

# Supernatural Iconographies in Nollywood: A Study of Selected Nollywood Film

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**Abstract:-** This paper looks at Supernatural iconographies as represented in Nollywood film narratives and how it replicates cultural realities of Nigerians, especially Igbo cultural ideologies and Africans at Large. Thus, the application of visual effects is craftily utilized in creating believable illusions. This paper therefore, x-rays the composition of magical images, supernatural characters and effects which are the creator's imaginations as conceived from their culture and social experiences to an audience who resonate with the images and meanings it produces. In so doing, this paper used Andy Amenechi's *Igodo* with references to some Hollywood epic movies to pinpoint meanings produced from the supernatural characters in the narrative. At the end, this paper, submits that the supernatural images as portrayed in Nollywood films promotes African beliefs, informs and shapes viewers perception of African ideologies.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent times, Nollywood film narratives are replete with supernatural images and characters as well as metaphysical environments to give the feeling of ghostly, evil environment, godly beings which are all culturally attributed. These supernatural images as iconic representations of Nigerian cultural artifacts which exhibit supernatural skills and magical powers that are not naturally visible to the human eye, are made to see on screen by the imagination of the creators. These supernatural images and magical effects are iconographic imaginations of the CGI designer, animator and the filmmaker as representations of Nigerian cultural belief system. Supernatural iconographies such as gods, demons, ghosts, spirits, monsters or villains are created and enhanced through the use of CGI. These supernatural images and effects are often exhibited in genres of horror, fantasy, epic movies, etc

Nollywood films where these supernatural images are exhibited are mostly epic and horror films such as Ernest Obi's *Calabash* and *Idemili*, *Igodo*, the *Elephant girl*, *Oshimiri* and so many others. Thus, Nollywood horror films tend to explore the theme of mortality in an extremely direct manner and strive to elicit feelings of fear, supernatural beings and prowess, horrific sound effects to heighten the tension in the narratives and flow of the narratives. Their plots typically involve themes of violent death, supernatural occurrences, spiritual or physical changes and metaphysical activity. Many horror movies pit characters against mysterious, supernatural forces but some, particularly within the sub-genre, feature films are strongly defined.

## II. CREATING SUPERNATURAL ICONOGRAPHIES

By the help of the most sophisticated media technology, supernatural and metaphysical phenomena have acquired an unprecedented presence in modern societies. In recent, Hollywood movies like *Narnia*, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and the *Harry Potter* film series, magicians, ghosts, Elves, unicorns, monsters possessed by evil spirits working for the good are vividly alive and inhabit the world on a par with mortal human beings. Likewise, films such as *The Mummy* (action, horror genre), *Pitch Black* (horror science fiction), *Scream* (horror, mystery), and *Aliens* (science fiction, action, horror) contain multiple elements of horror. The metaphysical realm is no longer something one may try and imagine or only occasionally see represented in symbolic forms in fresco paintings or pillars of stone. The media representations of the supernatural world have acquired a richness in detail, character and narrative, making the supernatural appear natural. The salience of the supernatural world is furthermore supported by its everyday character in the media. In this regard, Prince (2014, p. 22) argues that,

culture-bound determinations are very important in language-based film theories which rely on arbitrary, relational signifiers. The move to empirical, perceptually based evidence might be unwelcome for linguistically based accounts of pictorial meaning because it can be seen as replacing cultural categories with biological (and therefore ideologically suspect) ones, and because it may suggest that pictorial and linguistic modalities are distinct from each other. With respect to the role of culture in picture perception, some evidence does exist for vary-ing cultural susceptibilities to different visual illusions.

Thus, the deconstruction of iconography on screen and their victims establishes which aspects were present in the social backgrounds and what has been borrowed from fictional twentieth century monsters to create an archetype that is still recurring on screen. In this regard, Prince (2014, p. 22) reiterates that,

Most man-made objects will be judged based on their complexity. A smooth object will be considered to be small, and an object with a lot of detail will typically be assumed to be large unless otherwise indicated. Physical model spaceships may be covered with detailed items such as parts from commercial models. Smooth-

sided physical spaceships may be dubbed in cosmic crud—an affectionate term for a mix of modeling paste that provides a sense of organic texture. These same approaches can be used on CG models. If a CG model lacks detail, it looks either very small or, more likely, fake. Lack of detail and varied texture in CG models is what usually gives them away. Note that in nature even microscopic objects can be very complex.

This notwithstanding, it all depends on how the creator conceives or perceives the images culturally before creation and how the viewer perceives the images created. Representation as earlier pointed, depends on the creator beliefs and this affect how he/she wishes to iconize a character either as natural or idealistic. Likewise, the viewer's acceptance or rejection depends on their beliefs and perception. In this wise, filmic images remain purely denotative since its are presentation of how we perceive nature whether visuals and sounds. Unlike the ideologists, Phenomenologists do not concern themselves with how images are constituted (whether they are made of real or digitally manipulated elements, for example) but rather with what these images reveal of the real world beyond themselves. For an idealist, however, what a film represents depends on, or reveals, the spectator's constructed beliefs or prejudices, but it does not reveal the real world. Therefore, the mode of perception of these characters created with visual effects is not having the ability to identify the distinction between real and digitally manipulated images, rather, it is merely a subjective distinction made by the viewer in revealing his personal way of apprehending an image. It is not a distinction between something real and something constructed simply because for the idealist everything in a film image is constructed. Therefore, the distinction between 'real' and 'digital' is irrelevant or nonexistent; it exists only from the point of view of the realist or the phenomenologist, who seeks the real referent of both the real and the digital image.

In Nollywood, they are replete with magical effects, superimpositions of images, and use eerie synchronous and diegetic sound effects to depict supernatural beings and powers, ghosts, and ritual scenes from Nigerian cultural perspectives. Therefore, CGI is a visual device used in Nollywood narratives for representations of Nigerian cultural ideologies. Nollywood film industry like her counterparts has arguably improved immensely in the use of CGI in film narratives. Whereby CGI characters are easily identified as animated images. This notwithstanding, it still gives an illusion of what it represents which allows the spectator to retain focus on the narrative elements of the film. In this respect, CGI as a device is used in Nollywood films to enhance visual narratives which promotes the thematic preoccupations in the films. In this regard, the magical illusions, supernatural iconography of abstract characters and gory ritual representations seen in almost all the genres of Nollywood these days point to the relevance of visual effects in enhancing storylines.

The use of CGI in films can instigate fear of uncertainty in the audience as the narrative unfolds due to careful composition of images and synchronized sound structure that help to drive then arrative plot. CGI in any genre affects the audience depending on how the filmmaker applies his or her skill in creating suspense, heightened tension, or induce excitement, and intrigues.

The application of CGI in Nollywood is culturally driven. It projects the belief system of a particular people. The recent technological advancement in the world has enhanced believability in various forms of visual effects. This technological advancement has equally enabled flexibility on the design and application of various forms of effects in film production. Thus, designers with the right computer software are able to do creations and modeling of creatures, objects, and compositing of these images into proposed shots cum the distortion of shots from the original footages to achieve a desirable representation that are believable even when it is an imagined image. In this regard, computer generated images refer to specific images infused and alterations in film narrative through the use of computer software.

For effective creation and application of visual and CGI in Nollywood, there is a great need of synergy between the effect designers and the directors. In this regard, Benedetti, Brown, Laramie, Williams, P (2004, p, 47) stated that, "it is uncommon for the effects designer to visit the set and even to provide early drafts of each effect for the director and D.P to use when establishing the composition and flow of the related shots." Thus there is great need for the effect designer to visit the production set to supervise the shot construction. Likewise, during post-production, choosing the right computer tools, determines to a great extent how he actualizes his imaginations to blend with the entire narrative. In both foreign and Nollywood films CGI and visual effects were not present during the production and are mostly generated during post-production. Therefore, the filmmaker and the actors involved have no idea of what the end product would look like during production. For instance, in films like *Mad Max*, *King Authur*, and several other films made use of CGI to create believable effects that would be difficult, impossible and very expensive to build. As such, in the film *Mad Max (the fury road)*, the desert scene with cloudy effects were shot in the day, of which the cloudy areas were manipulated with the aid of CGI. And one of the reasons why *Mad Max* looked convincingly believable is that the CG images were concealed by the desaturation of the cinematography.



### III. CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF VISUAL EFFECTS IN ANDY AMENECHI'S *IGODO*




In the film *Igodo*, the director projected the African identity by adopting the African form of storytelling. This concept was also adopted in foreign made films such as *300 and Merlin*. These films employed African narrative form in different styles. Of which, *Igodo* has the pure African concept of people gathering round the narrator who was invited in the king's quest seeking for solution to the incessant deaths of young wealthy men of the community.

Whereas, *300* had the narrator identified in the film as one of the *300* soldiers who was sent back to narrate the story of how they fought. Whereas, in *Merlin* the narrator’s voice is heard at the background, but the film *Igodo* had the narrator being visible at the beginning of the film and at intervals in the background of the visual story. Moreover, the film *Igodo* employed good use of magical illusion to images that are scary for example when the seven men were crossing the threshold of the Spirit of twins, a sculpted head opens its eye. And there were eyes opening on a hole in one of the branches of the tree. The seven men never noticed these eyes but the viewers are made to see these images through the cut away shots to give the feeling of spirit world, and presence of supernatural beings. And the accompaniment of sound effects that are eerie which gives the feeling of the men entering a dangerous zone. This might lure the viewer to willfully suspend himself into the narrative world stimulating in an audience the eagerness of what is going to happen at this threshold. Thus, filmmakers which include the directors and the animators tend to have conveyed a level of expertise, knowledge, and conform to representing what Nigerian people and Africa at large believe (or not believe) either in abstractions or symbolically about African culture.

Again, when Izu saw the apparition of his mother, photo tricks of the appearance and disappearance of his mother created a ghost movement. This ghostly image showed how affectionate Izu is attached to family which symbolically is his weakness in achieving his task in the journey. This will make viewers immersed in the world of the narrative which offers a hyper-reality of place as pointed out by Hosterman (2013, p. 52) “through that of setting and genre.” He reiterates that, “in regards to setting, this can be actualized through the artistic stylings (visual representation) of the piece. Some backgrounds and locations are depicted with a precise sense of realism and include nominal references to actual places, buildings, or artifacts.” Thus, the ghost effect gives a chilly and scary effect on the viewer. In that respect, CGI in Nollywood movies are representations of Nigerian cultural artifacts based on the Filmmakers’ (Director, Editor, CGI creator, Animator, Sound effects designer) imaginations conceived from their culture and social experiences to promote African cultural identity which hyper-realistic when screened by audience, they resonate with the image and meanings it produced. Thus, compositing of imaginative images in a film narrative provides a visual experience comparable to what we see in the theater. In this regard, Chow ka (2010) state that, “hence real-time control and rendering technologies fulfill what Tillis considers the double meanings of “real time” (p.62).

**IV. PICTORIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF SUPERNATURAL POWER WITH THE USE OF SPECIAL AND VISUAL EFFECTS IN ANDY AMENECHI’S *IGODO***

PLATE 1	VISUAL EFFECT	CRITICAL ANALYSIS
	Eyes opening on carved images, accompanied with evocative sound effects	In the scene where the selected men had crossed the threshold between the land of the living and the dead. Trees and carved images started popping its eyes open and accompanied by an eerie sound to give the feeling of a spirit world
	The appearance of a skull with glowing effects on the eye region which ushers in a human-ghost.	The medium shot of the appearance of a skull fading in a woman symbolizes an evil ghost. This gives a chilly goose bumps when it appeared.

	<p>The appearance of an effigy with cloudy smoke effects surrounding it and an echoing voice calling on Echina.</p>	<p>The close up shot of the appearance of an effigy with cloudy smoke effects surrounding it and an echoing voice calling on Echina. This indicates the ghost of his grandfather. Then we are made to see a jump-cut shot of whisked away with yellowish light effect. The yellowish light effect shows the transition of Echina to the spirit world, and by implication no longer exist among the living.</p>
	<p>The eruption of an elderly man out from a broken calabash which fell as soon as Igodo, Eguna (sam Dede) and Agu entered the cave.</p>	<p>The close up shot of the appearance of an elderly man out from a broken calabash which fell as soon as Igodo, Eguna (sam Dede) and Agu entered the cave. This image symbolizes the supernatural being as custodian of the knife need to be used to cleanse the land.</p>
	<p>Agu being magically electrocuted when he attempted to take the sacred knife.</p>	<p>A medium close-up of Agu trying to collect the sacred knife and being prevented from doing so except with a human which is meant to be done voluntarily.</p>





Light flares effect on Agu's left side of his back .

A medium close-up of Agu hugging his supposed wife in the land of the dead who turn into a masquerade. Light flares effect on Agu's left side of his back combined with a grinning and whizzing sound from the masquerade indicates that the life force of Agu has been taken. This means that his death is eminent and can no longer get to the village.

The filmmakers applied synchronous African instrumental sounds which gives it the feeling of an epic movie. Once the sound track of the film is played the film is identified anywhere. This local instrumental sounds explored in the film were informative. For example, in the beginning of the film when a child is being born the audience is made to have the feeling that the king is in an intense mood. And when the child was born the music lightened up the mood informing us that the king was about to smile. Consequently, whenever the maidens get to the point of trials, the viewer gets the feeling of distinctive eerie sounds that gets the audience heartbeat racing. For example, at the first test where they met the lost souls of the night, Ebube the whirlwind, the designer made us have the scary sound effect of these gods. The sound effects used gives us a pre-information with a resounding strike of a bass guitar indicating danger. This danger effect could have been achieved more if the designer had adapted from natural sound like birds (e.g. owl or bat sounds) and some local instruments like big wooden gong or maracas to create rattling effect, which can be eerie. Moreover, eerie sounds can be generated through some cultural activities for example during *Ekpe* festivals, in the darkest night people get to hear sounds generated through the winding of a half cut ruler stick with a tiny tread attached to it. The sounds generated from this local effect gives the impression that a god is passing –by or talking. On the other hand, it creates an effect of a powerful ghost passing- by. The designer had a good impression of the spirit world and its transition from the human world to the spirit world was well differentiated through the use of echoing of *ogbanje* voices and claps. This scene of the spirit world was differentiated from that of the lost souls. The lost souls had rattling sounds with percussion instruments. The rattling sounds can be blended with a steady heartbeat. This equally puts the viewer in fear and suspense of what is going to happen at that point.

Sound is an integral aspect of film design that aids in complementing and enhancing a visual message. Thus, there is need for video filmmakers to improve on their application of sound in films. For it is through the creative ability of the sound designer and the video film editor to harness quality and believable sound designs in tune with the visual images that the intended messages could be projected in the film when audience is watching. It requires the sound designer to portray what Harry Levin citing Simmons referred to as “all the depths of human soul”. No matter how waived, the sound & image, it must be realistic to the audience. For example, in the film *300* (2007), the sound designer applied appropriate sounds that enhanced the visual interpretations of which in the battle scenes we were made to feel the weight of the spears driven into their opponent's bodies and the squash sounds as the blood gush out from their body; these sound made the audience feel empathy on the dead bodies slaughtered. Moreover, music as a massive leverage used to detect the flow of scenes incites emotion in viewers and builds rapport with fans. In the film *300* (2007), the narrator's voice lifted the scenes, blending with the sorrowful sounds (music) played at the background. Moreover, the erotic sound enhanced the mood of the silent love scene. For instance, the music played during king Leonides love making with his wife is different from the one played when his wife made love to another man in bribery which showed she was not doing it out of her own will.

The Nigerian video films tend to develop good stories, but poor treatment of the filmic sound could be traced to poor manipulation of technical effects and application aesthetics in sound design. In Nigerian comic films they make use of techniques and styles that are salient. These salient techniques enhance the understanding of the comic film, and the way their shots are being stringed together and harnessed with the music and sound effects. For instance, in the film *Aki na Ukwa* (2003) directed by Amayo Uzo Philips, the sound track tells us about the characters Aki and Pawpaw and it sometimes interprets their previous actions or the ones they are about doing. This style of informative

sound track is used in most Nigerian comedy films. In so doing, the filmmakers guide the perception of its viewers to the image and the unfolding events in the comedy films. Apart from the funny characters used in the film the director explored the three auditory elements in the film which are dialogue, music and sound effects. In most Nigerian comic films, characters say some funny statements that trigger laughter in the audience watching. The funny statements are witty statements that sometimes ridicule the world and make the viewer see a reflection of him in a funny way. Moreover, the music and sound effects are used to link the events in the film in order to achieve the basic theme of the film. These techniques are explored in films like *Aki na Ukwa* (2003), *Pampam* (1997), *Spanner 1and2* (2002), *Osuofia in London* (2003), *Mr Ibu* (2003). Music and sound effects were used in these films to indicate the nature of the characters and their actions. It was equally observed that in some of these films the speech and sound effects do not synchronize effectively. Consequently, Nigerian English films tend to use sounds to define a character or group of characters' actions in the films; but the sound tracks of most of these films do not express our culture. The filmmaker either makes use of already made musical songs sung by foreign musician which depicts foreign culture to complement these films. Though some of these films are adaptations of foreign movies, sounds should be able to reflect our culture and the period in which the story is told. Galadima opines that, imagine a film about 1960 Nigeria and at the background you can hear the music of Femi Kuti who may not have started his musical carrier at that time. If we hear the music of IK Dairo, or Bobby Benson fine" (2004: p.142). This implies that sound not only depict the culture but equally state the period of the film. Thus, Nigerian video films should be able to use musical sounds that will express their culture in any film genre. For instance, Jamaican films tend to depict their culture in the soundtracks and musical sounds used in their films.

Akan Ebong (2010: p.2) highlights that,

Nollywood sound design department suffer a great deal of mediocrity. Keenly sitting through the literally mixed baggage task of viewing a typical home video, one would expect to be wrapped in thought provoking moments of vision and sound... the amateurish method of sound designed put on our T.V screen ridiculous sound effects (if there is very) and deficient sound tracks. From start to finish, distorted sounds trail shots and scene and make mice meat of creativity in sound design, thus a supposedly fantastic movies experience become irksome. By global film sound design standards, 'Nollywood' movies appalling take the back seat.

Based on Akpan's view, the film egg of life that seems to have explored good visual effects, has lapses in the area of sound design. If the designer had researched on some other natural and cultural related sound that could aid him in his designs. For example, in the scene where the maidens had met the lost souls, the designer would have mixed the rattling sounds with the crying of owls. This owl effect

would have given a better impression ghost like area. Thus, sound designers in Nigeria are not involved in the film production process on time, therefore, the realization of appropriate and effective sound designer will enhance Nigerian video films to have effective impact to a global standard. This is a challenge which Nigerian filmmakers have met resourcefully in the past (celluloid) and will meet again inevitably in years ahead, if only they will brace up to the challenge.

Most filmmakers are happy to fulfill only the first challenge to make a relevant story relevant, or at least accessible. But the makers of 300, basing their film on the graphic novel by Frank Miller and Lynn Varley, take the second challenge seriously. They take pains to show the strangeness of Sparta at least from our perspective its brutality, its fanatical obsession with warfare and its code of manhood. The movie thrusts us into this bizarre warlike culture and then, just as we are beginning to get our balance, it surprises us by quickly establishing that the Spartan soldiers, in fact, are the good guys. The invading Persians are worse, mythical, cruel and autocratic, with no proto-democratic traditions. The visual and sound elements are not softened for our benefit but are presented with accuracy. As a result, we get to feel every move made by the key actors and what prompted their move. The film 300 was a studio production which has its realistic effects on the film and the audience. The film 300 is like watching marble turn to flesh and blood, and the effect is fascinating. Significantly, this hyper-stylization of 300 is limited to its visuals. The performances are played straight, and this combination of straight performances and stylized visuals produces an uncanny effect. It is as if the movie is reminding us that we are seeing history as it truly appeared, even if this is history as it happened. We are getting it through the gauze of memory, or legend. Whereas in Nigerian films, filmmakers have been able to project some African cultural identities but the area of sound still leaves much to be desired. For instance, in the film *Mountains of evils* it had a good plot which technically was marred due to poor sound synchronization. Sometimes the visual images tend to lack coherence with the sounds synchronized to them. Some of these faults were mainly the problem of the sound designer not being precise. And some are as a result of piracy and much dubbing. Some sounds were able to decode some information about the scene and the theme of the film story

It can be argued that the problem of poor sound design in some Nigerian video films is not a question of capability, but professionalism. This is because in the Nigerian music industry, our indigenous sound engineers are proving their mettle in producing brilliant sound statement. Our indigenous music is now internationally recognized. These Nigerian musical videos are visually interpreted. If some of the sound engineers are trained in the manipulation of sound design in video films that will improve manpower and equally improve sound designs in Nigerian video film. Therefore, administrative authorities between music and Nigerian video film industry should fashion out ways that will encourage feasible and progressive working relationship. Based on all that have been discussed, an

enticing movie cannot be without appropriate sound that is, music and sound effects.

## V. CONCLUSION

Nollywood films portray the belief systems of Nigerians and Africans at large using Visual effects to create images that are far more gory and vivid in details compared to the former style of storytelling. Africans generally believe in a world that is unified between all beings, whether material, spiritual or metaphysical. And the mediators between these worlds are culturally called the chief priests or Dibia in the Igbo speaking part of Nigeria and Babalawo in the Yoruba area of the nation (Uwah 2009, p. 51). These representations are seen in Nollywood film and the forces between these worlds are portrayed as supernatural powers and magic with the aid of CGI and sound effects.

Nollywood films and its CGI, visual effects and application of special effects, appeal to the viewers because the image and sounds are replete with cultural symbols, artifacts which symbolically are representations of cultural, ritual, and supernatural issues familiar to Nigerians and Africans at large. Moreover, the appearance of CGI and visual effect images is determined by how the filmmaker and the designer conceive the idea and also how the viewer perceives visual reality as pointed out by Si Qiao. According to Haynesas cited by Kemwenda, (2007, p.16);

The supernatural appears routinely, as even the most “modernized” of Nigerians may have recourse to “traditional” magic when under the sort of stress to which these melodramatic films routinely subject their protagonist. Witchcraft as a weapon in domestic or neighbourly antagonisms, mysterious fates that can only be elucidated by a diviner, selling one’s soul to a dark occult power for the sake of wealth-all are stock elements in the videos.

Thus the portrayal of these magical and supernatural images x-rays the African beliefs, informing and shaping the viewer’s perception which is constructed and as well constructing their identities.

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#### Filmography

- [50.] Title. *Igodo*(1999). Director: Andy Amenechi and Don Pedro Obaseki, Screen Play: Don Pedro Obaseki & Kabat Esosa Egbon. D.O.P: Jonathan Gbemutor, & Solomon Nwoko. Starring: Pete Edochie, Nobert Young, Sam Dede, Charles Okafor, Obi Madubogwu, Company: Oj Productions.