

# Cinema Occultism as Pseudo-Realism: Using Achille Mbembe's Concept of "The Double" to Rationalize Nollywood Film Audiences' Fetish Mindset

## *Sahte-Gerçekçilik Olarak Sinema Okültizmi: Nollywood Film İzleyicilerinin Fetiş Zihniyetini Achille Mbembe'nin "Çift" Kavramıyla Rasyonalize Etmek*

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### Abstract

Like other forms of fictional productions, Nollywood occult movies are make-believe. Yet, it is not uncommon for African audiences and film directors with religious or fetish mindsets to believe that the content of these occult films is real and imbued with energies that can negatively affect viewers, cast, and crew. Despite their fictional nature, Nollywood audiences' tendency to perceive occult movies as real has received limited scholarly attention. To address this gap, the present study examines Nollywood audiences' superstitious mindset through the lens of Achille Mbembe's concept of "the Double." This paper specifically aims at three main objectives. First, it explores Nollywood's obsession with the occult. Second, it investigates how some audiences and film directors associate Nollywood occultism with realism. Lastly, it seeks to rationalize these viewers' and film directors' fetish dispositions in the light of Mbembe's philosophical concept of "The Double." The paper argues that the inclination of Nollywood audiences and film directors to associate cinematic occultism with realism stems from unscientific and speculative methods. Indeed, the religious and superstitious Nollywood audiences who view occult films as real often rely on intuitive approaches. These audiences tend to use an intertextual understanding to draw connections between the events depicted on screen and occult-related occurrences in real life—events that are not only prevalent but often regarded (whether rightly or questionably) as empirical evidence. In other words, audiences attribute a sense of truth and empirical value to everyday occult-related events. This religious disposition shapes their reception of filmic occultism. Off-screen occultism acts as a meta-influencer, prompting audiences to perceive the experience of filmic occultism as an authentic representation of reality.

**Keywords:** Nollywood video films, realism, occult movies, Achille Mbembe, fetishism

### Öz

Diğer kurgusal yapımlar gibi, Nollywood okült filmleri de hayal ürünüdür. Ancak, dini veya batıl inançlara sahip Afrikalı izleyiciler ve film yönetmenlerinin, bu okült

filmlerin gerçek olduğuna ve izleyiciler, oyuncular ve ekip üzerinde olumsuz etkiler yaratabilecek enerjilerle dolu olduğuna inanması nadir bir durum değildir. Kurgu doğalarına rağmen, Nollywood izleyicilerinin okült filmleri gerçek olarak algılama eğilimi, akademik açıdan sınırlı bir dikkat çekmiştir. Bu boşluğu doldurmak amacıyla, bu çalışma, Nollywood izleyicilerinin batıl inançlı düşünce yapısını Achille Mbembe'nin "Çift" kavramı çerçevesinde incelemektedir. Bu makalenin üç ana amacı bulunmaktadır. İlk olarak, Nollywood'un okült ile olan takıntısını araştırır. İkinci olarak, bazı izleyicilerin ve film yönetmenlerinin Nollywood okültizmini realizmle nasıl ilişkilendirdiğini inceler. Son olarak, bu izleyicilerin ve film yönetmenlerinin batıl eğilimlerini, Mbembe'nin "Çift" adlı felsefi kavramı ışığında anlamlandırmayı hedefler. Makale, Nollywood izleyicilerinin ve film yönetmenlerinin sinematik okültizmi realizmle ilişkilendirme eğiliminin bilimsel olmayan ve spekülasyon yöntemlerinden kaynaklandığını savunmaktadır. Gerçekten de, okült filmleri gerçek olarak gören dindar ve batıl inançlı Nollywood izleyicileri genellikle sezgisel yaklaşımlara dayanır. Bu izleyiciler, ekranda görülen olaylarla gerçek hayatta sıkça rastlanan okült olaylar arasında bağlantılar kurmak için metinlerarası bir anlayış kullanma eğilimindedir—bu olaylar sadece yaygın olmakla kalmaz, aynı zamanda (doğru ya da tartışmalı bir şekilde) ampirik kanıt olarak kabul edilir. Başka bir deyişle, izleyiciler günlük okült olaylarına bir tür doğruluk ve ampirik değer atfeder. Bu dini tutum, filmdeki okültizmin izleyici tarafından alımlanma şeklini şekillendirir. Film dışındaki okültizm, izleyicilerin sinematik okült deneyimini gerçekliğin tantak bir temsili olarak algılamasına neden olan bir meta-etkileyici olarak işlev görür.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Nollywood video filmleri, gerçekçilik, okült filmler, Achille Mbembe, fetişizm

## Introduction

The idea that occult filmmaking inevitably involves real magic and sorcery is shared by many horror film directors. Some of these directors have not only sought the assistance of occult consultants during the production of their films, but have also designed mechanisms intended to neutralize any spiritual energy generated during the production process. A case in point is veteran Nigerian filmmaker and actor Jimoh Aliu (as cited in Asabe, 2019), who, in his films, has made it a principle to avoid the use of what he calls “hard Yoruba incantations”. According to the veteran filmmaker, this type of incantation (often used by Yoruba native priests in South-Eastern Nigeria) is so imbued with great esoteric energy that only initiates dare use them without suffering spiritual consequences. Another case in point is Zoe Lister-Jones, who, in the course of filming her horror classic *The Craft: The Legacy*, sought the assistance of a real witch, Canadian-born Aerin Fogel. *The Craft: The Legacy* reveals a new coven of witches and teases their beautiful and terrifying relationship with magic; the inclusion of a real witch on the set of the movie is both preventive and protective. Lister-Jones (as cited in Chichizola, 2019) described this role: “With scenes where we’re actually practicing rituals that we are practicing them authentically. She has also been helpful in opening and closing circles. Because magic is real, so making sure that everyone feels safe in the spells that they’re casting even though we’re just making a movie.” The occult consultant, Aerin Fogel, also provides explanations that are in line with the idea that occult films have great spiritual complexity. She says:

My role here in the film is to make sure that anything that pertains to something that might be occult is accurate. So any of the spaces where the girls are practicing magic or where they are experimenting with ritual and starting to open up their power a bit. These are all things that I’ve been consulting on to make sure that they are accurate [...] But [I am] also making sure that things are cared for energetically in the film as well. If we are doing spells and rituals and all sorts of practices that are part of the film, magic does not know you are acting. So I have also been doing some work in my own time and with the cast and crew so that they feel supported. Any energetic space that is opened through the practice in the film is also closed at the end of it (as cited in Chichizola, 2019).

Similar perceptions are common among consumers and makers of Nigerian video films (nicknamed Nollywood). In fact, it is common to find audiences who tend to

perceive the off-camera attitudes and personalities of actors based on the roles that the latter play in occult films. If an actor is constantly typecast as voodooist in films, Nigerian/African audiences often automatically associate that actor with voodoo ("How Nigeria...," 2010; "Lights, camera...," 2010). In this context, popular Nollywood stars such as Kanayo O. Kanayo, Yul Edochie, Danguro, and Jimoh Aliu, who are regularly typecast as cultists, are frequently identified with their film roles. It is also not uncommon to find religious leaders who associate some of the cinematic codes used in Nollywood films with esotericism (Meyer, 2015; Hayes, 2008). Thus, Nollywood occult films are often associated with real magic.

The tendency to view occult films as esoteric or real magical experiences is a popular belief not only in religious circles but also within certain intellectual quarters. Consequently, a number of theorists have sought to investigate the veracity of audiences' belief in the realism of cinematic occultism. A panoply of studies has, for instance, been devoted to the presence of occult symbols and other esoteric signs embedded in films, apparently to convey subtle messages and to facilitate the agency of various paranormal entities. The works of Rowe (1974), Turner (1978), Reich (2001), Hanegraaf (2013a; 2013b), Leyten (2015), Dyer (2016), Sullivan (2017), Taberham (2018, 2019), Ko (2018), and Seig (2021), among others, speak volumes about the perceived esoteric nature of (selected) occult movies.

Most studies devoted to the issue of occult films as sites of real magic are exogenous to Africa or Nigeria. Few scholars have explored Nollywood as a case study for occult movies. In alignment with Nollywood audience's tendency to consider occult movies as real, in spite of their fictional nature, these films have not significantly drawn the attention of African film scholars. To address this gap, the present paper explores Nollywood audiences' fetish mindset in the light of Achille Mbembe's concept of "the Double". This paper specifically aims at three main objectives. First, it explores Nollywood's obsession with the occult. Second, it examines how a number of audiences and film directors associate Nollywood occultism with realism. Finally, the paper attempts to rationalize these viewers and film directors' fetish tendencies in the light of Mbembe's theory of "the Double."

## Methodology

This paper is based on a descriptive research model. By definition, descriptive research aims to accurately describe a phenomenon, situation, or population. In the words of Aggarwal and Ranganathan (2019, p. 34), this type of study is "that is designed

to describe the distribution of one or more variables, without regard to any causal or other hypothesis."The descriptive research model is used to determine the characteristics of a population or phenomenon. Consistent with this approach, the present research sought to determine the characteristics of Nollywood audiences' and film directors' fetish mindsets. The paper relies on two data collection methods: Documentary analysis and critical observations. The documentary analysis used in the context of the research involved analyzing secondary sources such as journal articles, book chapters, encyclopedias, newspaper articles and relevant online content. The critical observation part of the methodology involved deploying the senses to collect data. The study also used relevant empirical evidence drawn from recent events and observable trends to support the claims made in the paper.

## Nollywood and the Occult

Nollywood is the nickname given to the Nigerian video-film industry. It was formed in 1992 with the straight-to-video release of Chris Obi Rapu's *Living in Bondage*. For many scholars, the industry encompasses video-film productions originating from the southern part of Nigeria. Such authors differentiate it from Kanywood (the Hausa film industry, named after the northern city of Kano), which is mainly located in Northern Nigeria and primarily depicts various aspects of the Hausa culture. However, in popular imagination within Nigeria, Nollywood is more than a southern Nigerian concept. It includes all video film productions in Nigeria. The film industry is characterized by a remarkable number of nationalistic, regional, and ethnic currents. For instance, Nollywood includes video films produced in both the dominant and minority languages existing in the country. In this regard, there is notable production in Yoruba and Igbo (national languages in Nigeria), as well as in other indigenous languages such as Ibibio, Tiv, and Edo. The regional currents in Nollywood have largely focused on regional concerns and tend to promote the cultures of the zones in which they exist. Despite these regional currents, the Nollywood industry as a whole remains dominated by two predominant Southern Nigerian tribes (namely Yoruba and Igbo) and the northern Nigeria-based Hausa tribe (Afolabi, 2022; Omoki, 2020). This dominance has led critics to believe that a great number, if not the majority, of Nollywood films, reflect the Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba worldviews.

Irrespective of the cultural origins of Nollywood filmmakers, the industry has paid serious attention to the occult. Over the years, themes such as blood money, occultism,

black magic, ritual killing, and spiriticism, among others, have characterized Nollywood films. The film that kick-started the movement *Living in Bondage*, for instance, features black magic and ritual killing as its central themes. The film recounts the story of a man called Andy, who sacrifices his wife to a satanic cult in exchange for economic and social upward mobility. Subsequent films such as *Nneka the Pretty Serpent*, *Karishika*, *Issakaba*, *Night of the Vultures*, and *Festival of Royalties*, among others, have contributed to making the occult a dominant theme in Nollywood. Thus, from its inception, Nollywood has been obsessed with the occult. This obsession has earned it pejorative labels such as "occult economy" and "specter of an occult economy" ("Lights, camera...", 2010; Akande, 2012; Alawode & Fatonji, 2013; Tsaaior, 2018). It has also motivated many critics to tax the industry by selling the idea that a typical Nigerian is a voodooist, ritualist, or cultist (Omoki, 2020; Brown, 2021). These accusations stem partly from the popular belief that audiences in Nigeria, as well as in international spheres, tend to believe the Nollywood depiction of occultism and black magic in Nigeria as a truthful representation of the Nigerian sociocultural and political reality. A one-time Nigerian Minister of Information Frank Nweke emphasized this theory. He argued that "the more people see [continuous depiction of voodoo in Nigerian films], the more they will think that [Nigeria] is all about voodoo practice" (as cited in Ezegwu, Okeckukwu, & Etukudo, 2016, p. 5).

A number of scholars have sought to understand Nollywood filmmakers' obsessions with the occult. Their studies attribute this obsession to a variety of causes, two of which are the extremely religious nature of the Nigerian populace and Nigerian filmmakers' capitalistic approach to cinema (Pype, 2016; Haynes, 2008). In essence, widespread religiosity in Nigeria fuels issues such as occultism, voodoo, juju, and sorcery to profoundly fuel the socio-political discourse and the world views of Nigerians. In a country where high-caliber politicians are often suspected of, or taxed with practicing cultism/occultism (Oviasuji, Ajagun & Isiraoje, 2011; Ellis, 2008; Meyer 1998), successful businessmen are often embroiled in issues of blood money (McNally 2011) and where the news-holes of local tabloids are frequently filled with stories of Pentecostal pastors involved in human sacrifices and occult practices (Samuel, 2016; Akinpelu, 2015), it is logical that black magic and the occult become popular topics for socio-political debate. Such development also makes conditions favorable for the occult to permeate most, if not all, aspects of Nigerian popular culture, including cinema.

Nollywood filmmakers capitalize on the popularity of the occult in Nigeria to construct their films and contribute to social debate. They tap into the socio-political discourse

to make their films authentic representations of the Nigerian experience. This enables them to shape their movies to the tastes of their primary spectators and ultimately make maximum economic profit. In their study on the reasons for Nollywood filmmakers' principal focus on the occult, Azegwu, Nneka, and Etukudo (2016) argue that, like sex, the occult sells Nollywood films. Scholars such as Omoki (2020) have sought to debunk the above theory by arguing that Nollywood's highly grossing films—notably *Wedding Party*, *Wedding Party 2*, *King of Boys*, *Chief Daddy*, and *Sugar Rush*—are romance rather than occult-oriented. To these scholars, the above development was logically supposed to engender a decline in Nollywood obsessive interest in the occult. At first glance, Omoki's argument could be deemed pertinent. However, his logic clearly overlooks the huge commercial success of occult movies such as *Living in Bondage* and *Isakaba*. Thus, it remains undeniable that occult movies are highly sought-after or palatable to Nigerian audiences. In other words, occultism is a powerful draw for local and African spectators. Nollywood filmmakers tend to capitalize on Nigerian society's obsession with and fears/anxiety around the occult to produce films that will enable them to achieve economic success and fame. In addition to this, audiences tend to crave onscreen occults because they are vivid and spell-binding glimpses into the world of the invisible (the spirit world); meanwhile, knowledge of such a world is popularly believed to be power in its self. Haynes (2008, p. 117) notes, for instance, that money rituals (a form of magic enactment) are particularly associated with the Nollywood video culture because "the rituals themselves are inherently shrouded in secrecy, but the video undertake to penetrate this secret realm and reveal stories about it."

Besides the capitalistic tendencies of Nollywood filmmakers, it is important to note the evangelical or moralizing motives that drive many occult film projects undertaken by Christian organizations. Indeed, a considerable number of Nigerian filmmakers are either religious entrepreneurs or Christian entities who regard cinema technology as a strategic tool for evangelism and the promotion of interventionist theology. As Meyer (2015) puts it, for such religious or Christian entities, occult movie making is an excellent medium for revealing the handworks of the spirits of darkness that maliciously and secretly afflict the living and engineer the suffering of mankind. The Liberty Church founder, Helen Ukpabio, on the one hand, and the Mount Zion Church on the other hand, have, for instance, produced occult movies for salvific purposes. These church personalities and movements have, in effect, specialized in the production of Christian films, which are most often occult-oriented in view of reaching both opportunistic and spiritual goals. Exploring the theme of the occult, is for religious entities such as Ukpabio's Liberty Church, a promising strategic action to sensationalize their films, preach specific

Christian values, and ultimately win souls for Christ. This will be addressed in greater detail in subsequent sections.

## Nollywood Audiences' Fetish Mindset

The proliferation of occult narratives in Nigeria fuels the fetish mindsets of many Nollywood filmmakers and audiences. Aligned with this mindset, audiences tend to believe that the content of occult movies is a true or perfect reflection of reality. They also tend to perceive these films as media through which spiritual forces directly and mysteriously affect the lives of the cast, crew, and viewers. For instance, it is common for Nollywood critics, audiences, and filmmakers to overlook the fictional quality of occult films to suggest that the spiritual/magical acts enacted on camera are more than make-believe and still esoteric enough to affect the lives of either the actors or the audiences. In an interview, a Yoruba filmmaker Jimoh Aliu, affirms, for instance, that the use of hard Yoruba incantations<sup>1</sup> in occult films is liable to summon esoteric forces and cause them to manifest in real life during and after film production. Jimoh recounts the real-life misadventures of some actors who were mysteriously attacked by some Yoruba deities during a film rehearsal:

Some theater practitioners came to my house for a rehearsal, and they were mimicking *Esu, Sango, and Ogun*<sup>2</sup>. They started rehearsing and calling those deities, and I said to my wife "something will happen [to these actors] this evening". I added, "If I don't quickly stop them, their calling *Esu* might lead to something terrible for them. My wife made a joke about my apprehension and said that I was exaggerating. She asked: "which *Esu* are you afraid of?" Is it not a play that they are just rehearsing? I retorted "*no wahala*"<sup>3</sup>. [...] by the time they rehearsed for three hours, they started calling me from down stairs to come help them. The situation had become [so] tensed that they had begun to fight and fight each other. It was the spirit they called that appeared to have manifested among them. They never knew the implication would be worse because they were hitting the ground, hitting their heads, and hitting their legs against the ground. It is that incantation [they] called without having the code that made them run into a crisis (as cited in Asabe, 2019, p. 21).

1 The Yoruba people are one of the dominant tribes in Nigeria. Yoruba incantations are part of this tribe's oral poetry. They are used by powerful witchdoctors or priests of the traditional religion under specific circumstances. For the sake of realism, some film directors often use such incantations in their productions.

2 *Esu, Sango, and Ogun* are Yoruba deities.

3 No, wahala is a Nigerian term used to mean no problem.



According to Jimoh, not all Yoruba incantations are suitable for use in cinema production. The film director believes that some actors contract mysterious sicknesses or other misfortunes as retribution for using 'hard' incantations during acting or shooting. He uses personal experience to illustrate the potency of this type of incantation. He confides:

In my younger days when I used to make incantations (Ofo and Ayajo)<sup>4</sup>, I used to withdraw lines (mimicked) in specific parts of the chants. I will say "Lagbaja o! Lagbaja o! Lagbaja o!!!" When he [my fellow actor] responded "Ohoo", I would say "Ipe trunnion ma je, majetaiyemo". This caused the death of three of my children in three days. When that happened to me, [...] I took note. You must learn to remove certain lines from the incantation you are presenting. Don't let it be full (as cited in Asabe, 2019, p. 22).

Similar negative perceptions of filmic occultism have been expressed by Pastor Azuka, the founder of the Pentecostal movement. Azuka claims to have come across many Nollywood actors who provoked spirits by intentionally or unintentionally opening energy spaces during acting or film productions. In an interview with the online tabloid *Spring News*, the man of God claims a number of Nollywood films are shot for esoteric purposes and that some actors have ended up bewitched and dead-on account of the fact that their acting styles opened some energy spaces. He explains that:

The movies that talk about evil forests, ancestral kingdoms, powers, and gods of the land are demonic. These movies are dedicated to satanic kingdoms [...] When producing them, most workers [crew] or actors die during the process. They are used as lambs in sacrifice. The actors or producers [of the films] make huge commitments to lure souls into belonging to occult kingdoms through the films (as cited in Okafor, 2018, p. 19).

It goes without saying that declarations such as those made by Jimoh and Azuka are difficult to prove. Freethinking and atheist critics may even consider these statements delusional. However, these declarations represent manifestations of Nollywood filmmakers' and audiences' fetish mindset. Meyer (1995, 2005, 2015, 2017) explored similar perceptions among some Ghanaian audiences of Nollywood and Ghollywood. Many factors may account for the proliferation of this mindset among Nollywood

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4 Ofo and Ayajo are types of Yoruba incantations.

audiences. This paper uses Achille Mbembe's concept of "the Double" to explain the aforementioned phenomenological issue.

## Nollywood Occult Films as Doubles

This section begins with a brief incursion into Achille Mbembe's concept of "the Double" and proceeds to demonstrate how Mbembe's concept is a good interpretative tool to understand or explain the Nollywood audience's belief in cinematic occultism as reality.

## Achille Mbembe's Conceptualization of the Double

Achille Mbembe's philosophical concept of "the Double" can be viewed as an attempt to explicate what happens to reality when it is projected or screened. The concept is defined in Mbembe's book *Critique de la raison nègre* (*Critique of Black Reason*). According to philosophers, any representation of reality deployed through arts or the media functions like a double reality. He argues in *Critique de la raison negro* that the power or ability to represent reality implies the ability to resort to elements of magic, double-sight, imagination, and even fabrication that involves "clothing the signs with appearances of that thing for which they were a metaphor" (Mbembe, 2013, p. 108). In this framework, a filmic or artistic representation may not be reality itself, as one will find out there, but rather a representation in the form of a double. Far from being a mirror image, this double is a real site for a playful display of transgressions of all sorts which fuels "the hope for an exit from the world as it was and is", so as to "enable a rebirth of life and a continuation of the feast" (Mbembe, 2013, p. 108). Mbembe's concept is a useful interpretative tool for explaining the spiritual complexities and values of Black African occult moviemaking and film-watching as well as the metaphysical phenomena in African audiences' perceptions of these occult films. Several anthropologists and African film scholars have deployed this concept of "the Double" to explain the functions and esthetics of the occult in African films. For instance, Meyer (2015, 2017) draws on Mbembe's reflection to argue that African occult movie makers follow an African politico-esthetic practice of figuration, which guides filmmakers into being less interested in representing or illustrating an outside reality; and being essentially bent on intervening in that reality by doubling it. Using occult movies produced by Ghanaian cineastes as case studies, she explains:

[These] video-movies are situated in this African tradition of figuration that does not aim to represent the world by mirroring it as accurately as possible, but rather to conjure the invisible and unleash creative energies to intervene in the world via a logic of doubling that involves transgression, revelation, and deception. Movies represent in the sense of figuring and figuring out: vision in action. In turn, the images that trace the causes of affliction may be experienced as potentially dangerous and even afflicting themselves, penetrating the imagination of their spectators, and haunting their dreams and daydreams (Meyer 2015, p. 204).

The above suggests that there are different and divergent theories on the spiritual nature and values of cinematic occultism (magic, rituals, witchcraft, voodoo, among others). These theories are based on various methodologies. Although divergent, the theories offer insights into occult filmmaking and watching as esoteric experiences. Of these theories, Achille Mbembe's concept of the Double is relevant when it comes to showing how reality is interpreted vis-à-vis cinema representations of existing things.

### **Occult Nollywood Films as “the Double”**

To make Nigerian audiences believe their narratives, Nollywood occult filmmakers tend to anchor their stories in old religious narratives and popular myths. They also draw upon true and current occult-related happenings in Nigeria. As previously mentioned, Nigerian newspapers and other elite media outlets regularly publish stories of influential politicians, businessmen, and religious figures who allegedly deploy black magic or gruesome occult practices to achieve success (Samuel, 2016; Akinpelu, 2015; McNally, 2011; Oviasuji, Ajagun, & Isiraojie, 2011). Charismatic and revival Pentecostal movements, particularly in the south, spread similar narratives around the ubiquity of occultism in the country (Okene, 2020; Okafor, 2018) (see Image 1). These popular media and church messages, coupled with many other factors, make the occult not only a perceived reality but also the subject of ubiquitous representations in popular culture. Nollywood films, like other forms of popular culture, are therefore, in some ways, a double layering of religious myths, narratives, and occult-related happenings that are prevalent in Nigerian society.



**Image 1:** Ad Copy selling a religious program against witchcraft

Audiences tend to deploy intertextual understanding to establish links between what they see on screen or in films and occult-related events that are not only rampant but often considered (rightly or questionably) empirical evidence. In other words, audiences attach a degree of truth and empirical value to everyday occult-related events. This gullibility and disposition shape their reception of filmic occultism. Off-screen occultism serves as a meta-influencer that prompts audiences to perceive the occult filmic experience as a true representation of reality.

The observation made above can be well illustrated by the fact that the contents of many Nollywood occult films tend to be in line with the perceived eyewitness accounts of influential spiritual leaders or religious organizations operating in Nigeria. These films recreate and sometimes reenact experiences that are perceived as real-life events. For instance, when a viewer watches a shrine or bloody sacrifice scene in a Nollywood occult film, they do so, with the understanding that people in real life have performed or attended such spiritual/occult rituals. Through this lens, the screening strategy of Nollywood occult movie makers enables a situation where audiences watch the occult movie but think about the real-life events for which the occult movie is a metaphor. Thus, the occult movie functions as a double agent of real life and occult-related happenings.

In some instances, occult films are even made to technically transcend the role of a double for purported real black magic-related events. This happens especially in situations where the occult film functions as a transmedium and has strong meta- or intertextual relationships with some earlier published 'true' narratives. A good example is the ensemble of religious films released by some revivalist religious leaders for the

purpose of evangelization and soul-winning. The aforementioned films usually tend to be filmic versions or extensions of narratives previously published in purportedly true resurrection stories. Liberty Church founder Helen Ukpabio (who is also a filmmaker) has produced various occult films that she claims are based on her earlier accounts of the spirit world in resurrection stories that she published prior to the release of the films.

In fact, the church leader published *The Seat of Satan Exposed*, a book in which she provides an eyewitness description of Satan's kingdom (and the spirit world). In this publication, she also claims to expose some satanic circles to which influential Nigerian personalities belong. She further asserts that little children can be initiated into the coven of witches and made by satanic forces to be spiritually and mortally dangerous. In her words, "If a child under the age of two screams in the night, cries and is always feverish with deteriorating health he or she is a servant of Satan." This statement and similar declarations are also contained in her book *Unveiling the Mysteries of Witchcraft*. These statements have earned her the sobriquet of a witch-hunter campaigning against children (Inekwere, 2015).

Many of the occult practices that the church founder exposes in her books are portrayed in several video films she produced as part of her evangelical mantra. For example, her film titled *End of the Wicked* (1999) technically functions as an extension of *The Seat of Satan Exposed* and *Unveiling the Mysteries of Witchcraft*. In this occult/horror film, Ukpabio uses cinematic codes to reiterate claims about sorcery practice by children (see Image 2). She represents occult acts performed in the spirit world by this category of people and suggests that they (little children) are responsible for many tragic events, including deaths, in Nigerian families. In *End of the Wicked*, Ukpabio repeats many occult traditions that she mentioned earlier in her book. This trans-media situation coupled with the inter-textual relation between her occult film and her books (believed to contain eyewitness testimonials about the invisible world) imbues her film with significant 'credibility'. Audiences who have read and trust the contents of her two books are likely to view the depiction of children's sorcery in *End of the Wicked* as true. Indeed, *End of the Wicked* is popularly (but arguably) regarded as one of the influences behind the maltreatment of children believed to be sorcerers in some southern Nigerian cities.



**Image 2:** In this shot extracted from *End of the Wicked*, Teco Benson illustrates how sorcerers eat their human victims.

The film (*End of the Wicked*) was even banned by the Nigerian government, on the grounds that it encourages and has been instigating the maltreatment of children perceived as witches in some southern Nigerian homes (Moyo & Meer, 2014). In a paper devoted to religious institutions' participation in fueling the myth of "devil's children" (children accused of witchcraft) in southern Nigeria, Ngbea (2019) highlights Ukpabio's defense in the face of criticism over the effects of her films on Nigerian audiences' beliefs and attitudes toward children's sorcery. He writes:

Ukpabio spoke in her own defense saying that she cannot be blamed for the problem that arose nine years after the opening of her movie. She said that she was only doing her God-given work, which is delivering people from the bondage of witchcraft, and that her movies are only a pointer to the reality that some children are witches and transfer this to greedy ones by offering them edibles (Ngbea, 2019, p. 76).

Like Ukpabio, other Pentecostal and charismatic church leaders have produced and circulated books, pamphlets, and media content—notably Emmanuel Eni's *Delivered from the Powers of Darkness*—in which they recount their years of servitude in the

underworld. In the course of revealing their experiences, these religious witnesses graphically describe or “expose” satanic rituals, doctrines, and circles. For the sake of authenticity and viewers’ credibility, many Nollywood occult film makers have sought to tailor their depictions of the occult to the theories of the above religious witnesses and ecclesiastic figures. This alignment makes audiences view many of the depictions of the occult as a double representation of what is purported in religious leaders’ publications.

## Conclusion

Occult films are make-believe. Yet audiences with religious or fetish mindsets tend to view them as real and spiritually potent forces. This paper has attempted to examine this phenomenon in the light of Achille Mbembe’s concept of “the Double,” which explicates what happens to reality when it is projected or screened. It has shown how the occult is a popular theme in Nollywood films and attributed this popularity to the recrudescence of black magic narratives, magical beliefs, and myths in Nigerian society. It also linked this trend to the religiosity that prevails in the country. The paper then illustrated Nollywood audiences’ fetish mindset, underscoring the link between this mindset and certain screening styles and cinematic codes in Nollywood.

This paper argued that the associations between cinema occultism and realism follow from unscientific and speculative methods. Indeed, the religious and superstitious Nollywood audiences who view occult films as real, visibly, hinge on intuitive approaches or Christian esotericism to illustrate the spiritually harmful nature of occult drama. The methods used by these audiences fall outside the scope of natural science principles and theories. These methods are paranormal in themselves, which make their positions controversial (and perhaps doubtful) yet interesting. However, the results of this study reveal that film remains a vital channel for the deployment and sharing of imaginaries that intersect with reality. For a number of Africans, occult films do not always represent reality directly experienced; however, they intersect with reality and intervene in it by doubling it.

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