



LASU JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES (LASUJOH)

VOL. 15, 2021 EDITION | ISSN: 978-274-384-4

A publication of:
Faculty of Arts
Lagos State University, Ojo
Lagos, Nigeria.
Email: dean-arts@lasu.edu.ng

LASU Journal of Humanities (LASUJOH)

Volume 15, 2021 Edition

© 2021 Faculty of Arts
Lagos State University, Ojo
Lagos, Nigeria

ISSN: 978-274-384-4

Produced by

FREE ENTERPRISE PUBLISHERS LAGOS

HEAD OFFICE: 50 Thomas Salako Street, Ogbalikeja, Lagos.

☎+234.814.1211.670.✉free.ent.publishers@gmail.com

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Journal Address: LASU Journal of Humanities
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Contents

1	Democracy and Good Governance in Africa: Beyond the Myths and Illusions —Amosu, Kehinde Olorunwa	1
2	Taxonomy of Sound in Islamic Religious Practice among the Ansar-ud-Deen Society of Nigeria—Yekini-Ajenifuja, Isaac, PhD	10
3	Osofisan's Mythopoetic Reimaginings of the Gods and its Implications for Contemporary Postcolonial Discourse—Afolayan, Bosede Funke	20
4	On the Socially Constructed Racial Categories of "White" and "Black": An Abolitionist's Case—Afisi, Oseni Taiwo & Macaulay-Adeyelure, Olawunmi	33
5	Phoneme /L/ and its Allophones in the Southeast Yorùbá: An Optimality Theory Account —Adeniyi, Sakiru	43
6	Influence of Family Communication on Adolescent Students' Learning Processes in Lagos, Nigeria—Thanny, Noeem Taiwo & Baruwa, Olaide Abibat	54
7	The Yoruba Film as an Exploration of Yoruba Culture, Worlds of the Living, the Dead and the Yet Unborn—Amore, Kehinde P., PhD, Amusan, Kayode V. & Makinde, S. Olarenwaju	65
8	Christianity and Child Training: An Appraisal of Proverbs 22:6 —Komolafe, Hezekiah Deji, PhD	75
9	Dayo Oyedun's Compositional Style: An Analysis of <i>Cathedral Anthem I</i> —Bello, Abayomi Omotoyosi, PhD	87
10	Social Security: A Panacea for the Socioeconomic Challenges in Postcolonial Nigeria —Saibu, Israel Abayomi	95
11	China through the Lens of Nigerian Media—Olawuyi, Ebenezer Adebisi	107
12	Àmúlò Qrò Àwàdà nínú isé Adébáyò Fálétí—Àkànmú, Dayò PhD	128
13	Politique, Enseignement et Statut du Français au Nigéria : Trace d'une Contrainte Traductique—Thomas, Razaq, PhD	140
14	Vision Heroique de Salimata dans les Soleils des Independances d'Ahmadou Kourouma —Musa, Haruna	150
15	قضية الطبع والصنعة في ضوء النقد الأدبي: دراسة موسعة —Animashaun, Maruf	160
16	التعابير اليورباوية المتداولة من السياق القرآني: دراسة تناصية —Oniyide, Daud	178

7

The Yoruba Film as an Exploration of Yoruba Culture, Worlds of the Living, the Dead and the Yet Unborn

Amore, Kehinde P., PhD, Amusan, Kayode V. & Makinde, S. Olarenwaju

Abstract

The quality of films produced from the girdle of the Yorùbá film industry attests to the fact that the Yoruba is rich in culture. Various thematic preoccupations of the films produced in the Yorùbá film industries have greatly portrayed the nitty-gritty of the Yorùbá culture and tradition. This paper seeks to examine the prolific edifice of the Yorùbá film as it explores various aspects of her traditions and culture capturing the Yorùbá mind, worlds of the living, the dead and the yet unborn. To this effect, this study uses Agenda settings and cultivation theory as the model for this research. This study examined three Yorùbá films produced and directed by Tunde Kelani. They are Saworoide, Agogo Èwo, and Arugbá. The three Nollywood movies were analysed using content analysis with respect to how they have thematized the uniqueness of the Yorùbá culture by speaking the mind of a typical Yorùbá person as it strongly upholds and believes in supernaturalism and divinations in Yorùbá cosmos. Findings confirmed it to us that, the variation in the attitude and reaction of Yorùbá film audience is informed by perception, preference and taste owing to exposure and experience of the African people through multi-cultural purposes and diversification. The movies accentuate the importance of culture and morals, especially by drawing a connection between divinity and purity. It also shows the potencies in Africans to use traditional means to deal with contemporary issues. The paper concluded that there should be great harmony between the metaphysical or supernatural world and the physical world, as portrayed in Yorùbá films for cultural nationalism and place in the global film industry.

Keywords: *Yoruba film, Yoruba culture, the Yoruba world*

Introduction

THE THEMATIC PREOCCUPATION OF THE YORÙBÁ NOLLYWOOD INDUSTRY IS A reflection of the traditional values and cultural embellishment as well as the sociological and metaphysical relevance of the performance to the Yorùbá identity in revealing their culture, worlds of the living, the dead and yet unborn. The Yorùbá culture has been termed one of the richest in terms of alternating between the natural world and the supernatural world. The Yorùbá mind has certain configuration that is bent to the workings of the metaphysical world. Several researches have proven the fact that the Yorùbá people admit that the physical world is controlled by the spirit world. For instance, Sótúnwà (2008) submits that the death of anyone is predestined and agreed upon by the forces of the underworld. He also states that the creation of the world was ordered by Olódùmáre through "Qbàtálá," whom "Olódùmáre" sent with a couch of a snail filled with sand to fill the earth which was filled with water. While this belief is contrary to that of the Biblical account of creation of the earth, virtually every Yorùbá person holds tight to this great belief as they preach it at every point in time.

Sequel to this, the Yorùbá film industry, being an embodiment of like-minds with common interest of promoting and preserving the Yoruba culture, has revealed this in mostly every single hit of her film production. Hence, the question of how effective Yorùbá Nollywood has been able to continuously and perpetually propagate the Yorùbá culture, worlds of the living, the dead and yet unborn as cultural themes and necessities is the focus of this study. It sets out basic parameters for investigation by analyzing data as to rightly seek answers to the questions of what and how the Yorùbá culture and traditions are passed across. Three Yorùbá Nollywood films were selected. This paper focuses on the legendary works of the renowned producer and director: Tunde Kelani. The movies are *Saworoide* (Brass Bells) (1999), *Agogo Èwò* (Gong of Taboo) (2002), and *Arugbá* (Sacrificial Rites Carrier) (2010). These films are analyzed as relevant pieces that portray the content of this paper.

As a matter of fact, previous works that explored related issue have lacked adequacy in the aspects of integral correlation and hybridity between visualizing the real and the unreal worlds. Thus, this research aims at capturing the uniqueness of Yorùbá Nollywood movies as viable tools which capture both the physical and the metaphysical aspects of the Yorùbá cosmology. The significance of popular literature and rich performance culture through ritualization of psychocosmic experience and festival observances cannot be ignored in the evolution, growth and development of what is known today as the Yoruba film industry.

The producers of folkloric and epic Nollywood films represent Yorùbá cosmology as evident in the content of those films. Though, some of the film makers do not have adequate knowledge and understanding of the Yoruba traditional thought pattern, belief system and religious practices and to this end, they muddle up points and facts about the Yorùbá culture to an extent

of confusing an alien about the culture. The truth is that Yoruba cosmos is characterized by people who believe in divinations, terrestrial powers (*ayé*), supernaturalism, and life after death. Although, some of these producers present *ayé* as malevolent with no positive side, the earliest believers and worshippers of these powers strongly believe they are meant for good and not the other way around. But modernity and civilization have subjected many of these beliefs into naught. In the Yorùbá cosmology, *ayé* (the terrestrial power) is both malevolent and benevolent and for these reasons the *iya ayé* (mothers of the earth) or witches are categorized into three colors of black, red and white. In the Yoruba traditional thought, black and red witches are notorious for their wickedness while the white witches are appreciated for their kindness towards whoever deserves their favour. Unfortunately, some film makers [un]consciously misrepresent these values of Yoruba cosmology owing to their indoctrination in the values of modern religions (Christianity and Islam) and the Europeanization of Yoruba society and thought pattern.

With the journey so far, the Yoruba film industry has harvested from different genres: history; adventure (to the spirit world) and romance; thriller; comedy and evangelicalism, etc. These genres are products of creativity, literary/filmic imagination, adaptation and an exploration of Yoruba culture, worlds of the living, the dead and yet unborn (Sèsan, 2011).

The Yoruba film industry has harvested from the supernatural genre. History, naturally, emerges as a major site for cultural contestation as the sense of history of a people shapes their sense of accomplishment and supernaturalism (Olúsolá, 1981). Yorùbá filmmakers have utilized the blend in stories of *historical and supernatural* personages, events and actions in their movies. Among the films in this category are: *Efúnṣetán Antíwúrà*, *Ògbórí Elémóshó*, *Lísàbí Agbòngbò* *Àkàlà*, *Bashorun Gáà*, *Ogun Ìdàhòmì*, *Ogun Àgbékoyà*, and *Ògúnmólá: Bashorun Ibàdàn*. The list is long and exhaustive. This paper raises the question of how these filmmakers do “objectively” and appropriately portray the workings of the metaphysical worlds in their films? In the opinion of this paper, filmic imagination (the artistic/creative elements of the filmmaking process) impacts on objective historical documentation in film because “however loyal the film might seek to remain to history, the entertainment requirement must be inevitably fulfilled; otherwise, the film may be unable to retain the attention of its audience (Ògúnbiyí, 1981). In the end, these filmmakers engage in mindless adulteration and distortion of history for commercial benefits.

Adventure film is another genre of Yorùbá films and this genre is very common in the Yorùbá film industry portraying the relationship or the interface between the workings of the physical worlds of the living and that of the unknown. The expectation of adventure film is to teach moral in a lighter mood and with some tension. It is quite unfortunate that adventure genre of the Yorùbá film industry focuses much on the great or heroic sojourn to the world of no-return with little or no moral. Yoruba actors/actresses and script writers exaggerate action and/or

engage in improbable actions to the point of making it a fairy tale- “a dramatic piece containing horrific contents and depending less on plot and character than on improbable situations, the suspense arising from gross incongruities (Nwosu, Onwukwe & Okugo, 2013). It is not uncommon in the adventure genre of Yoruba films to see the main character embark on a journey to the world of his ancestors as he depends solely on his charms and several traditional incantations and divination. It is also common in Yorùbá films that the main characters are victims of heroic events which may either come in their favour or come against their fortune. Among the adventure genre of Yoruba films are *Ogbóri Elémósho*, *Ogun Idáhòmì*, etc.

Taking a look at the comedy genre, for instance, only few of the films teach moral. For instance, *Opá Kan* teaches the moral that it is always good to guide and protect the gift and talent that an individual is endowed with by Almighty God. *Mùnirù ati Ámbàlí*, on the other hand teaches the moral that no matter how difficult a condition is, prayer changes everything. Love and romance genre of Yorùbá films usually shows the trial and travail of love. It is usually premised upon the fact that nothing good in life comes easily. Films in this category include: *Máláíkà*; *Ako Igbin*; *Igba n'Bajo*; *Abeni*; *Adeyanju* and *Temini Nkem*. Some of these films reflect the challenges that one or both lover[s] face. In the end, they both come out victorious or one of them is lost out in the struggle. For instance, Akanni and Abeni are victorious at the end of *Abeni*. In *Ako Igbin*, Tomiwa and his lover also came out victorious. Thriller is yet another genre that is common in the Yoruba film industry. Films in this category include *Atopinpin*, *Sínmisólá Otelemúyé*, *Káni*, *Omótárá Johnson*, and *Onà Ábáyo*.

Most other films that capture the doings of worldly events treat the themes of crime, repentance, vengeance and punishment. They are meant to teach individuals that crime does not pay and that no criminal can go unpunished. In some instances, the actions in thriller films are overplayed to the point of becoming melodramatic, in which “the object is to keep the audience thrilled by the arousal anyhow of strong feelings of pity, honor, or joy” (Nwosu, Onwukwe & Okugo, 2013). Through the exploration of themes and subject matter, most of these thrillers are tragic. The Yoruba film industry has also has the evangelical genre. These films are meant to teach religious morals among the audience. The large volumes of Yorùbá films in the evangelical genre are produced by religious groups-Christianity and Islam. From the Christian axis, the contributions of Mount Zion and Kay-Technical cannot be ignored. From the axis of Islam, the contribution of Association of Muslim Theater Artistes of Nigeria (AMTAN) cannot be ignored. The essence of evangelical films is to fill the moral gap of the “conventional films” (produced with some level of secularity). Some films in this category are *Ápótí érí*, *Agbára Nlá*, *Ogun Átiléwá* and *Ábòdè Mecca Mi*.

This argument does not foreclose the involvement of producers of secular films in the production of evangelical films. A good example of this is seen in the production of *Àsà*– the story of a young man who turns good after abandoning

his diabolical ways past. Despite the genres of Yorùbá films discussed here, this paper acknowledges that the Yorùbá film industry has great potency of capturing some other genres which unveils the totality of the Yoruba culture.

Theoretical Framework

This study is situated within the framework of Agenda Setting and Cultivation theories. Through the explanation of agenda setting theory offered by McCombs and Shaw (1972) which Folárin (1998) summarizes as the mass media predetermine the issues that are regarded as important at a given time and in a given society. They also have the power to determine what people are thinking about without having the power to determine what they actually think. The agenda setting theory is a theory that discusses on how the mass media influences in making a certain issue as a public agenda. The public agenda is the main focus or prime issue which the members of the society or public concern about.

The present study therefore, focuses on examining Nigerian Yoruba Nollywood's projection of culture and its practices to in the industry. This is against the backdrop of the fact that Yoruba Nollywood, as a mass medium has the capacity to set cultural agenda for its entire audience by what they chose to showcase, how they showcase them and its cultural implications on the audience.

Methodology

This study appreciates both qualitative and quantitative secondary data and evaluate such information accordingly to answer the research questions and aiming at achieving the objectives of this study. Three home video films were carefully selected through purposive sampling method and watched from televised video of the television stations in Africa Magic (a cable network station). They are Tunde Kelani's *Saworoide (Brass Bells)* (1999) *Agogo Èwò (Gong of Taboo)* (2002), and *Arugbá (Sacrificial Rites Carrier)* (2010). In acquiring the relevant information and knowledge for this study, secondary data is mainly used and obtained from library research. Additionally, a survey method is used in finding the latest articles and researches from the available online databases from the internet.

The study specifically explained the selected films in details (for the readers to easily locate the film and watch for further details). The research method for analyzing data for the study was content analysis. They were analyzed by the researchers with respect to how they have been able to explore the Yorùbá mind, worlds of the living, the dead and yet unborn.

Film Critique

The three films assessed are "films having a Yorùbá worldview with religious and metaphysical imaginings; drawing their compositional elements from the past and present realities of the Yorùbá universe; folklore, mode of governance, family institution and so on" (Àkànle: 2011). The films are expected to "fall within the purview of Yoruba video film genre ... to interrogate ... Yorùbá history, culture,

religion, politics and social order" (Àkànlé, 2011). As it were, the three films represented all these and explored the highly esteemed Yorùbá social order, moral and culture.

Saworoidé

Saworoidé is set against the backdrop of a community seeking to create checks and balances in order to prevent the excesses of the king and his aides. It is the story of the pact between Jogbo, an ancient community, and the kings that rule over it. King Lépité (Kólà Oyéwò) refused to partake in some traditional rites at his ascension because he knew he would not be able to indulge in corrupt practices if he did. He muzzles all opposition into submission and induces his chiefs with money, all in a bid for a sit-tight kingship. *Saworoidé* the insignia of authority in Jogbo, eventually led to the dethronement of Lápíté. Tunde Kelani's creative interpretation shows oath-taking as an agency of accountability and good governance.

In some detail, *Saworoidé* is a story of a small town called Jogbo, whose kings were, for many years, sworn to service rather than the life of luxury that kings desire, bound by a pact and linked to a brass crown (*adé-ídé*) and the drum of brass bells (the titular *Saworoidé*). Lápíté suddenly ascends the throne and decides he'd rather make money than serve. His recklessness moves him to murder all his prospective contenders, trade with the homegrown trees and have the earnings transferred to a foreign account while the town remains in penury. Just before he ascends the throne, Lápíté marries Tinúolá, who is already pregnant with another man's child but hides it from him, and he abandons his former wife because according to him, she is a fat pig unfit for the palace.

In a quest to get their town back from the hands of the fraudulent king, journalists and a team of vibrant youths led by Fádítá, make several attempts to be heard but get rebuffed, in fact some ended up killed or thrown in jail. They decide to employ violence, and are sponsored by a concerned member of the logging merchants to purchase ammunition.

On the other hand is Adébólá, the only child of Adébomí, the rightful heir to the throne whose father was killed by Lápíté. He is raised by Ayángalú, the drummer, after his parents' demise, and is taught all he needs to know about his royal rights. He befriends Arapa, the king's supposed daughter when he returns to Jogbo under a pseudonym: Áréséjébàtà. When he reveals his real identity under the influence of the bottle, Lápíté plots to murder him, but he is overthrown by Lágàta, a military man who is equally corrupt and greedy for gain. Still battling the claws of bad leadership, the youth turn to Amawomárò, the chief priest for help, and he works with the drummer to get the *Saworoidé* played on the day of his coronation, which causes Lágàta to die mysteriously. Adébólá becomes king eventually. The play ultimately celebrates aspects of African history and culture and tries to enlighten people about these.

Agogo Èwo

The movie tells the tale of a simple farmer, Adébósípò (Déjúmò Lewis) who is appointed king by corrupt tribal chiefs who expect him to uphold the status quo. Instead he undertakes sweeping reforms that involve the title object, a combination of gong and drinking vessel that works like a truth serum.

When a clique of venal chiefs offers the throne to their former crony, an ex-police officer, ostensibly to implement “reform” (i.e. insure the uninterrupted flow of cash into their pockets), Adébósípò (Déjúmò Lewis) takes them for their word, much to the stupefaction of his wife and his people. While real reformers grow impatient and entrenched political plot and scheme, Adébósípò reinstates the tribal gong which kills officials who do not confess their crimes. Climax finds appropriately color-coded gangs of youths, in the pay of separate warring factions, recognizing their commonality and finally embracing, leaving corrupt power mongers to writhe in agony to the beat of the gong.

Arugbá

Arugbá discusses the importance of the preparations made for a traditional ritual in which a young virgin carries a sacrificial calabash. Adétutù is the beautiful young priestess chosen by the oracle to carry the sacred calabash at the Qsun Òsogbo festival. The calabash can only be carried by a virgin, and Adétutù being abducted by three men, her chastity and suitability as the chosen one is questioned.

Data Analysis

The selected Yorùbá films through their analysis have succeeded in portraying and showcasing the Yoruba culture, and the supernaturalism of the Yorùbá worldview.

With the establishment of an environment of cultural embellishment and divination, as with *Jogbo* in *Saworoide* and *Agogo Èwo*, Kelani’s exhortatory devices are evident early in the narrative. After introducing the king, chiefs, and palace milieu, a scene in which a *babaléwo*, or Ifá priest seeks to ascertain the location of allegedly stolen beads and he requires a virgin to read the sand in his divination tray, when several of the mothers volunteer their daughters, who are all reluctant and thus reveal they are not virgins.

As for *Saworoide*, apart from the fact that it paid attention to detail cultural embellishments, or the intermittent use of sweet-sounding songs and chants to drive points home, *Saworoide* thrives on very witty performances from its lead characters. It is also a star-studded movie, laden with many legendary Yoruba film actors. Kólá Oyèwò, who seems to appear the most, brings his A-game with every scene, portraying his villainousness with such finesse. Léré Páímó’s and Lárìndé Akínleyé’s performances as greedy eye-servicing chiefs are stellar, and just when you think you’ve seen all there is to it, Adébáyò Fálétí hits the roof with his sarcastic and proverbial songs, keeping your eyes and ears fastened to the screen.

Kèlání works emphasized how music and dance often unconsciously can be integrated into promoting the Yorùbá culture, likely due to the regularity and efficacy of such practices. In addition, in order to target the youth audiences which are such a crucial demography for many of his exhortations, Kèlání further stressed the importance of not only including music, but blending traditional and contemporary trends. In fact, Kelani even mentioned discussion of an *Arugbá* soundtrack, as released with the famous plays of Hubert Ogúndé with the Yoruba in *Saworoidé*. Kèlání elaborated on the importance of the talking drum in society, discussing the notion of the “educated Yorùbá” who understands “Yoruba drum vocabulary” and has the ability to decipher different drum tones among the báta drum family. He described the *iyá-ilu*, the mother drum; the *itólele* or father drum, and their baby or Okónkolo, each which produces a variety of distinctive polyrhythmic tones. Essentially, Kèlání referred to the Yorùbá talking drums as “absolutely important, as the culture itself.” In fact, Kèlání and the scriptwriter Akínwùmí Ìshòlá initially conceived of the film as a documentary about Lásí Ayányemí, a master báta drummer, dwelling in the Yoruba village of Lábodé near Ibadan; however, due to Ayányemí’s death before Kèlání was even able to meet the drummer, eventually led the film to become a fiction, albeit one which draws from contemporary society.

Saworoidé also shines the torch on the splendor of tradition, the myth of folklore and the allure of African art in a manner that is not forced or overly mysterious. It is able to merge a broad spectrum of Yorùbá culture into one hour forty-five minutes without choking us or rendering us confused and scrambling for meanings in a mess. The writer is patient with the script and intense too, leaving no evident loose ends. And that's just swell!

In *Agogo Èwø*, a whole lot of factors interplay in this movie to show the role orality plays in forging an indigenous film practice with recognizable universal dimension. Kèlání aims to speak through Yorùbá mediated experiences, through recognizable memory, and through metaphysics. *Agogo Èwø*, a follow-up to *Saworoidé*, shows how a group of corrupt chiefs offered the throne to Adébòsípò (Déjúmò Lewis) in the hope that it would be business as usual. There is a captivating interplay of proverbs, folklores, and riddles in the movie. The metaphor of *Agogo Èwø* is extensive: It is a symbol of legitimacy and authority, a weapon against authoritarianism and symbol of democracy. This is the story of the pact between an ancient community and the kings that ruled over it. The ancient community which the viewer will be introduced to throughout the film is Jogbo, defined by Kèlání as a “fictitious entity,” although he continued, “Nigeria is thinly disguised as Jogbo. Regardless of the exact location at this point, the first images importantly highlight the interplay of many elements of the story: authentic imagery, sound as a crucial communicative channel, a foundation of oral storytelling, social awareness and the necessity of community interaction, and the overall importance of drumming throughout the narrative. As the elder further explains the ritual, a sophisticatedly edited montage develops as a means

to illustrate that first a brass crown, jingle bells, drum, and small container must be created as part of this process and the production of each is very briefly introduced. The brass bells are fastened to the top of the drum, the materials are brought to an Ifá priest, and he provides a set of instructions which the audience witnesses during the montage: one half of the “agbáarin seed” will be placed in the king’s crown and the other in the drum; prescribed leaves will be burnt in the pot and that powdered ash transferred to the small container; an incision made on Àyángalú, as well as all Jogbo kings in the future; the powder is rubbed into Àyángalú’s wound; and the pot previously containing the leaves and ash is smashed on. Altogether the ceremonial procedure acts as an oath binding the people, the king, and the drummers of Jogbo. He further expounds how the film’s main action initially comprised a scenario in which this pact is challenged and the narrative demonstrates how “life is normal until somebody tries not to go through the constitution.” Following the establishment of this custom, the camera frames the old man in a close-up as he lies on the same bed as the opening and speaks the word Saworoidé before expectedly passing as the camera zooms out of his face and smoothly dissolves into the king’s memorial service in the next scene.

Arugbá’s exhibition capitalizes on the illumination of the historical culture of the Yoruba tradition and popularity of Yoruba filmmakers using video projectors for public screening practiced. *Arugbá* depicts a society deeply entangled in corruption. Interwoven with themes of balance, love, loyalty, and loss, her tale also explores issues of governance, political corruption, HIV/AIDS and the influence of modernity over convention, all within the context of a culture that is rich with traditional values yet marred by traditional viewpoints.

To rid the society of corruption and its attendant vices, there had to be a sacrifice to Osun, the river goddess and the task of carrying the sacrifice fell on Adétutù (Bùkólá Awóyemí). The movie accentuates the importance of culture and morals, especially by drawing a connection between virginity and purity. It also shows the potency in Africans to use traditional means to deal with contemporary issues.

Scene selections

1. The Ifa priest consulting the oracle and picking Adétutù as the sacrifice carrier.
2. Christianity and Islam coexist with indigenous religions in Yoruba land. For example, a Cherubim and Seraphim church preacher and a Muslim cleric are seen in the movie preaching in the public space without being harassed.

Conclusion

This study concerned with an exploration of Yorùbá culture, worlds of the living, the dead and yet unborn, has critically investigated relevant aspects of the issues discussed with respect to *Saworoidé*, *Agogo Èwø* and *Arugbá*. These movies have

thematized the totality of the Yorùbá mind and culture towards handling salient cultural issues in both the imaginary world and the real world. They have also epitomized the world of animation, world of the living, the dead and the yet unborn.

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