

# RE-ENGINEERING YORUBA TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN VIDEO FILMS PRODUCTION

*Oyebisi Omolasoye*  
*Department of Yoruba,*  
*Federal College of Education,*  
*Okene.*

## **Abstract**

*Attempt was made to highlight what re-engineering connotes and what embodiment of Yoruba traditional religion depicts. In order to authenticate the crux of the discussion, the randomly selected samples were Yoruba films produced from 1990s till date. This paper therefore elucidates different sort of sacredness engineered within the sanctimonious context of the movies. In addition, the significances in the use of Yoruba traditional religion in films is considered. Conclusively reasons were given to the expediency of re-engineering Yoruba Traditional Religion substantially in movies.*

Re-engineering according to Wikipedia refers to trouble shooting. Business process re-engineering is the analysis and redesign of workflow and process within an organization or between enterprises. But of art; re-engineering implies changes of various types and depth to a system from a slight renovation to a total overhaul. Other terms it could denote are; reconstruction, revival, re-organizes for the purpose of getting a better and effective outcome.

The process of re-engineering Yoruba films involves the breaking of old method of presenting Yoruba traditional religion in movie production, finding new sophisticated idea and applying beneficial strategies.

## **Yoruba Traditional Religion**

According to Malmowski, birth, puberty, marriage, death are crises faced by man since creation, but religion offers explanation, thus reducing tension and making them view life more positively. Noah (2000) opined that “traditional religion is the oldest religion in Nigeria”. On the same stance with Murray (1982:6), Usman (2002) believed that “religion is a very powerful force in human society. Its all-pervading influence on every community is undeniable. Religion embraces a fixed practical relationship between the human self and some superhuman entities considered sacred or supernatural”.

Therefore as Oladipo (2002) rightly pointed it out the “mythical character” which embodies the traditional Yoruba world-view is centered on Olodumare. Ogbontiba (1997) believed the Yoruba acknowledge God but see Him to be too exalted to concern Himself directly with man and their affairs, hence they admit the existence of many gods as intermediaries and these they term ‘Orisas’.

In fact, this religious belief affects their traditional and occupational lives. And it is being sustained through convention and strong code of taboos. These sets of beliefs are themselves rooted in many creations of myths which safeguard and enforce morality.

### **Yoruba Video Films**

Several mediums and media can be used as tools of social and national integration. Adeleke (2005) rightly observed that “Yoruba film is a useful tool like any other medium”. He further suggests that the filmmaker as the propagator of the ideal of the society should strive to sell lofty values that will aid growth and development. Yoruba video films have contributed immensely to the way people value their personality and esteem the societal norms. Much more, generations to come and even foreigners will have the idea or understand the codes, the style, the benefit and the originality in Yoruba traditional religion.

### **Religious Contextualities in Yoruba Video Films**

Yoruba knowledge of God is expressed in proverbs, idioms, song, prayers, names, myths, stories, and so on. Mbiti (1985) opined that all these are easy to remember and pass on to other people. Therefore digging deep into religious code and norms, the Yoruba film producers strive to reminiscence about religious issues pertaining to Yoruba society. The filmmaker thus coins in different Yoruba traditional beliefs into film by engineering different ritualistic conjecture in relation to the choice of the followings:

1. The Instrumentality of the film
2. The linguistic items.
3. The character and the performance
4. The sanctimonious themes.

### **The Instrumentality of the Film**

This has to do with diverse instruments or tools with which the film prodger synchronizes and harmonizes his intended idea to the mind of his viewer. On many occasions, such religious instruments are often improvised especially when the original pattern is not within the filmmakers’ reach or when bringing it to public view amounts to committing sacrilege. Therefore, in a bid to give a vivid portrayal of performance and give in-depth meaning to the dialogue within the plottal progression, the film producer carefully selects and manages the followings: (a) Costume (b) Setting (c) Other properties.

**Costume:** It is important for the cast to assume the outward appearance of the character he/she is impersonating. In Yoruba films, in order to depict the caricature of the actions that reveal ‘religious mentality, the actor, though a young man, tints his beard, mustache and eyebrow to make all look greyish. The teeth become darkened and quite unattractive. Sometimes they wear priesthood or cultist regalia, attaching cowries to

### *Oyebisi Omolasoye*

their hair, wrist and ankle, barbing part of the head, using either red or white or black beads, wrapping or tying red or white or black attire, and so on.

Meanwhile, the arrangement of the dressing code and the colour of the costume normally portray the kind and level of the character in religious context. White apparel is associated with worshipper of Obatala, Osun and Ifa while black and red signify witchcraft.

**Setting:** This is the specific geographical location where the events in the plots take place. There are two types of setting: Macro and Micro setting. Macro setting is usually a larger society. Micro setting is the specific location within the larger society, where certain events in the play take place.

Therefore, most of the scenes that depict Yoruba traditional religion are always in micro setting. This could be a shrine, grove, thick forest, inside or beside the river, inside or under the tree, in the cloud or sky, market square and even a consecrated hall or room decorated with sacred objects.

**Other Properties:** These are special items being used to depict divinatory or sacredness. Religious properties include: Ifa wooden divination tray (Opon Ifa), a group sixteen sacred palm nuts (Ikin Ifa), dust from Irosun tree (Iyere Osun), a tapper instrument (Iroka Ifa), a fly whisk (Irukere Ifa), all these depict an Ifa priest.

Beside, other properties that depict religious elements include red, white or black staff, cloth or calabash designed with cowries; statues, leather charm (Onde) other amulets, clay pots and so on.

In addition, film's properties show the favourite menu and totems of many divinities. And different sacrificial objects acceptable to each of the divinities are brought to foreground. Sango loves bitter kola (orogbo) Esu loves palm oil (epo) while Ogun loves dog (Aja) and palm wine (emu). So also the items these gods detest are revealed in Yoruba films. For instance Esu detests palm nut oil (adi)

Furthermore, Yoruba films make their viewers aware of the symbolic meaning attached to items especially when they are proffered as sacrificial objects. Snail (Igbin) symbolizes calmness and peace. Pigeon (Eyele) depicts good luck and longevity. For instance in the film Ajana Oro, Ige and his transmogrified statues (Sigidi) to human beings cannot be over powered until the invoked spirit of the babalawo tells them to prepare odundun leaf, orin leaf and much snail water with which they do not only calm but subdue him. Again, musical instruments distinguish the distinctiveness of each of these divinities. 'Igbin' drum is for the worshippers of Obatala, 'Agere' drum is associated with Ogun while 'Bata' is for Sango.

### **The Religious Linguistic Items**

This revolves around placation, music, sound wave, and different poetic utterances. On several occasions, these religious linguistic items fascinate especially adult's attention; for they depict the olden day's poetic peculiarities. This is one of the distinctive features that make Ogunde's play quite memorable.

### Academic Scholarship

---

An aspect of placation is the regular invocatory chant like Iyere Ifa, Rara, Ijala and so on. Each of the divinities has at least a chant and specific drum beat pattern to be reckoned with. Esa chant with melodious vibrated sound from bata and dundun drums are quite obvious in movies like *Ilu Gangan*, *Makanje* and *Deborah*. All these movies have to do with the pronounced influence of masquerade in political and communal issues.

Besides, Ijala chant is always rendered at festivity of Ogun worshippers. But Irewoje features during the ritualistic performance after the burial of a deceased hunter for the purpose of severing relationship between the deceased and the guild of hunters. So also Oriki (praise chant) is always employed in addressing a person or on animal or an inanimate object. The praise chant to the deities reveals their attributes and what their devotees are still expecting from them. Thus, the deities are gingered, quickened and motivated to fulfill the desire of the chanter.

Furthermore, Ofo chant is entrenched in the Yoruba believe in magic and medicine. Olatunde (1985) observed that Ofo is a kind of invocation, making assertion based on universal time truths. This kind of chant in countless movies is used in compliance with charm to invoke spirit, expedite actions of evil forces, defend and or protect oneself and even to afflict one's foe(s).

Meanwhile, liturgy is a kind of communion with God or these divinities within the setting of worship. It can involve invocation of spirits, pouring of libation, prayers and giving of offering.

In addition, divinatory chant (ese Ifa) provides insights about the current circumstances by relating it with certain occurrence in the life of past heroes through divinatory corpus (odu), thereby imparting the life of a person requesting information and provides any necessary information to aid the individual.

In case of music, countless songs that emanate from religious perception are eminent in Yoruba films. For example

*E ma sika laye*  
*Tori a n rorun/2x*  
*To ba de bode E o rojo*  
*Do not be wicked on earth*  
*Because we are going to heaven*  
*When you get to the gate of heaven*  
*You will give account*

## **The Character and Performance**

### **The Character**

In many Yoruba films, some of the characters include traditional religious leaders, the medicine man or woman, diviners, spirit beings, animate and in-animate objects. Even in many epic films, the main characters include past hero and heroine like Sango, Ogun, Esu, Orunmila, Obatala, Osara, Olokun, ..... as we have it in films like *Oduduwa*, *Obaluaye*, *Obakoso* and several others. These divinities are being portrayed not only susceptible to human foibles such as anger, jealousy and disobedience but such that also need food, clothing, and shelter. They also have feelings and emotion as well. The Performance: This depicts the indigenous motion and style a character employs to convey the intended message of the film. Making a libation, act of buzzing, clustering, invoking, reciting incantations, chanting, singing, boasting and so on to encroach upon the dialogue during enactment are all sorts of performance that make a picture of religious instinctiveness.

### **The Sanctimonious Themes**

This connotes the reverent ideas that are logically expanded in a play. This would be expounded under: belief in supernatural beings, destiny, taboo, charm, immortality, sacredness of response, prayer, revelation and dreams.

Belief in supernatural beings: Religion is a system of beliefs and practices related to the Supernatural Being (God) or beings (gods) whom believers hold to have absolute control over their lives. Orisas are more like “animistic entities” and have control over specific elements in nature, thus being better referred to as the divinities. Yoruba films like *Oduduwa*, *Oba koso*, *Obaluaye* and *Oranmiyan* reveal the two categories of divinities. That is;

- (a) The primordial ones that descended from heaven like Esu, Ogun, Obatala and Orunmila.
- (b) The heroes like Oranmiyan, *Oduduwa* and so on, heroine like Oya, Osun, Osara, Olokun and others, all these divinities transmogrified at the climax of their lives to show their prowess or consequent upon being ridiculed or betrayed.

The belief that their deified objects or replica possess exceptional power is always being extolled in Yoruba film. For example the statue of Abeke in *Ere Abeke* dealt mercilessly with people that sold her.

Furthermore, Yoruba films feature different types of spirit according to their inexhaustible scenery or categories thus:

- (a) *Spirit beings* which are able to assume various dimensions whenever they wish to manifest. Their habitation and deeds are always terrific.
- (b) *Ghost spirit* of the dead that can enter into animal, bird, or other creature to destroy or molest their foe(s).

## Academic Scholarship

- (c) *Born to die Spirit (Abiku)*: Yoruba films normally reveal how these children gain access into a home, their characteristics, their deeds and how to overcome them.

Considering the uniqueness abilities of these supernatural beings, characters in Yoruba film sometimes reveal how to appease them. This could be in form of giving sacrifice, votive offering substitutionary sacrifice, propitiatory sacrifice, preventive sacrifice and foundational sacrifice.

**Belief in Ancestor:** This is being depicted at the instance of when failure to remember them as prescribed brings calamity.

**Belief in Cultism:** The cult, according to Akiwowo (1978) are associated with organization with secret codes, passwords and signs ..... For instance, the cult bond made Iya Abiye to release her daughter-in-law to Aro in *Amunmora* because she was the brain behind the charm Aro uses as voodoo to charm the young bride.

**Belief in Destiny:** The Yoruba holds that all human beings possess “*Ayanmo*” (Destiny, fate) which are expected to come to pass no matter how man tries to change or alter it.

This belief normally stand as basis for several inexplicable luck or miseries in Yoruba films.

**Belief in Taboo:** Defaulting of taboo pronounced by the divinity (not to hunt or shoot gun for 3 (three) months) results to annual sacrifice of sixteen children in *Eni Aye Kan*.

**Belief in Magic:** Magic objects like charms, amulets, and rings are used to protect, defend, oppress, harm, liquidate or achieve success. In Yoruba films besides the above; magic is sometimes portrayed to be manifesting in two dimensions:-

**Home ophitic:** The character injures, or destroys by inflicting the image of his foes or in another way, heal or protect himself or his loved ones by putting charm on animal or in-animate object.

**Contagious:** This occurs when the character uses objects that belong to his victim to inflict him/her. In addition, traditional medicine treats patient with drugs and elaborate rituals. The fact that divinities, make the knowledge available to priest are revealed in several Yoruba films.

Furthermore, some animals and plants are also associated with mysterious power.

**Immortality:** The belief in a future state brings about the idea of invoking the spirit of the dead. The beliefs in reincarnation are evidences that bring about names like Yetunde, Babatunji and so on. The belief in future judgment in heaven is the bedrock upon which the themes of many Yoruba films are established.

Sacredness of Prayer and Response: Omorege (2007) opined that “man prays in order to change the course of things . . . . Meanwhile the need to say ‘Ase’ (so shall it be) is crucial. With it, all communications with Orun (heaven) are enriched, and energized. Failure to say ‘Ase’ to mother-in-law’s prayer made a parent to lose two children in Amin.

### **Revelation and Dreams**

Dreams are successions of images, ideas, emotions and sensations that occur involuntarily in man’s mind. It is an experience during sleep.

Tillich (1991) defined revelation as “a special and extra-ordinary manifestation which removes the veil from something which is hidden in a special way”. Many characters in film find out the source and solutions of their predicament through dream or revelation.

### **The Significance of the Portrayed Traditional Religion in Yoruba Films**

The film makers have greatly contributed to the progress and existence of Yoruba traditional religion. The following discussions give a critical analysis;

1. One of the sources of severe strain for Yoruba exposed to modern change is the increasing process by which individual becomes detached from their traditional environment. In *Isele Lagba*, Gbemisola would have been butchered by the ritualist like her friends if not for the white beads her grandfather gave her which made her formidable.
2. The film makers are portraying the connotation that Yoruba traditional religion has never been contaminated with the contagion by which other religions were infected.
3. It is the vehicle that propels Yoruba culture.
4. The teaching and inculcation of fear of retribution which is always eminent in films is reducing the level of impieties especially among the youths.
5. The fact that each worshipper of different religion should not intervene or interrupt the idea of others is depicted in *Ija Yemoja* when the pastor meets his water-loo after baptizing a lady from marine kingdom.
6. Attempts are always made to justify Yoruba religion against external contempt and underestimation.

### **The Need for Re-Engineering Yoruba Traditional Religion in Films**

1. Most of the scenes that are full of conjuration appear not to conform with the socio-religious development.
2. Much efforts should be made to clear off areas in which there have been much perplexity and confusion which have resulted in a coinage of wrong description of religion. Some make-belief enactment appears as rare and the idea(s) look enigmatic.
3. The mode and means of presenting religious initiative issues make it look necessary and helpful. And this can easily make inquisitive audience fall victim of cultism.

### Academic Scholarship

---

4. Giving and creating of wrong images about Yoruba priests and gods. When Babalawo plaits hair like Sango worshipper, it brings a time age confusion into the mind of both outsiders and young ones. Or when a Yoruba priest shadows one of his eye balls with white substance, he portrays Igbo priesthood peculiarities.
5. The way the film makers present Yoruba priests sometimes depict them as being poor, awkward and backward among their contemporaries in other tribes. Therefore, knowing and being quite sure that these religious traditions have been handed down from our forefathers; each generation should take them up with modifications suitable to its own historical but developmental situation and needs.

### **Conclusion**

The major pre-occupation of this study is the exploration of some sacredness that emanate from Yoruba religious perception which are being embroidered in Yoruba films. Several elements that throw Yoruba traditional religion into limelight in Yoruba films are therefore brought to the foreground.

Meanwhile, the need to give a total and circumspect overhaul to the way, manner and means of enacting these sanctimonious theme has been expostulated on. In fact the future of Yoruba traditional religion is threatened by urbanization, western education and foreign religion. And if it will survive within this globalization era, its incorporation in films needs to be re-engineered.

### **Reference**

- Adeleke, A. (2005) The Social and National Integration Phenomena in Yoruba Video Films. *Yoruba Journal of the Yoruba Studies Association of Nigeria*. 3.1 Ed O. Adebowale. Ibadan Verity Printers Ltd. African herald express com/blog 6.2011
- Akiwowo, A. (1978) Christian Denominations in Nigeria. *Christianity in West Africa. The Nigerian Story* Ed. Ogbu Kalu. Ibadan. Daystar Press. 391
- Allistair, K. (1971) *The Way of Transcendence*. Middlesex: Penguin Books.
- Idowu, E. (1991) *African Traditional Religion. A definition* Ibadan. Fountain Publication.
- Malinowski, B. (1954). *Magic Science . Religion and Other Essays* New York. Double Day .
- Mbiti, J. (1985). *African Religions and Philosophy*. Ibadan Heinemann Educational Books Ltd.
- Noah, M (2000) *Christianity in Nigeria, Ebira Land in Focus*. Lagos, Majab Publishers.



Ogbontiba, F. (1997) *Glory of the Yoruba Race Challenge of 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Ibadan. Global Books and Publications.

Oladipo, O. (2002) Rethinking Yoruba World. View Ideal of Life. *The Third Way in African Philosophy*. Ibadan. Hope Publications.

Olatunji, O. (1984). *Features of Yoruba Oral Poetry*. Ibadan. University Press Ltd.

Omorege, J. (2007). *A Philosophical Look at Religion*. Lagos. Joja Educational Research and Publisher Ltd.

Tillich, P. (1951) *Systematic Theology*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press. .108

Usman, D. (2002) *Philosophical and Sociological Studies of Religion*. Ilorin. Nathadex Publishers.

[www.nairaland.com/Nigeria/topic – 5100 16.ohtm](http://www.nairaland.com/Nigeria/topic-5100-16.ohtm)

[www.voanews.com/english/2007-09-02-voa22.cfm](http://www.voanews.com/english/2007-09-02-voa22.cfm)