

Research Article

The Westernization of the African Zombie in Nollywood Films

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Abstract - The Nigerian film industry (nicknamed Nollywood) has, over the years, embraced foreign influences as a form of newness and singularity. Many films produced in the industry have displayed the capacity to re-contextualize and indigenize specific forms and styles associated with the global mass culture, including Hollywood horror films and the zombie genre. Thus, there have been at least two ways of representing zombies in the Nollywood films. While most films have depicted zombies according to local African or Nigerian myths, a certain number of recently produced films have displayed representations of these undead creatures (zombies) which are visibly inspired by the Western imagination or fantasies. This thesis could well be illustrated through a critical study of two Nollywood films namely A.C. Enonchong's *Witchdoctor of the Living Dead* and Sam Perry's *Outbreak 2020*. Using the two above mentioned films as case studies, this paper specifically seeks answers to three research questions: how are Western myths about zombies different from those prevailing in the Nigerian socio-cultural space? How has the zombie filmic genre evolved in the Nigerian film industry and how are Western myths about zombies informing or reflected in selected Nollywood films?

Keywords: Representation. Nollywood films. Zombies. Myths. Voodoo.
The Living Dead. Westernization

Introduction

Media representation has always been a complex socio-cultural process. This understanding is, in part, connected with the fact that there is a symbiotic relationship between media and society. This symbiotic relation makes most media narratives to be constructed according to the social beliefs, the (received and non-received) ideas and the ideologies prevailing in the society. In line with this, media contents are most often constructed according to prevailing ideologies, myths and social beliefs. Even highly constructed (or fictionalized) media texts such as advertising and films are not exempted from this rule. The filmic text in particular most often strongly reflects the worldviews of specific cultural and social entities/communities, as well as the ideologies of particular schools of thought. In tandem with this, it is axiomatic that films produced within the context of the Nigerian motion picture industry (Nollywood) have, in their majority, attempted to reflect, deconstruct or reconstruct the worldviews, cosmological ideas or cosmogony of various ethno-religious communities present not only in the country, but equally in other parts of Africa. Nigerian filmmaker Zina Saro-Wiwa corroborates this position when she contends that Nollywood films provide “a vision of Nigeria and Africa that has been wrested from the ideologies of foreign bodies and distributors that want to impose their own vision of Africa. And this is a wonderful and long-overdue turn of events. For the first time and in the purest, rawest form, Africa is representing and interpreting Africa” (cited in [Barrot 2009](#)).

Saro-Wiwa’s contention is, to an extent, plausible if one considers most Nollywood films’ depictions of socio-religious issues like the afterlife, the world of the dead, cultism, voodoo, witchcraft and traditional African religion (animism/ancestral worship) among other cultural and supernatural phenomena.

However, it must be underscored that the Nollywood film industry has not purely been Nigerian or African from an ideological and cultural point of view. Indeed, over the years, the industry has been subject to various forms of cultural and ideological influences emanating directly or indirectly from global cinematic forces such as Hollywood and European cinemas. These influences have led a good number of Nigerian film producers or directors to wittingly or unwittingly import various Western cinematic paradigms – particularly those observed in Hollywood. In line with this, a

multitude of Nollywood films tend to dominantly copy Hollywood and other Western cinemas' modes of representing social phenomena or universal realities. In their depictions of life in Nigeria in particular and Africa as a whole, they tend to literally superimpose the Westerners' worldview to their filmic productions. As noted by Usman and Ohwovoriolè (2016), many Nollywood filmmakers deploy packaging techniques which are clearly defined by criteria rooted in Western commercial standards in terms of scripting, characterization and production. Indigenous cultures in their original form are, in the process, considered secondary in film contents. The middle ground between the commercial consideration which is primary and other secondary considerations, including culture, yields filmic productions which neither please nor perfectly represent local peoples nor "are strong enough to break significant grounds with overseas audiences" (p. 337). A number of local Nollywood films are thus mere replicas or indigenized versions of Hollywood films. Many of them could be described as veritable symbols or carriers of Western popular cultures.

This position could well be illustrated with the aid of some Nollywood films' depiction of the undead notably vampires, ghosts and more especially zombies (the living dead). A critical look at Nollywood films' depiction of reality and popular myths reveals that there have been at least two ways of representing zombies in Nollywood films. While most films have depicted zombies according to local African or Nigerian myths, a good number of recently produced films have displayed representations of zombies which are visibly rooted in Western myths and other exocentric imaginations. This thesis could be illustrated through a critical study of two Nollywood films namely A.C. Enonchong's *Witchdoctor of the Living Dead* (1986) and Sam Perry's *Outbreak 2020*. Using the two above mentioned films as case studies, this paper specifically seeks to answer the three following research questions: how are Western myths about zombies different from those prevailing in the Nigeria socio-cultural space? How has the zombie filmic genre evolved in the Nigerian film industry and how are Western myths about zombies informing or reflected in Nollywood films?

Popular myths about the living dead: Western vs African perceptions of the world of zombies

Zombies seriously pervade the Western popular culture from video games and comics to urban music and cinema. The growing popularity of neologisms such as zombie banks, zombie walk, zombie dogs, zombie agents, zombie literature, zombie films and

zombie games just shows how the concept and phenomenon (zombie otherwise known as the living dead) has gained cultural currency and has multiplied in the Western/modern world “with the virality of a real zombie” (Matteo 2018). However, the zombie archetype is not essentially Western as it transcends various other cultures and epochs. In effect, as an archetype or a cultural notion, it has undergone various mutations and has been adapted to various socio-cultural environments across the globe. The zombies have been an integral part of the Western imagination for nearly a century. However, very little attention has been given to the zombie in terms of its mythological components. Additionally, scholars have not really explored how the myth of the zombies clearly varies from the Western imaginary to traditional African cosmologies.

Origin of the zombies

The myth of the living dead may be traced back to ancient Greece, given the discovery by archeologists of many ancient graves containing skeletons pinned down by rocks and other heavy objects, presumably to prevent the dead from resurrecting or reanimating (History 2017; The Atavist Magazine 2012). However, most authoritative sources associate this myth with a number of tribal cultures from West Africa and the West Indies (following the deportation of large waves of slaves from Africa to the New World). According to these sources, the zombie myth actually originated from Central and West Africa and became fully-fledged in the plantation society of Saint Domingue (today’s Haiti). The term “zombie” is thus related to the African/Congolese word “nzambi” (which means god), and is part of a complex animist vocabulary (Kette 2010, Nasiruddin 2013). In effect, in some West and Central African cosmologies, the *Grand Serpent* referred to as “*Le Grand Zombi*” is considered the father of all “*laos*” (gods). He always appeared in the form of a python. Thus, the etymological definition of the term “zombie” includes various concepts related not only to Sub-Saharan cosmologies but also to non-African cultures. It is popularly acknowledged that the origin of the word is subject to controversy. It may come from the Bantu word “zumbi” which means “fetish” or the “nzumbi” which means “spirits”. It may also derive from the Creole “jumbie” which means “ghost”. According to The Atavist Magazine (2012), the word zombie may even be a corruption of the French term “sans vie”, meaning “lifeless”.

The zombie folklore was exported – all together with the voodoo religion – from West and Central Africa to Haiti, thanks to the massive deportation of Blacks via the transatlantic slave trade of the 17th century. Based on this fact, it is generally believed that, while tales of the living dead originated from Africa, the monster's character associated with the zombie was systemically shaped by the terrible and inhuman plight of African slaves in Haitian sugar and coffee plantations – no doubt [Lauro \(2015\)](#) describes the zombie as “a figure that combines the oppression of the slave with the image of slave revolt” (p.34). In effect, brutal conditions of work and life in these plantations pushed them (the slaves) to fervidly long for a type of freedom which only death could give them. Nevertheless, they were terrified by the idea of killing themselves. On the sugar cane plantations, the slaves suffered quotidian starvation, over-work, bodily punishments and other violent chastisements which made them to have no or little hope in life and to regard religion (Haitian vodou¹) and the afterlife as the only path to salvation and rest ([Alvarrado 2009](#); [Christie & Lauro 2011](#)).

In the Haitian vodou, death was – and is still – revered as it is considered a sure transition to another continuum rather than an end of someone's existence on earth. This religion emphasizes the ability of a human soul to peacefully transit to the other stages of the afterlife if all traditions and rituals are perfectly performed by a *Bokor* (a traditional priest) after one's death. In line with this frame of thinking, the slaves viewed *Bokors* as spiritual experts and sorcerers who, with the aid of magic, spells and relevant potions, could help lost souls find their way, subsequently, to the afterlife and to heaven. In 18th century Haiti, this way to heaven was regarded as an escape from the mercilessness of life in the New World and equally as a return to the African homeland which symbolized a kind of liberation from the grips of slavers. Such successful return and liberation could only be possible if the *Bokor* perfectly observed the post-mortem traditions. However, the *Bokor* could act with malicious intension and reanimate someone's soul, for selfish motivations, thus turning a soul aspiring to heaven and eternal freedom to a zombie. This scenario was seriously resented by the slaves ([Nasiruddin 2013](#)).

¹ It is important to note that the orthography of “voodoo” (referring to religion) varies from Haitian to African context. “Vodou” and “vodun” are used by most authors to make reference to the Haitian version of this religion while “voodoo” is used in reference to the African version of it.

The slaves also resented committing suicide even though they considered death to be a transition from the harsh realities of their lives to heaven and freedom. At the time, it was popularly believed that suicide could only lead one to the zombification of his or her soul. In other words, anyone who took his life was bound to become a zombie and be doomed to eternally roam sugar plantations. The fate of a zombie in the afterlife thus horrified the slaves, the same as the idea of surrendering their souls to vicious *Bokors* whom, out of malicious intent, could rather turn them into eternal zombies (Kette 2010).

In colonial Caribbean, the zombie was believed to take a variety of forms. It could be a disembodied soul trapped in a jar by a *Bokor* (sorcerer). It could be a human transformed into an animal notably a three-legged horse or a dog that is five feet high. It could also be a corpse raised from the dead. However, in the Haitian vodou in particular, a zombie is generally construed to be a reawakened corpse, or a human-like being who has once again become a slave. He is a being who is no more master of his actions and who can be used by an evil *Bokor* for various types of biddings: murders, physical works and domestic chores among others. Thus, zombies are entities that are trapped between the physical world and the afterlife and who are made slaves to *Bokors*. It is also important here to stress that a zombie is not always a body (otherwise called *zonbi ko kadav*). It can be part of a soul called “*ti bon ange*” trapped in a bottle or an earthenware jar by an evil *Bokor*. In Haitian vodou, the human soul is believed to be composed of two distinct parts: the *gros bon ange* (which is the main life source driving the body) and the *ti bon ange* (which the person’s individuality – his agency, memory and awareness). The *gros bon ange* goes directly to heaven after death while the *ti bon ange* lingers for some time after death, before joining its god. The *ti bon ange* can be imprisoned or enslaved by a *Bokor* and be subsequently used by the latter for a variety of purposes: healing, mystical attacks against enemies/rivals and protection among others (Alvarado 2009; Kette 2010).

Up till today, in Haitian vodou, *Bokors* are thought to have the power of capturing and manipulating weak and unfortunate souls that linger after death for some time, waiting to join their gods. These sorcerers execute their macabre operations and machinations with the help of black magic, spells and various potions, notably the “zombie powder” (otherwise called *coupe poudre*) containing tetrodotoxin, hallucinogenic dautra and Calabar beans. The tetrodotoxin (TTX) is a kind of neurotoxin found in marine species such as the puffer fish, toads, polychaete worm,

lizards and even human remains (Davie 1983; Lauro 2015). When administered, tetrodotoxin can cause zombie-like symptoms such as difficulty to breathe, disorientation, aggressiveness, mental confusion, difficulty to walk (paralysis) and even death. The Bokor's capture of the *ti bon ange* through exoteric formulas similarly gives birth to a spiritual zombie (*zonbi astral*) which can be very dangerous, even to his captor or owner. It is popularly believed that when left hungry, the *zonbi astral* can consume its owner's life force (Brown 2010, Seabrook 1929). The *zonbi astral* is thus the flipside of the *zonbi ko kadav* which is a person who has been enslaved, after being deprived of his or her soul through the process of zombification. This conception of the zombie and the zombification technology and process is also part of the Westerner's imagination.

It is important at this juncture to underscore the fact that, zombification is not the exclusive specialty of evil *Bokors*, but a mode of punishment used by some secret societies in Haiti (Brown 2010; Hamilton 2007; Krensky 2008). These secret societies use the process to chastise "evil doers" who happen to fall in their nets. These societies thus assume the role of mystical justices, operating in a mode similar to Western mafia and violating Haiti's anti-zombification policies². As performed by these societies, zombification entails removing the *ti bon ange* from a victim and turning him or her to an enslaved body. This soulless body is sold by these secret societies into modern-day slavery and made to labor in sugar plantations.

The transnationalisation of the zombie myth: Role of early literature and films

The zombie archetype has progressively transcended cultures and undergone serious mutations from one cultural community to the other. These transcendence and mutations have partly been enabled by the proliferation of zombie stories and beliefs about the living dead, in countries across the world. The above mentioned proliferation has been aided by a complex mix of vectors, some of which include fictional and non-fictional literature, films, comics, video games and social representations among others.

²Article 249 of the Haitian Constitution criminalizes zombification. This law stipulates that if somebody drugs another person, buries him as though he was dead, and then exhumes the person and brings him back to life, it is a murder. Word verbatim, the Article states "Also shall be qualified as attempted murder the employment which may be made against any person of substances which, without causing actual death, produce a lethargic coma more or less prolonged. If, after the administering of such substances, the person has been buried, the act shall be considered murder *no matter what result follows*"

A wealth of early literature contains early iterations and descriptions of the African, Haitian, Caribbean and Hollywoodian zombie. This literature has profoundly and subtly shaped the popular imaginary about the zombie not only in colonial and post colonial Caribbean but also in North America, Europe and other parts of the world.

One of the earliest attempts to paint the world of zombies is *Le Zombi du Grand Perou* written in 1697 by French novelist Pierre-Corneille de Blessebois (1646-1700). Composed in both prose and verse, the book narrates the story of a Creole countess who sets out to use voodoo (charms procured by a sorcerer) to exact her revenge against a former lover, the marquis de Grand Perou. The countess' revenge is fuelled by the fact that her former lover has jilted her after exploiting her sexually and dragging his feet on the promises to marry her. The countess seeks charms from a voodoo priest, in exchange for sexual favors. The charms are expected to render her invisible to the marquis de Grand Peru so that she may harm the man. Unfortunately, the voodoo priest fools the countess: he sexually exploits the woman and instead supplies the latter with a charm that does not have the expected propriety/virtues. He also later on delivers the woman to an army of naughty "zombis" who torment her. In the novel, the concept of the zombie principally denotes a "biting, pinching, hair-plucking spirit" which tries to get its victim to open their eyes or make noise. The depiction of the zombie in the novel is very much close to the Haitian/Caribbean concept of "*zombi astral*" or "*zombie bouteille*" as the writer's "zombie" mainly refers to a phantom, a spirit or an immaterial entity. No reference is made to the zombie as a soulless body or a resuscitated corpse used as laborer in a plantation.

Other early novels and essays such as Dany Laferriere's *Pays sans Chapeau*, Doris Garaway's *The Libertine Colony* and Pere Labat's *Nouveau Voyage aux Isles de l'Amerique* (1722) also provide accounts that have been windows into beliefs and practices related to the *zonbi astral* in various Caribbean cultures, particularly during the colonial or slavery period. However, like De Blessebois's *Le Zombi du Grand Perou*, these other early literary works do not clearly depict the zombie as a walking dead, a soulless embodied being or a resurrected corpse. They thus mainly popularized the idea of the zombie as an immaterial being and a vampire-like being say a giant dog, a horse possessing only three legs or a child growing taller by minute. [Lauro \(2015\)](#) explains that these early literary works rather helped popularize the four following Western beliefs about the zombie:

- i. Zombies are spirits that walk around having left their bodies resting elsewhere
- ii. The word “zombie” is related to charms that render the person’s body invisible and maleficent entities (“Zombis de ronde”) that pester and can lead one to do evil.
- iii. There exist flying zombies that always carry torches and
- iv. There existed wax figures similar to voodoo dolls that were used by European witches to torture people — an early reference to voodoo dolls, perhaps, which illustrates an instance of syncretism between European and Caribbean witchcraft (Lauro 2015, p. 35).

The above Western imaginary about the zombie however soon changed with the publication of non-fictional accounts such as William Seabrook’s *The Magic Island* (1929) (see Fig. 1). In effect, Seabrook’s book and subsequent literary works came to popularize the concept of the zombie as an embodied spirit, a walking dead or a living dead. In *The Magic Island*, Seabrook actually depicts his encounter with the trio of walking dead laboring in a sugarcane field. This depiction of the three walking dead came to inspire much of the Western idea of the zombie. In his book, Seabrook described the zombie as a being having the appearance of a lobotomized dog and a mentally deficient being forced into slavery. He actually describes the eyes of one of the walking dead thus:

The eyes [of the negro workers] were worst. It was not my imagination. They were in truth like the eyes of a dead man, not blind, but staring unfocused, unseeing [...] I had a sickening, almost panicking lapse in which I thought, or rather felt, “Great God, maybe this stuff is really true, and if it is true, it is rather awful, for it upsets everything. (p. 29).

In the same book, Seabrook provides a description of zombification which defies early conceptions of the zombie as an essentially immaterial being. He writes that:

The zombie, they say, is a soulless human corpse, still dead, but taken from the grave and endowed by sorcery with a mechanical semblance of life. People who have the power to do this go to a fresh grave, dig up the body before it has had time to rot, galvanize it into movement, and then make of it a

servant or slave, occasionally for the commission of some crime, more often simply as a drudge around the habitation or the farm, setting it dull heavy tasks, and beating it like a dumb beast if it slackens. (p. 31)

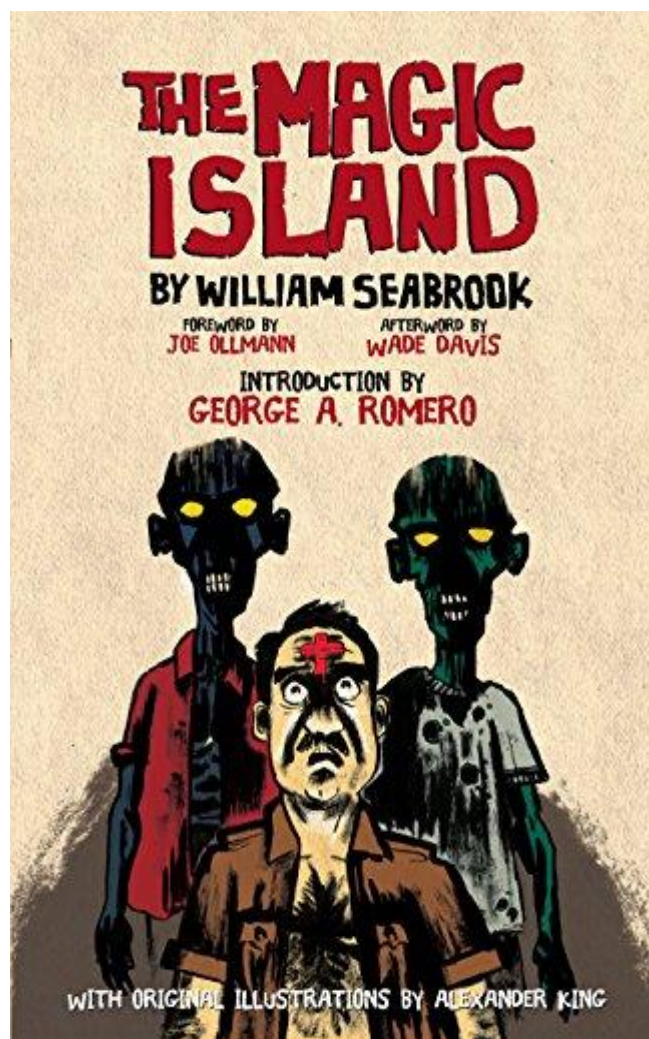


Fig. 1 Cover Page of Seabrook's *The Magic Island*

The above description of the living dead profoundly shaped subsequent social and media representations of the zombie in the Western world particularly in America (Kee 2011). *The Atavist Magazine* (2012) corroborates the above observation. It surmises that, through his bestselling book *The Magic Island*, Seabrook influenced the Western imagination not only about the zombie but also about voodoo and Haiti as a whole. In effect, in the light of Seabrook's voyage book, most Westerners – particularly Americans – started to fervidly view Haiti as the land of “tom-toms pounding in the

night and corpses staggering down the road, shaking of dirt from their graves". In the light of the same book, the Whites abandoned much of the age old stereotypes of the zombie they upheld, in favor of the *ko cadav* ("corps cadavre") myth. [The Atavist Magazine \(2012\)](#) further explains that: "From the book's publication forward, the White world would hear almost nothing of the helpful chore-doing zombie, the giant dog zombie, and the playful spirit zombie. The only zombie that now existed in the Western imagination was the zombie cadavre (p. 46). Actually, Seabrook's claim that "dead men [were] working in canefields" in Haiti as slaves very much informed the Western idea that zombies are kind of somnambulistic laborers. It also fuelled associations of the zombie concept with controversial values such as capitalism, the monstrous other, global exchange and industrial technology. Furthermore, Seabrook's additional explanation that the laborers were "plodding like brute and automates" (p. 29) informed the Western belief that zombies are both dehumanized beings and entities programmed to perform mechanized and robotic gestures. The above mentioned conceptions of the living dead and many similar myths will later be observed in the Western/American popular culture from films to game to comic and music videos. For instance, Seabrook claims in his *The Magic Island* that by consuming salt, a zombie is automatically delivered from zombification and his trance condition. In line with this belief, G.W. Hutter wrote a story titled "Salt Is Not for Slaves" which was published in August 1931 by *Ghost Stories Magazine*. Hutter's story is about a talking zombie named Marie who recounts the story of a zombie revolt to an unidentified foreigner. Similarly, Derleth wrote a zombie story published in 1932 in *Strange Tales* magazine which is based on the somnambulistic laborer trope and the myth that the consumption of salty food reverses zombification.

Seabrook's non-fictional account received much acclaims from various critics, intellectuals and commentators in the West; a development which shows the popularity of his description of voodoo, the zombie and Haiti. In line with this, R.L Duffus of the *New York Times* (cited in [The Atavist Magazine 2012](#)) commended Seabrook saying "He has penetrated [...] the soul of Haiti". Similarly, The Harlem's Amsterdam News proclaimed *The Magic Island* the "best book of the year on a negro subject". Furthermore, William Seabrook became popularly known as the one who introduced the zombie to America ([Kyle 2015, 2010](#); [Faragher 2011](#)) as well as the brain behind the living dead's depiction as corps cadavre in early zombie films. [Lauro \(2015\)](#) corroborates the above mentioned popular belief thus:

Seabrook's 1929 account, "Dead Men Working in the Cane Fields," marked the decisive union of the word zombie with the walking corpse — a coupling that would captivate American audiences from the first films in the 1930s to the present day. But before the ultimately inaccessible, obscure point and time of its collision with the word zombie, the concept of the walking dead, or *corps cadavre*, was on its own journey. (p. 43)

In tandem with the above line of thought, Seabrook's *The Magic Island* is believed to have partially informed the depiction of the living dead in early zombie films. This is true to the portrayal of the living dead in *White Zombie* (1932), *King of the Zombies* (1941) where the zombie is characterized as shuffling, glassy-eyed automaton, who having neither memory nor emotions, exist to execute the design of a voodoo priest. *The Magic Island* is also thought to have influenced the image of zombies in George Romero's gothic movies: *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Day of the Dead*, *Land of the Dead* (2005) *Diary of the Dead* (2007), *Survival of the Dead* (2009) ([The Atavist Magazine 2012](#), [Lauro 2015](#); [Faragher 2011](#)). In the above Romero's films (see [Fig. 2](#)), the zombie is depicted as an alienated worker oppressed by industrial capitalism or a symbol of American consumerism. In effect, Romero uses the "everyman" zombie trope in the above mentioned films to suggest America's descent into consumer culture. He also critiques the human nature - selfishness and capitalism - which paradoxically is becoming a danger to the humanity/humanism of man. Zombification in Romero's film is somehow used as a symbol of consumerism and capitalism. This portrayal is suggested by Seabrook's account in *The Magic Island* where zombies are depicted as both the victims and enablers of Western industrial capitalism. It is however important to note that many features of the above films differentiate Romero's zombies from typical Haitian zombies. Some of these features include the fact that contrary to the living dead depicted in Seabrook's *The Magic Island*; Romero's zombies communicate, form plans, deploy guns and ride horse. In addition to these, Romero's zombies react to being lit on fire.

Romero's films also replicate and popularize the myth that zombies are the product of (massive) infection, contamination and/or reanimation; that they are hazardous to human life and instinctively and mechanically feed on living organism

(human flesh or human brain). They are at best cannibalistic and predatory. They follow their prey, and once in close proximity of their target, ravenously claw and bite anything in their grasp. Romero's films also suggest that although devoid of thought and memory, some zombies are capable of learning through a process of trial and error. By the same logic, some zombies have emotions and communicative skills. Furthermore, Romero's films have naturalized the belief that zombies do not possess a fine motor control and that they move in a shambling walk because of various forms of body deformation or physical imperfection/deformation – notably bodily decay and brain decomposition. They move slowly and extremely silently. This enables them to sneak up on pray undetected.

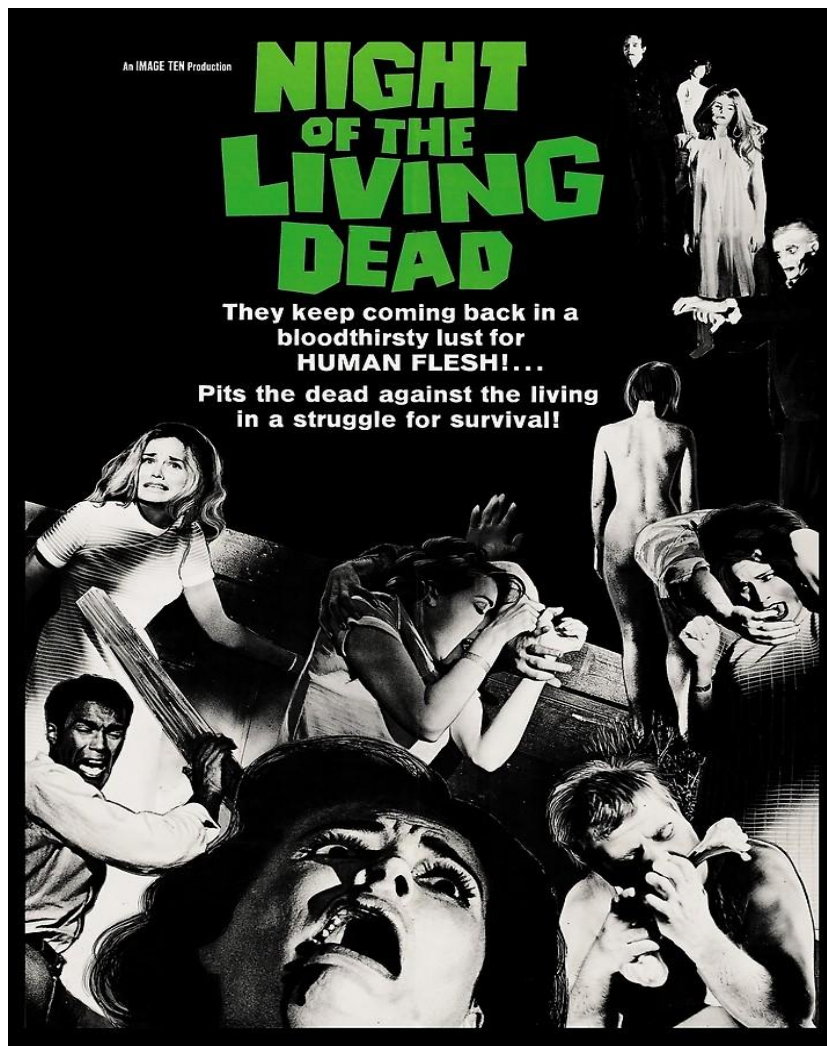


Fig. 2 A Poster for Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968)

The above depictions have seriously influenced the representation of the living dead and zombification in many subsequent zombie films. This has been to the extent that many commentators view Romero as the inventor of the zombie movie ([Benson-Allott 2017](#)). [Boon \(2011a\)](#) remarks for instance that:

Discourse in contemporary popular American culture concerning zombie mythology is colored by George Romero's fusion of the zombie with the ghoul in his monumental film *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968. Nearly every film made after Romero's first sequel to *Night*, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), can be linked back to Romero's characterization of the zombie. And it is quite difficult to find a zombie novel or short story released after Romero's third film in his zombie series, *Day of the Dead* (1985) that does not follow the director's lead (p. 5).

The influence of Romero's movies on subsequent gothic films cannot be denied. But it must be highlighted that each zombie film director has sought to give personal touch to his zombie. This has made the zombie myth to slightly vary from one film to the other as well as from one community to the other. As noted by [Christie and Lauro \(2011\)](#), the zombie "has not just evolved within narrative; it has evolved in a way that transforms narratives" (p. 2). For instance, in his zombie-oriented works, Max Brooks seriously departs from Romero's characterization of the living dead. In his *World War Z* more specifically, he does not characterize his zombies as beings that have memories and the ability to learn by trial and errors. Meanwhile, Romero's zombies have these qualities particularly in *Land of the Dead* and *Dawn of the Dead*. Also, contrary to Romero who characterizes his zombies mainly as symbols of American consumerism, many authors tend to portray their living dead as representation of the monstrous Other ([Boon 2011b](#)). In spite of all the above mentioned variations in the cinematic representations of the living dead, a number of common features have characterized zombies in the Western imagination as well as in most western films. This will be explored in greater details in the subsequent part of this essay.

The Western vs the African Zombie

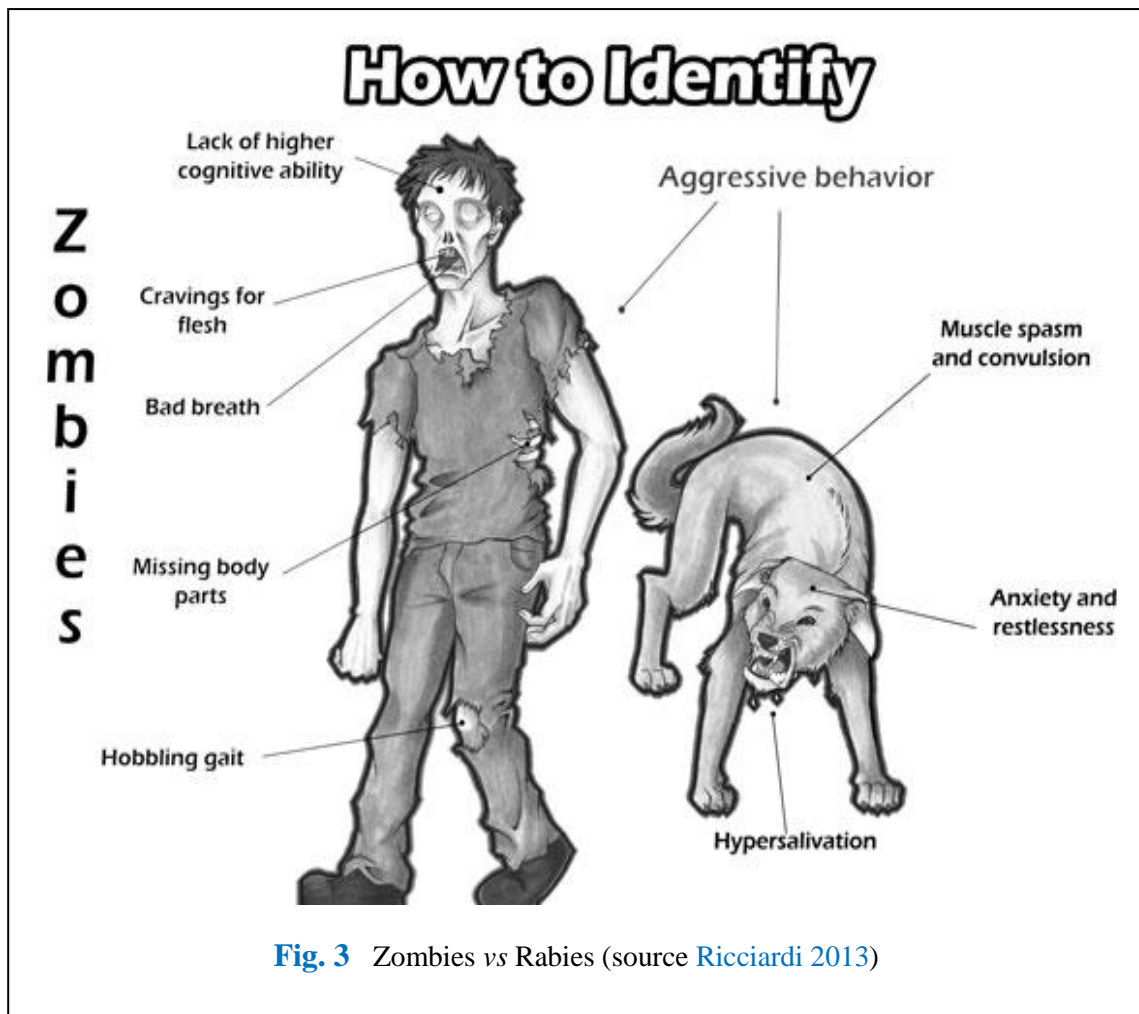
Western myths about zombies are reflected in the contents of cultural products such as Hollywood films, comics, graphic novels, games and Western literature among

others. As earlier mentioned, social representations and media depictions of the zombies have often slightly varied from one Western author to the other as well as from one community to the other. However, there have been some similarities in the ways the living dead are perceived in the West or the way they are depicted in the western popular cultures. As noted by [Lauro \(2015\)](#) the zombie has been “oscillating between cultural appropriation and syncretism, or something in between” (p. 10). There are some common features in the Western zombies irrespective of the authors of works of art or Western cultures ([Kee 2011](#)).

[Ricciardi \(2013\)](#) explores some of the popular myths that characterize the Western imagination about the living dead. He hinges on a graphical representation of zombies as well as a comparison of these creatures (zombies) with animals such as dogs (see [Fig. 3](#)). A remarkable fact is that the Western zombies – as portrayed in Western popular cultures – clearly differ from their ancestors (the Haitian or West African zombies) as they are cannibalistic; they reproduce themselves and are owned by nobody. Western myths about zombies therefore exclude the central role of *Bokors*, as well as the religious or spiritual dimensions of these entities (zombies). Perhaps the only traits common to Western zombies and their Haitian ancestors are the following: Both types of zombies are reawakened bodies; they are soulless and could be very aggressive and terrifying. Secondly, both types of zombies have compromised brains. Another characteristic commonly shared by the Western and the original (Haitian) zombies is that, they represent man’s enslavement to his mortal flesh as well as to the capitalist system. Tapping into various aspects of the Western popular culture, [Matteo \(2018\)](#) corroborates this position thus:

Individuality in a capitalist system is a fiction that gives us the illusion of freedom, thus preventing us from rebelling. Capitalist workers and consumers alike have been compared to zombies in that the first perform mindless work, and the second consumes without the physical need to do so. Both worker and consumer are constructs, which are necessary for the system to exist. [...] the zombie preserves the original meaning of both slave and slave rebellion. Capitalist zombies – the worker and consumer – are slaves to the system. In the figure of zombie, we can see the inhumanity and monstrosity

of the capitalist system. However, those slaves have the potential to rebel. (p. 29-30).



The major differences between these two typologies of zombies lie in (i) their physical appearance and survival strategies/instincts, (ii) the procedures or accidents through which they became zombies and (iii) the socio-cultural symbols for which they stand. In terms of physical appearance and survival strategies, Western zombies have rotting skin; they appear weak with a robotic way of walking and are ravenous flesh eaters (cannibals). Meanwhile, Haitian zombies (*the znonbi ka kadav* in particular) are generally strong enough to execute the biddings of their owners. They are fed with a paste prepared with ingredients that include sweet potatoes, cane syrup, henbane and nightshade (Arevalo 2017). They are equally fed with hallucinogenic compounds made with plants such as *Datura metel* and *Datura stramonium* (what is popularly called

zombie cucumber). In terms of their origin, the Western zombies are thought to be the biological products of exposure to radiation or accidental contamination. They are beings that have been rendered infected by a zombie virus. Meanwhile, Haitian zombies are cursed people who died and returned as zombies through the agency of malicious sorcerers called *Bokors*. Finally, in terms of the symbols they stand for, Western zombies are a metaphor for the culture of mindless American consumerism while their Haitian (as well as African) cousins are a symbol of both spiritual and physical alienation as well as a metaphor for the dispossession of self through the “reduction of the self to a mere source of labor” (McNally 2011).

The parameters highlighted above to compare Western zombies with their Haitian ancestors could as well be considered to compare Western zombies with their African cousins. The major difference between the Western and the African zombie is that while the former (Western zombies) deal with the body, the latter are concerned with the spirit. In effect, the Western zombie is a body which has partially become rotten through biological or chemical contamination or exposure to damaging radiations; and which is made to behave aggressively and in a horrifying way. Contrary to this, the African zombie is a hitherto cursed and dead body which has been brought back to life through the agency of an opportunistic and capitalist sorcerer or a group of sorcerers (Van Wyk 2004, Kgatla 2000, Mildnerova 2016; Kumwenda 2007). As explained by Hamilton (2007), for a zombie to be created in Africa, sorcerers will need to “seize your spirit from your body, influence it by a charm, then when you are buried, they will come back reinstate the spirit into your body; you wake up, but you are influenced and directed only by the charm in you”. Through these charms the sorcerers control both the bodies and spirits of their victims and send them to the underworld to work in invisible plantations or various other industries to make money for their captors (the sorcerers or secret society). In Cameroon for instance this system of zombification is manifested through the phenomena of *Nyongo* (among many English speaking ethnic groups), *Famla* (among the Bamilekes) and *Ekóng* (among the Fan Beti)³. In his book titled *Dahomey, an Ancient West African Kingdom*, Herskovitz (1967) reviews various forms of zombification and zombie-related myths in some West African cultures. He writes:

in Togoland or on the Gold Coast or in Nigeria. Such individuals, however, did not recognize their old friends,

³ Bamilekes and Betis are tribal groups in Cameroon.

even though addressed by name. They were soulless beings, whose death was not real but resulted from the machinations of sorcerers who made them appear as dead, and then, when buried removed them from their graves and sold them into servitude in some far- away land. (p. 243).

In Nigeria, there are similar tales of zombification purportedly motivated by men's insatiable quest for material possessions. There are unsettling stories of ambitious personalities who contract sorcerers to seize the spirits of their relatives and get them biologically dead and zombified via black magic for the latter to be sent to the underworld to generate money for them (Ukpabio 2007, Biodun 2004; Omotola 2013). There are equally tales of very ambitious people who, in a bid to economically, spiritually or politically succeed in life, trade their souls and part of their life span to "demonic powers". Such people contract sorcerers who introduce them to some spiritual entities desirous "to buy" their souls and part of their life span. When all the rituals are scrupulously performed, the sorcerer's client receives his request but dies at an appointed date, just to be expedited to an underground world where he is doomed to serve as spiritual slave (the Haitian equivalent of the *zonbi astral*) for the spiritual entity with which he sealed a covenant. In tandem with this McNally (2011) notes that "in Nigeria, newspapers carry reports of passengers on motorcycle-taxis, who, once helmets are placed on their heads, transform into zombies and begin to spew money from their mouths, as if they had become human ATMs" (p. 232).

It is important at this juncture to underline the fact that the conception of the zombie as an immaterial being may be unthinkable in the Western imagination; meanwhile, in both Haitian and African imaginations, there are spiritual entities which could serve as zombies. The concept of *nzonbi ancestral* in Haitian vodou vividly gives credence to this thesis. The equivalent of the *nzonbi astral* in black African spiritualism are the (evil) spirits or roaming souls which sorcerers successfully capture, manipulate and circumstantially send on specific missions. In MacGaffrey's (1986) *Religion and Society in Central Africa*, the African concept of zombie astral is defined thus:

Witches may suck out or draw off (*vola, hola*) all or part of the soul, depriving all or part of the body of its inner essence, so that in a short time it will be seen to sicken or die. ... [T] he soul is removed from its ordinary container and enclosed

in another in such a way that its energy is at the witch's disposal. . . . A person in this kind of captivity is called the 'soldier' (soldat) of his witch master. His soul may be enclosed in a charm so that his anger at the way he has been treated may be turned against his master's victims. Or he may be sold to another master or even shipped to America to be put to work in factories making textiles and automobiles. (p. 161– 62)

[Khan \(2013\)](#) explains that though these typologies of spiritual servants or slaves (the *zondis astral*) may circumstantially be efficacious, they are no match to physical zombies. As he puts it, because of their lack of physicality and lack of belonging, spirits or roaming souls of dead can be tamed by a sorcerer for evil purposes. "But even when the spirit of the dead can be controlled by the living, its potency cannot be equal to the physical powers of a human being because the spirit is supernatural; it has crossed the boundary of the living to enter into a metaphysical world" ([Khan 2013](#), p.33).

The Zombie Thematic in Nollywood Films

Since its inception in 1992, the Nollywood film industry has been characterized by spiritual thrillers among other cinematic genres. The majority of the industry's filmic productions has sought to explore diabolical and mystical themes such as voodoo, witchcraft, blood money, ritual killings and cultism among others. The film believed to have kick started the cinematic movement (Kenneth Nebue's *Living in Bondage*) is for instance based on the story of a business man called Andy who, for the purpose of prosperity and upward social mobility, scarifies his wife through occult procedures and with the aid of some demonic powers. Unfortunately for Andy, his sacrifice results not only in affluence and a semblance of social security but in a continuum of psychological sufferance and woes. The ghost of his diseased wife soon embarks on a punitive mission to avenge her death. The feminine spirit incessantly haunts Andy, tormenting the latter and making his life to be a real hell. Like Keneth Nebue's *Living in Bondage*, many early Nollywood and pre-Nollywood films (notably *My Mother is a Witch*, *Billionaires' Club*, *I hate my Village*, *Igodo* and *Krashika* among others) have sought to represent

myths such as the afterlife, the world of the spirits, as well as the world of the undead notably ghosts, vampires, devils and mermaids among others.

Early Nigerian films that featured human-like creatures that could be associated with zombies are generally classified among the so-called *juju* films (Passchier 2014). As Witt (2010) insightfully highlights in her critique of common production cultures in Nollywood, “the so-called *juju* movies often feature witchcraft, the undead, ritual sacrifice or, as in one movie I found on YouTube, called *Night of Vultures*, an indeterminate diplomat from the spirit world with a latex vulture claw”. The undead deployed in *juju* films most often resemble Hollywood zombies. Rarely are they designed after local Nigerian myths. Witt (2010) further explains that these undead “bear closer resemblance to the zombies in Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” video or the infected of *28 Days Later*” (p. 19).

In spite of the pervasiveness of the undead in the Nollywood film industry, a number of critics consider the zombie thriller as a more or less emerging genre in the industry. Tayo (2017) notes for instance that, since the inception of the Nollywood cinematic movement, there has always been an obsession with the paranormal in the storylines of Nollywood films. Such obsession has made spiritual thrillers to dominate the industry since the 1990s, most often integrating a mix of Nigerian Christian beliefs, indigenous myths and diabolical themes revolving around Christianity warring against some exotic paranormal entities such as mermaids, demons and ghosts (The Economist 2010; Hugo 2009; Garritano 2012). According to Tayo, there has “hardly [been] any movies on vampires, zombies or serial killers lurking in the woods to kill white college students” (p. 3-4). It would be helpful to clarify that, by his submission, Tayo seems to mean that films that explore the Hollywoodian types of vampires and zombies have been rare in Nollywood. His contention is however arguable given the fact that there has been a number of zombie movies produced even before the emergence of the Nollywood movement. Charles A. Enonchong’s *Witchdoctor of the Living Dead* (1985) is a case in point. Thus, although critics tend to believe that the zombie genre (à la Hollywood) is a relatively novel development in Nollywood – with the release of films such as J.C Obasi’s *Ojuju* (2014) and Samy Perry’s *Outbreak 2020* (2014) - the living dead have started pervading Nigerian films even before the 1990s. What seem a little bit plausible is that the majority of Nollywood zombie films that have recently emerged are based on stories of the undead that very much resemble Western and Hollywoodian

version of the zombies. This will be illustrated in great details using specific case studies in the following section of this discourse.

Representation of zombies in A.C. Enonchong's *Witchdoctor of the Living Dead* and Sam Perry's *Outbreak 2020*

Charles A. Enonchong's *Witchdoctor of the Living Dead*

Witchdoctor of the Living Dead is one of the very first zombie thrillers produced in the Nigerian film industry. The film was precisely released in 1985, seven years before the official birth of the Nollywood movement. Written and directed by A.C. Enonchong and produced on the tiniest of budgets, the film recounts the story of a devilish and extremely powerful witchdoctor who deploys black magic to terrorize a whole African village. To ease his terrorist activities in the village, the witchdoctor mobilizes both animal spirits and an army of dreaded zombies (dead people he was able to bring back to life). The zombies and animal spirits crush any person that dare stand in the way of their master but are finally neutralized by the village priest.

Charles A. Enonchong's *Witchdoctor of the Living Dead* has attracted mainly negative criticism from both Nigerian and exogenous film critics. Much of this negative criticism borders on the film's poor technical quality, poor plot construction and poor sound quality as well as the unprofessional performance of the actors among other issues (Mudman 2015; Dortch 2018; Beveridge 2014). Few critics have sought to compare the film with small budget and unpopular Hollywood zombie films (Mudman 2015; Beveridge 2014) but little –or no – attention has been given to examining the extent to which Enonchong's zombies are African or conceived in line with some peculiarities of the African society in which they subsist.

The least one may say is that Enonchong's zombies in *Witchdoctor of the Living Dead* are remarkably hybrid. They have features of both Hollywoodian/Western and African zombies. To be more perceived, they appear more Western than African. The few elements of Africaness observable in their appearance and behaviors include the following:

- (i) They are dead people who have been resurrected by a witchdoctor. This is congruent to two popular beliefs. The first is that zombies are

supernatural beings coming straight from the world of the dead while the second is that they are former corpses brought back to life through the instrumentality of black magic.

- (ii) They are made to be answerable to a master (the witchdoctor or kind of *bokor*). This is in tandem with the Nigerian/African myth that zombies are animated by an occult or satanic power; and that they work for the prosperity of that satanic power. The power may not always be a human entity as it is the case in Enonchong's film. But the principle is that they receive directives from a superior being or spirit.
- (iii) They are used as slaves or labor by their evil master (the witchdoctor). This is in line with the belief that zombies generally actualize the evil plans of a devilish force. They receive no pay.
- (iv) They are vulnerable only to spiritual weapons. As earlier said, contrary to Hollywood zombies who are the products of biological contamination, African/Nigerian zombies are essentially the outcome of spiritual manipulations. Such manipulations can only be undone by spiritual tools or weapons. In line with this, the only way to neutralize or deliver an African zombie is by counter witchcraft or exorcism. It is not surprising that in Enonchong's film, it is a local priest equipped with a spiritual arsenal that crushes the zombies and liberates the village.

In spite of these few characteristics, Enonchong's living dead behave much in the same manner as those deployed in George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, Fulci's *Zombi 2* and Hooper's *Salem's Lot*. In effect, as zombies, they look mindless and somnambulistic. They have a robotic walk style; a slow moving pace and even feed on human flesh. In other words, Enonchong's living dead are shambling, slow-witted and cannibalistic walking corpses (see [Figs. 4](#) and [5](#)). These specific aspects of their behaviors contradict some of the popular zombie-related beliefs in Nigeria and other African countries. According to such beliefs, zombies are so human-like that they can even mingle with ordinary human entities without being detected at first sight. There have been stories of zombies who successfully do petit trading or are motorcycle riders in some Nigerian urban towns ([McNally 2011](#)). According to a plurality of tales, these zombies successfully mingle with ordinary humans in metropolitan towns and it will take extra scrutiny to detect their presence and acts.



Fig. 4 Image of a Zombie in *Witchdoctor of the Living Dead*

The use of Hollywood-like zombies in Charles A. Enonchong's *Witchdoctor of the Living Dead* is one of the multiple indexes that are indicative of Hollywood imperialism on Nollywood. It is also an evidence of Nollywood filmmakers' tendency to superimpose Hollywood concepts on their filmic productions. Such superimposition of Hollywood concepts most often lead to the creation of symbols that are strange, if not odd. Enonchong's zombies seem more like Hollywood zombies. This choice of Hollywood production paradigms and esthetics suggest at least two things. The first is that Hollywood image/portrayals of the zombie remain popular even in Nigeria. The Western/Hollywood version of the zombie is a lead that can enable local filmmakers in Nigeria develop their (indigenous/Nigerian) stories and make them attractive and in tune with the modernizing Nigerian society. In other words, the Western version of the zombie sells local Nigerian zombie stories and films. The second observation one may draw in the face of the popular use of the Western zombie in Nollywood films is that, Nigerian filmmakers are still conscious that Hollywood has so much defined the Nigerian imaginary about zombie. This development pushes them to use Hollywood codes (Western representations of the living dead) that may easily be understood by local Nigerian audiences.



Fig. 5 A Zombie enacting a Vampire-Like Attitude in Witchdoctor of the Living Dead

Sam Perry's *Outbreak 2020*

Outbreak 2020 is a 2014 Nollywood zombie film written and produced by Oyebanjo Oyemaja. The film recounts the story of a company which conceives a capitalist scheme consisting in (i) creating a virus that will be inoculated to people and (ii) designing an anti-dote to be administered to those inoculated. The creation of the antidote aims at making millions of Naira to the detriment of the population. Unfortunately, The company's dark ambition fails as an accident occurs during the production of the virus: many people are contaminated by an uncontrollable version of the virus. The contaminated people phenomenally mutate from humans to dreadful and dreaded flesh-eating creatures that mercilessly prey on the town dwellers. The latter resort to gruesome models of self-defense including the use of very sharp machetes and fire weapons; which they use to *in extremis* defend themselves against their monstrous predators.

Like in Enonchong's *Witchdoctor of the Living Dead*, the zombies deployed in *Outbreak 2020* are Western like in their physiques: they are flesh eating creatures, have a robotic way of walking and prey on people. Apart from the color of their skin (their race), Perry's zombies have virtually nothing in common with the African zombies imagined to be kinds of slaves and labor for a night or underworld economy. They are represented as the victims of powerful commercial or capitalist entities or rather as the ugly consequence of a capitalist system which has no place for humanism or African communalism. As earlier mentioned, the zombie has in many Hollywood films – notably *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Land of the Dead* (2005), *Diary of the Dead* (2007) and *Creature with Atomic Brain* (1955) and *I-Zombie* among others - represented as symbols of capitalism, consumerism. Perry replicates this tradition through his use of the “everybody” zombie trope and the central themes of his film which is capitalism and humanity's readiness to go the extra mile to acquire wealth.

Perry's use of contamination/infection as a mode through which his characters are zombified is another evidence of the westernization of his living dead in *Outbreak 2020*. In effect, Perry's zombies are not only the products of inoculation, but decaying and rotten bodies (see [Fig. 6](#)) who mechanically prey on non-infected humans. Technically, they are Western or Hollywoodian zombies operating in an African setting.

Another clear evidence of the westernization of Perry's zombies is the fact that the latter are represented in the film as creatures which can fatally be neutralized just with the use of fire arms and machetes – a myth which is often exploited or reflected in Hollywood zombie films. This way of dealing with zombies is contradictory to the African anti-zombie defense system which rather gives a primordial attention to exoteric means. This could rightly be attributed to the fact that zombies are widely believed to be the fruit of mystical and occult practices. Thus, instead of facing a zombie with fire arms or other physical weapons, Africans will resort to the help of a well experienced oracle or mystic powers to tame the undead, not necessarily to mortally neutralize it. Many Africans thus believe in the possible deliverance of a zombie with the help of mystical powers.

It could therefore be argued that *Outbreak 2020* replicates a dominant trope in Hollywood zombie films: powerful scientific societies which, for egoistic and boundless financial gains, are ready to use their technological and scientific knowledge/power to

exploit people, creating delicate viruses and diseases that are incurable except by their manufactured antidotes. By importing this Hollywoodian trope and presenting it as socio-scientific pathology which is to be envisaged in post-modern Nigeria, Perry simply Nigerianizes a Western myth.



Fig. 6 A Survivor Uses a Machete to Slay a Female Zombie in Perry's *Outbreak 2020*

Conclusion

Supernatural/spiritual thrillers based on themes such as witchcraft, sorcery, black magic, the undead and voodoo have, for long, been a dominant cinematic trend among Nigerian filmmakers, causing a good number of both endogenous and exogenous critics to derogatorily profile Nollywood film directors and actors as voodooists. The desire to diversify directorial and ideological currents within the industry has driven many Nollywood dudes to import various cultural concepts and production paradigms from Hollywood and from the global mass culture. This has led to the popularization of zombie thrillers styled *à la Hollywood* or dominantly shaped according to the Western imaginations. This study has attempted to illustrate this theory with the aid of two Nollywood zombie thrillers Charles A. Enonchong's *Witchdoctor of the Living Dead* and Sam Perry's *Outbreak 2020*.

The study argued that the two films portray Western/westernized zombies in African setting or rather new “races” of zombies which are not typically African and may rightly be described as hybrid: they have a black color and may have African origins, but behave like – or rather mimic – Western zombies. The zombies portrayed particularly in *Outbreak 2020* do not really constitute symbols of spiritual slavery and key players of a night-economy as most Nigerian myths would have presented the living dead. They do not, have captors or masters (*Bokors*) and do not work in invisible plantations or in mysterious industries for the economic prosperity of their masters. Those portrayed in Enonchong’s *Witchdoctor of the Living Dead* have a master. They are spiritual slaves who work for their *bokor* (the witchdoctor). They are resurrected bodies – just like any African zombie will be. However, they still exhibit many characteristics of the Western zombie: they have a robotic walk style; exhibit a slow moving pace and even feed on human flesh and blood. They are made to appear biologically affected, just like the living dead deployed in George A. Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, Fulci’s *Zombi 2* and Hooper’s *Salem’s Lot*.

The zombie portrayed in Sam Pery’s *Outbreak 2020* and Charles A. Enonchong’s *Witchdoctor of the Living Dead* could rightly be regarded as a blind deconstruction of the African zombies and the product of Nigerian “videastes”⁴ adoption or adaptation of exocentric myths and cinematic paradigms.

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⁴ It has become a common practice among African cinema critics to derogatorily differentiate “cineastes” (who are believed to be good adepts of conventions guiding film production and who produce their film on celluloid) from “videastes” (whose filmic production are mostly considered to be of lower quality, given the fact that they are packaged in video format).

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