding unexpected riches which Chukwudi felt fascinated with because his contemporaries suddenly rose to riches with no major business enterprises. It is Agorde's contention that power and money are usually accompanying themes, the implication being that while many individuals are confronted with temptations, some actually achieve wealth and power by succumbing to the powers of darkness (2).

The excessive use of murder, ritual sacrifice, *juju* and magic in the films may convince an average viewer that Nigerian films are vehicles for fetish culture and eulogies to sorcery. For the poor man or common man, a movie with the theme of 'juju money,' 'magic money' or 'blood money' is a delightful subject to watch as it massages his ego to prosperity. Comaroff observes that:

Occult economy may be taken, at its most general, to denote the deployment of magical means for material ends or, more expensively, the conjuring of wealth by resort to inherently mysterious techniques; techniques whose principles of operation are neither transparent nor explicable in conventional terms. These techniques, moreover, often involve the destruction of others and their capacity to create value. (279)

Speaking about the Igbo film, Helen Ukpabio claims that Igbo video filmmakers deal with and act out their own culture in their video films. They bring attention to and exhibit typical Igbo mannerisms in all their video films. They tilt the stories of their video films towards their own existence in the city and in the village (7). The film *Money is Money* has made a very serious cultural statement about the Igbo. Having established that the Igbo are very industrious, enterprising, adventurous, egalitarian and fiercely competitive, the film validates the efficacy of rituals as the characters involved become rich and successful. The fierce competition in the market between Chukwudi, Ejofofor, Madam Edna and Ikenna has deep roots in ritual sacrifices

even at the expense of making self sacrifice to become rich. The maxim, 'money is the root of all evil' is well replicated in the film under investigation. The theme song of the movie captures the entire motive of the film as paraphrased here, 'the quest for riches and wealth has become the order of the day, everyone wants to make it; get rich, some will go to the devil; the devil will give them wealth and ask for their soul'.

### Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated from the analysis of the film, *Money is Money* that the use of charms, sacrifices and occultism 'mbatuku' (the Igbo spirit of wealth) are a traditionally held cultural phenomenon among the Igbo, which have their sources in ancient times when traditional worship of gods was popular. These are common narratives that excite the masses in contemporary Nigerian society. Such entertainment narratives are not only unimaginable, unpalatable as they diminish the culture of hard work and ingenuity earlier credited to the Igbo but they cause great damage to Nigeria's image at the international level. It is in this connection that the article establishes that culture configures identity. Nollywood scriptwriters and producers should note that film is both an economic and socio-cultural product whose content is determined by the dynamics of culture. The image of Nigeria, to a large extent, lies within the ambit of its diverse cultures if positively documented on film. The conclusion reached is that Nollywood filmmakers should adhere to their social responsibility and strike a balance between their socio-economic interests and the onerous task of using the film medium as a cultural ambassador for Nigeria.

### Works Cited

- Adejunmobi, Moradewun. "Nigerian Video Film as Minor Transnational Practice." *Postcolonial Text* 3.2 (2007): 1-13. Print.
- Agorde, Wisdom (2007) "The Triad of Men's Violence in Time; A Ghanaian Occult video film. *Post Colonial Text* 3. 2 (2007):36-43. Print.
- Amobi, Theresa I. "Perception and Implications of the themes of the Supernatural in Nigeria's Igbo Home Video Movies." *Emergence, growth and challenges of films and home videos in Nigeria*. Ed. Onabajo, O. and M'bayo, R. Bowie, MD: African Renaissance Books Inc. 2009. Print.
- Camaroff, Jean and John L. "Occult Economies and the Violence of Abstraction: Notes from the South African Postcolony". *American Ethnologist*. 26.2 (1999): 279-285. Print.

- Ezikeojiaku, I.P.A. "Towards Understanding Ndi Igbo and their Cosmology." *Essays on Nigerian Literatures*. Ed. Darah, G.G. Lagos: Malthouse Press Ltd., 2008. Print.
- Hussein, Shuaibu. "Nollywood... Hausa movie Eyes Hollywood" in *The Guardian Newspaper*, September 6<sup>th</sup>. 2003. Ikenga-Metuh, E and Ojoade, O. *Nigerian Cultural Heritage*. Jos: Imico Publishing Company, 1990. Print.
- Nwafor, Friday "The Igbo: Key Players in Nigerian Film Industry." Web. 2 Feb. 2019 <[www.kwenu.com/publications/Nwafor/Igbokeyplayers](http://www.kwenu.com/publications/Nwafor/Igbokeyplayers)>.
- Okenwa, Sunny C. "The Problem with the Igbos by Mohadana." *Nairaland Forum* 19 June 2007. Web. 12 August 2019 <<http://www.nairaland.com/60836/problems.igbo>>.
- Okwori, Jenks. "A Dramatized Society: Representing Rituals of Human Sacrifice as Efficacious Action in Nigeria Home Video Movies." *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 16.1(2003): 7-13. Print.
- Onwuejeogwu, M.A. *An Igbo Civilization: Nri Kingdom and Hegemony*. Benin: Ethiope Publishing Corporation, 1981. Print.
- Shaka, Femi O. "Nollywood: Reconstructing the Historical And Socio-Cultural Contexts Of The Nigerian Home Video Industry." A Paper Presentation at the NFC Annual Lecture 2011 at Silverbird Cinemas, Lagos, 5 May.
- Taiwo, O. "Nollywood's Impact on African Screen." *Africa* 2 (2007): 19-26. Print.
- Ukpabio, Helen "The Message is Reaching a lot of People, Proselytizing and Video Films of Helen Ukpabio." An Interview with Onookome Okome. *Postcolonial Text* 3. 2 ( 2007):
- Uwah, Innocent E. *From Rituals to Films: A Case Study of the Visual Rhetoric of Igbo Culture in Nollywood Films.* Ph.D. Thesis, Dublin City University, Ireland, 2009. Print.