Òṣòròmọ̀nìgà: Representations of witchcraft in Yoruba films

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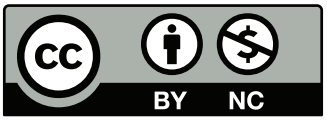
Abstract

Cinematically, Yoruba filmmakers represent different aspects of the Nigerian nation and various elements of traditional cultures, customs, and praxes. In particular, they pay close attention to the influences of supernatural powers and metaphysical agents in human times and affairs, and they represent them in elaborate visual narratives. Against this cinematic backdrop, this paper investigates the representations of *àjẹ́*, erroneously known as witchcraft, in Yoruba language films. The paper posits that contemporary Yoruba language filmmakers copy the cinematic models that the late Chief Hubert Ogunde and Alhaji Yekini Ajileye created to make movies about witches. By focusing on the representations of witchcraft in two purposefully selected films, *Ìyá-Àjẹ́* (2017) and *Àgbà-Méta* (2016), this article argues that the binary model that Yoruba filmmakers adopt in their portrayal of witches is a tired formula. Instead, this study proposes *àjẹ́ism* as a theoretical model for studying the *àṣẹ* vital force that witches own, as well as the relevance of *àṣẹ* to women's empowerment, civil protests, and space claiming. Thus, this essay proposes that we reimagine *àjẹ́* as a cultural resistance tool that women can appropriate to fight injustices and oppressions.

Keywords: Nigeria, witchcraft, Yoruba language film, cultural customs, metaphysics



About the author

Olusegun Soetan is an Assistant Teaching Professor of African Studies at Pennsylvania State University, USA. He is a postcolonial scholar of African literature, language, and culture. His research interests include African cinema (Nollywood), gender and women's studies, African knowledge systems, digital humanities, contemporary Africa, and popular culture. Importantly, Dr. Soetan's scholarship sits at the crossroads of many fields of African studies – from film, language, and popular culture to literature and diaspora. His works clearly draw on critical theories of gender, class, and sexuality.

Introduction: African witchcraft, *Òṣòròmọ̀nìgà*, and the Nollywood tradition

African communities have specific cultures and traditional customs that define their religious and social identities. For many Africans, the cosmos is a mystery and a complex ontological system. The ontological perspectives that Africans bring to bear on the universe bestow living and non-living things with supernatural powers to act as spiritual agents. These multiple African belief systems explain the various ways Africans interact with the universe and how such interactions sustain cosmic orderliness. In many African cultures, specific deities, goddesses, and supernatural forces play prominent roles and occupy significant positions in the philosophy and worldviews of the people.

Among the many supernatural phenomena in Africa is witchcraft. Witchcraft is both cultural and sacred, and its practices suggest that specific individuals have supernatural powers that enable them to bend physical and cosmic laws. The phenomenon has many names and meanings in different cultural contexts in Africa. For example, it is known as *àjẹ́* in Yoruba society, *amoosu* in Igbo culture, and *gris-gris* in the Maka tradition in Cameroon. Witchcraft, as a cultural phenomenon, is popular among both illiterate people and the educated elites in Africa. Despite claims to modernity, witchcraft has not waned in popularity and its tropes continue to shape themes of popular arts on the continent. For decades, anthropologists and cultural studies scholars have published books and articles to explain and theorize African witchcraft, while searching for 'authentic evidence' to document the existence of real witches. The pioneering studies on witchcraft include Evans-Pritchard's (1976) research on witchcraft in the cosmology of the Azande people, and Lucy Mair's (1969) work on witchcraft, African religions, and healing; moreover, Barry Hallen and Sodipo Olubi (1986) investigate Yoruba epistemology and situate witchcraft within the Yoruba knowledge matrix.

Beyond these early academic efforts, in more recent times cultural studies scholars, literary critics, and religious studies scholars have shown renewed academic interest in witchcraft discourses and practices in Africa. These scholars strive for more holistic understandings of the phenomenon, especially regarding the expression of witchcraft in postcolonial contexts. They write about witchcraft from multidisciplinary perspectives and bring new research methodologies to bear on the phenomenon. More recent research has explored the multilayered connections between witchcraft and modernity (Geschiere 1997); witchcraft and justice (Ashforth 2015); witchcraft, power, and the distribution of resources (Leistner 2014; Smith 2017); witchcraft, intimacy, gender, and sexuality (Mavhungu 2012; Geschiere 2013; Richter et al. 2017; Eboiyehi 2017), as well as the multiple intersections between these topics.

Existing scholarship on African witchcraft provides not just the theoretical base for my engagement with the theme in African popular culture; these studies also serve as critical archives of cultural information that shape my approach to studying the phenomenon. Witchcraft is often a complicated topic to engage in because of the many socio-cultural views and reactions surrounding it. Building on the previous scholarship, in this article I examine the audio-visual representations of witchcraft in two Yoruba language films: Adebayo Tijani's (2017) *Ìyá-Àjẹ́* and Okiki Afolayan's (2016) *Àgbà-Mẹ́ta*.[1] The films were purposefully chosen because they portray Yoruba witches in modern times and are similar in their storytelling techniques. Moreover, in this article, I analyse cinematic representations of witchcraft in relation to the Yoruba philosophical concept of *àjẹ́*. Often *àjẹ́* is erroneously equated with witchcraft. Yet, as Teresa Washington (2005,

[1] Nollywood is the appellative for the Nigerian film industry, which is known for its representations of the variegated Nigerian cultures and customs.

8) argues, *àjẹ́* is "not a one-dimensional concept or figure with a neat definition or concise exposition." By analytically juxtaposing the cinematic representations of witchcraft with the philosophical concept of *àjẹ́*, my study proposes to enrich our understanding of the cultural representations of witches in African cinema and popular culture.

In the Yoruba logic of power attribution, *àjẹ́* is a phenomenon that uses life's vital force (*àṣẹ*) to regulate cosmic balance (Drewal 1974). It is a neutral force that oscillates between two significant extremes of a value spectrum: good and evil (native knowledge). To better situate *àjẹ́* within the ambit of Yoruba philosophy, this essay takes *Òṣòròmọ̀nìgà* as a term that specifically refers to Yoruba witchcraft. *Òṣòròmọ̀nìgà*, as one of the many cognomens of witches in Ifá divination systems and praise poetry, is culture-specific, and without a deep understanding of the Yorùbá philosophy and Ifá religion, the term will suggest that witches in Yorùbá worldviews are malicious and violent (Opefeyitimi 1994). At the deeper level of meaning, *àjẹ́* suggests a delicate subtlety, gentility, and perseverance, while *Òṣòròmọ̀nìgà* is characterised by the caution and perseverance that are the hallmark of witches in the Yoruba cosmology (Washington 2005). It is also an onomatopoeic term that describes the swiftness with which witches attack their enemies to deliver justice (native knowledge). It is a term that is grammatically derived from *àràmàgàmàgà,* the bird familiars of witches.

Furthermore, this article regards Yoruba films as Nollywood films because they represent the multiple forms of film style in the Nollywood tradition. The term 'Nollywood' has been used widely in the existing literature on the gigantic Nigerian film industry to refer to all films produced in Nigeria (see Adesokan 2011; Harrow 2013; Haynes 2016; Krings and Okome 2013; Ogunleye 2008). Nollywood is no longer a term that describes a specific sectional style of film production; it has become a universal signifier for the Nigerian screen media. The point here is that even though it was a foreigner who originally coined 'Nollywood' to describe early Nigerian films made in the English language,[2] the term has now been appropriated as the single most qualified term to refer to filmmaking in Nigeria. Of course, there are instances of regional filmmaking styles that explore different religious and cultural practices in the country. This does not suggest that terms such as Yollywood (Yoruba language films) and Kannywood (Hausa language films) are independent film traditions outside of the Nollywood frame. Kannywood, for example, is used to direct attention to a local filmmaking style that has a different cinematic flavour and ideology from the mainstream Nollywood. Yollywood and Kannywood are the other local 'woods' in Nigeria, and they are subsets of the Nollywood Venn diagram.

Nollywood, as the dominant umbrella term for the Nigerian film industry, gives a nationalist identity to the country's cinematic traditions and insulates the industry from ethnic tensions that have tormented socio-political institutions in Nigeria. According to Haynes (2007, 106), "Nollywood neatly expresses powerful aspirations by people in the video film industry and by their fans to have a big, glamorous entertainment industry that can take its place on the world scene and appeal to international audiences." The term has proven to be very useful, to the extent that many African countries have begun copying its filmmaking styles and adopting the 'wood' template to name their film industries (see Krings and Okome 2013). Before I move into my analysis of witchcraft in *Ìyá-Àjẹ́* and *Àgbà-Mẹ́ta*, in the following section, I map out a historical genealogy of witchcraft in Yoruba films.

[2] Jonathan Haynes (2007) claims that Nollywood first appeared in an article by Matt Steinglass in the *New York Times* in 2002 to describe the Nigerian film industry as a version of Hollywood and Bollywood.

Witchcraft in Yoruba films: A historical genealogy

Haynes (1995) argues that as a cinematic tradition, "Yoruba films grew straight out of the Yoruba Traveling Theater." Historically, Hubert Ogunde, who is regarded as the doyen of the Nigerian theatre (Clark 1979), played a significant role in the creating of indigenous cinema in Nigeria and in the development of Yoruba language films. Borrowing from Yoruba oral literature, cosmology, religion, and mythology, Ogunde made films that contextualized African metaphysics, religion, modernity, and epistemology. Notably, he made movies about the witchcraft phenomenon and reimagined the bizarre supernatural world of witches. For example, in 1980, Ogunde contracted Ola Balogun to direct his feature-length movie *Aiyé*. Using special effects, *Aiyé* depicts witches as shapeshifters and represents witchcraft as a cosmic power that women possess, which they can use for bad intentions. In *Àyànmọ́* (1988), Ogunde emphasizes the unending spiritual battle between the spiritual agents of God and Satan, especially focusing on how witches disrupt the happiness of the communities and how *Ọ̀ṣẹ́tùúrá* (a holy spirit) intervenes to defeat them. This narrative model is critical to Ogunde's creative universe regarding witchcraft and paranormal stories, and it has been adopted as the modus operandi by other Yoruba filmmakers (see *Ọ̀pá Ajé* (1988), *Kòtò Ọ̀run* (1989), and *Kòtò Aiyé* (2002)).

In surreal images, Ogunde visualizes how witches decapitate their victims to drink their blood and feed on their entrails (see *Aiyé* (1980) and *Àyànmọ́* (1988)). In the rituals he shows, he gives life to the legend of witches as bloodsucking mothers and cannibalistic sisters. Meshing his Christian values with his traditional Yoruba upbringing, he introduces the magnificent and long musical scores that witches perform in their covens into Yoruba films. He often represents two types of witches in his films – the *àjẹ́-funfun* (the white-robed witch) and the *àjẹ́-dudu*/*pupa* (black/red-robed witch). The *àjẹ́-funfun* (white-robed witch) is portrayed as a holy bird of justice, the seeker of truth, the emissary of the Supreme God, and the punisher of wicked witches. Ogunde's holy witch resembles the Holy Spirit in the Bible. Interestingly, too, the semiotics of the *ẹyẹ-funfun* is synonymous with the image of the Christian Holy Spirit, which is often described as a white dove (See Matt. 3:13–17). Thus, Ogunde's idea of the *ẹyẹ-funfun* parallels the Christian ideas of purity and holiness, represented by the colour white.

Unfortunately, the rich cinematic tradition that Ogunde and other filmmakers helped to create in the early 1960s could no longer be sustained by the late 1980s and early 1990s because of the ailing Nigerian economy, primarily caused by the new structural adjustment programme that the International Monetary Fund imposed on African nations (Haynes 1995). As a result, in the early 1990s, Nigerian filmmakers embraced video technology for filmmaking. Though a nondescript tool for filmmaking, the video camera helped Nigerian filmmakers tell their stories at lower costs. However, for Yoruba filmmakers, including the late Alhaji Yekini Ajileye, the new video medium was only a technological shift and not an ideological refocusing, as they continued to tell stories about witches and other supernatural elements in their films.

Ajileye, like Ogunde, made movies that represented the metaphysical world of witches and their doppelgangers. He created narratives that paralleled Ogunde's stories and exposed his audiences to grotesque images of witches disturbing idyllic communities. Ajileye continually reimagined witchcraft in existential dimensions in Yoruba communities. Some of his films engaged with the intersections of gender, class, and group affinity in the lives and times of men and women across ethnic boundaries in Nigeria and Africa. The films sometimes portray witchcraft as a tool for social and retributive justice. However, many of these films show witches as naturally wicked and evil, causing chaos and calamities without

Figure 1: Visual representation of *àjẹ́-pupa* (red-robed witch) in *Ìyá-Àjẹ́*.

Figure 2: Radeke as *àjẹ́-funfun* (white-robed witch) in *Ìyá-Àjẹ́*.

provocation (see *Kòtò Aiyé*, *Kòtò Ọ̀run*, and *Àbẹ̀ní Agbọ́n*).

In critical terms, one could argue that Ajileye continued the artistic efforts of Ogunde regarding the witchcraft phenomenon in Yoruba films. Ogunde died on April 4, 1990, and Ajileye came into the cinematic limelight in the early 1990s. Importantly, Ajileye tried his best to replicate the representational model that Ogunde created in his films. Speaking about Ajileye's *Kòtò Ọ̀run* (1989), Ogunleye (2004, 148) posits that "the film production in its entirety looks like a pastiche of Ogunde's *Aiyé*. It opens with a carnival." Here, Ogunleye points our attention to the cinematic similarities between Ogunde's portrayal of witchcraft and Ajilye's attempt to copy that model. Like Ogunde, the late Ayileye creates a mystical universe that shows how witches feast on human flesh and blood. Using Ogunde's colour coding of witches, Ajileye makes a distinction between evil and good witches. For example, he opens *Kòtò Ọ̀run* (1989) with a scene that features the witches in their coven dancing and singing the praise of Satan, who has come to visit them. In the scene, Satan tells the witches that God has sent Oriade to the world to liberate human beings and that the witches should be ready to fight him. Satan also alludes to his primordial battle with God, which led to his banishment from heaven. Contrasting the black robes that Satan and the witches wear in *Kòtò Ọ̀run* with the white attire of Oriade, Ajileye sets up the *àjẹ́-funfun* (the white-robed witch) as the liberator of the afflicted, showing *àjẹ́-dúdú* (the black-robed witch) and *àjẹ́-pupa* (the red-robed witch) as instruments of Satan. To foreground his own adherence to Islam, Ajileye sometimes includes scenes where Islamic clerics engage in spiritual warfare with witches. The image of the Islamic cleric is symbolic in Ajileye's films; it underscores his assumption that only the worshippers of Allah possess the real 'holy power' and that witches are agents of Satan.

This reading of the films of both Ogunde and Ajileye shows how witchcraft is coded as an evil power that threatens the collective good of human societies. Culturally, the colours white and black do not always signify purity and evil in Yoruba philosophical logic. In the same way, the colours black and red do not always signify evil and chaos. For instance, *Èṣù* (the trickster god of the crossroads) is represented ambivalently using the colours red and black. In this symbolic coding, *Èṣù* is not regarded as a deity of chaos; instead, his worshippers allude to his ambiguity and intersectionality. So the fundamental difference between the expression of good/bad and the use of colours by Yoruba people and the semiotic representations of good/bad witches in both Ogunde's and Ajileye's films indicates the significant influences of Christianity and Islam in their works. The shift in operational meanings that Ogunde and Ajileye give to *funfun* (white/good) and *dudu*/*pupa* (black/red/evil) emphasize their religious affinity with Christianity and Islam and show how the value systems in these two religions have shaped their perceptions of witchcraft. This reading is plausible if one considers that Ogunde started his career in the church, while Ajileye was a devout Muslim, who had observed the holy pilgrimage to Mecca, and answered to the title of 'Alhaji' before his death in 2006. In essence, both Ogunde and Ajileye popularized the stock cinematic representations of witches and witchcraft that audiences see in Yoruba films.

Against this historical genealogy, this article suggests that the representations of witchcraft in Yoruba language films have, over the years, followed the cinematic creations of Ogunde and Ajileye. In the next section, I engage in a critical analysis of the films *Ìyá-Àjẹ́* and *Àgbà-Mẹ́ta*. The analysis unpacks the cultural symbols in the films and interprets the witchcraft semiotics that the filmmakers embed in their works to explain the internalized images of witches in contemporary Nollywood films.

The *Òṣòròmọ̀nìgàs:* The good and bad witches in *Ìyá-Àjẹ́* and *Àgbà-Mẹ́ta*

Ìyá-Àjẹ́ (2017) is produced by Olasco Nigeria Limited and directed by Adebayo Tijani, a famous mainstream Nollywood director. The film centres on a witch, Lalonpe, who offers her children as well as her granddaughter as sacrificial tokens to her coven members. Through its visual narratives, the film projects scenes of gory decapitation and macabre nocturnal feastings, also showing the magical abilities of Lalonpe to transform images and shift shapes. Lalonpe torments her children and the community severely. In the end, the supreme God sends a helper – Radeke (Lalonpe's granddaughter) – to help defeat Lalonpe and her colleagues. Thus, the witches in *Ìyá-Àjẹ́* lose their power, and they confess their evil deeds publicly.

À*gb*à-*Mẹ́ta* is a 2016 film produced by EasyWay Pictures and Ladi Folarin Films and directed by Okiki Afolayan, an upcoming mainstream director. The film centres on a witch, Ayoka (Bunmi Olatilewa), and her sardonic antics against her husband's mistress. She kills her husband as punishment for having a secret lover and afflicts the mistress with mental illness. To show her loyalty to her coven, Ayoka promises to offer Akin, her late husband's illegitimate son, as a sacrifice. However, Ayoka and the coven members are unable to kill Akin because a higher supernatural power protects him. In the end, Ayoka loses her sight, and she dies a shameful death after confessing her sins. Meanwhile, before her death, Akin's mother regains her sanity, and she rejoices about her miraculous healing.

The bad witches / *àjẹ́-pupa/dúdú*

Both *Ìya-Àjẹ́* and *Àgbà-Mẹ́ta* are archetypal films about the witchcraft phenomenon in Yoruba society. Their narratives follow a general pattern of witchcraft discourse in Yoruba language films that involves: 1) nocturnal coven meetings; 2) intra-coven strife and unprovoked attacks; 3) confrontations with priests, diviners, pastors, and imams or other agents with superior spiritual power; and 4) public confession/shaming and death. Although the two films focus on the witchcraft phenomenon in Yoruba culture, they differ in scope and cinematic creativity. While *Ìyá-Àjẹ́* features the wicked mother trope, *Àgbà-Mẹ́ta* reiterates the theme of jealousy and rivalry between co-wives. Usually, in Yoruba movies, witches are introduced as married women who feel animosity towards their co-wives, wicked mothers-in-law looking to punish their daughters-in-law, or evil mothers-in-law wishing to remain close to their children but regarding the spouses as threats. At other times, witches are merely portrayed as bad mothers who wish their children ill-luck. Witchcraft is always framed in kinship terms and contextualized in familial narratives. Geschiere (1997, 212) even argues that "witchcraft is the dark side of kinship." Almost all Yoruba films portray witches as people who carry with them "bad emotions that cannot be openly expressed" (Haynes 2016, 108).

For its part, *Ìya-Àjẹ́* makes use of typage, which is the selection of actors/actresses on the basis that their facial or bodily features readily convey the truth of the character the actor plays. By casting Bandele Olayinka (also known by her stage name, Iya Gbonkan) as Lalonpe, the filmmaker rehashes the stereotypes about witches. To the many Nollywood audiences, Iya Gbonkan has proven her screen reputation by playing the role of witches in numerous Yoruba films, especially in Ajil-eye's movies. Her physiognomy readily fits the archetypal description of witches in Yoruba social imagination. She is a short, older woman with a limping leg and a coarse voice that resembles a bird's cackle. Her physical features thus fit the imagined appearance of a witch in the social consciousness of ordinary people, especially children, who usually think of older, wrinkled, and menopausal women as *àjẹ́*

(Drewal 1977).

Lalonpe's natural features and esoteric costumes give her a fearful look in the film, especially in the coven. In typical Ajileye style, the story portrays Lalonpe as an evil witch with immense spiritual power to cause chaos in her community. She is also portrayed as a harbinger of misfortune for her children. *Ìyá-Àjẹ́* reimagines the phenomenon of witchcraft in contemporary Nigeria. In non-ritual contexts, Lalonpe exchanges the destinies of her six children for more power in the coven. At first, Lalonpe is shown to the audience as an ordinary citizen, until the scene changes to show her in the coven fighting for the position of leadership with other senior witches. Although the exchange is a spiritual transaction, it is premised on Yoruba notions of body duality, which conceives the 'self' as a fusion of two parts – the exterior (*òde*) and the interior (*inú*). A person's exterior reveals little or nothing about his/her real being, whereas the inner aspects control all thoughts, actions, and goodwill (Drewal 1977).

Ìyá-Àjẹ́ frames Lanlope as a blood-thirsty witch who attacks members of her family and neighbours, even when unprovoked. This representational motif parallels that of Ajileye's 2002 film *Kòtò Aíyé*, where Àbẹ́ni Agbọ́n uses her *àṣẹ* power to kill the twins of Adeduntan because she is not served food during the twins' naming ceremony. In this movie, Àbẹ́ni substitutes the twins for the beef meat that she was not served. This romanticized stock image of witches as blood-thirsty, haggard, nocturnal beings also features in *Àgbà-Mẹ́ta.* The film reimagines the dark side of the co-wives' jealousy and the consequences of using the *àṣẹ* vital force recklessly. Like Lalonpe in *Ìyá-Àjẹ́*, Kòsọ̀fẹ́, in *Àgbà-Mẹ́ta*, offers Adéṣògá as a 'contribution' to her coven. The three witches hunt their victims, even when the victims have not provoked them. Here also, the wicked witch motif parallels the narrative plotline in Ajileye's *Sẹ̀gílọlá Àbẹ́ní Agbọ́n* (2006). In *Sẹ̀gílọlá Àbẹ́ní Agbọ́n*, Àbẹ́ni is a barren woman who becomes jealous of her younger sister because she rejected Àbẹ́ni's choice of husband for her daughter. On the wedding day, Àbẹ́ní and her entire coven of witches kill the bride and the groom in the middle of their wedding ceremony just to punish her younger sister. In both *Ìyá-Àjẹ́* and *Àgbà-Mẹ́ta*, the mothers deliberately relinquish their roles as guardians, instead allowing their selfish ambitions to trump their maternal feelings.

Yoruba mothers play a crucial role in socializing their children into various cultural and religious groups. In return, mothers are praised in proverbs, such as "*ìyá ni wúrà, baba ni dígí*" ('a mother is gold, a father is glass') and "*òrìṣà bí ìyá kò sí*" ('there is no deity like a mother'). The proverbs bring to mind the significance of mothers to children, especially their ability to protect and nurture. This nurturing trait is also essential to the cult of witches, hence the salutation, "*iya mi òṣòròngà*" ('my mother, òṣòròngà'). However, both Lanlope and Ayoka are portrayed as bad mothers who do not protect their children, but instead, use their *àṣẹ* power to destroy the *ẹlẹ́dàá* ('inner head') of their own and their co-wives' children.

Lamenting her unmotherly treatment of her children, Lalonpe becomes emotional as she seeks advice from Àbẹ́ní Agbọ́n, her coven colleague. As Lalonpe bemoans, "I had six children who were all destined to be great in life. I sacrificed five to the group. Now, the witches are asking me to sacrifice the last one." Here, the audience sees a grief-stricken Lalonpe, carrying the pain she has endured for sacrificing her children to the coven. However, these emotions evaporate as quickly as they come, and Lalonpe ends up sacrificing Radeke, her granddaughter, to the coven so that she can retain her leadership position. In *Àgbà-Mẹ́ta*, Ayoka also becomes emotional in the end and confesses her sins to the audiences. She reiterates how jealousy made her kill her husband and turn his mistress into a madwoman. As she confesses: "The day I made Ronke mad was the day I killed my husband, who is your father."

In both *Ìyá-Àjẹ́* and *Àgbà-Mẹ́ta*, the wicked witch motif is dominant, and they follow the model created by Ajílẹ́yẹ and Ogunde. The films blend the themes of co-wives' rivalry and wicked mothers to illustrate the dark side of witchcraft. Without provocation, the villains in the two films attack members of their households, thus affirming Geschiere's idea of witchcraft being the dark side of kinship. A significant point to note here is the idea that disgruntled mothers and jealous wives deliberately acquire witchcraft for the sole purpose of punishing family members and neighbours that offend them. To translate the wickedness inherent in malevolent witches into readable visual codes, Yoruba filmmakers use elaborate coven settings populated by grotesquely dressed women. Traditionally, only women can acquire witchcraft in Yoruba society because the concentration of life's vital force (*àṣẹ*) in women manifests itself in both positive and negative ways, and this power allows them to turn into such nocturnal creatures as bats, snakes, and birds (Drewal 1977). However, *Àgbà-Mẹ́ta* also has a male coven member who functions as the executioner.

In both films, especially in *Ìyá-Àjẹ́,* the filmmakers use specific paraphernalia in the set décor to denote the sacred coven of the witches, also dressing them in red or black attire to suggest that they are evil and malicious. Symbolically, the red and black colours denote the bloodshed and loss that evil witches cause. The cowrie-decked costumes that Lalonpe and her colleagues wear in the coven suggest that they are *Olójú Méji* ('people with two pairs of eyes'), that is, shapeshifters. Their dress symbolizes the immense incantatory power that allows them to transform into snakes, birds, and other animal familiars. The cowries, feathers, and animal horns attached to their red blouses and dark skirts allude to a belief system or a secret among the initiates about how charms and amulets grant their users supernatural powers (Soetan 2017). These amulets and charms magnify the *àṣẹ* power that witches possess, and which they use in spiritual fights with other supernatural agents.

In their everyday lives, Lalonpe and her colleagues wear regular Yoruba attire, and they conduct their business like other citizens. However, when the witches fight Awósọgbọ́n (the herbalist that Ayinde and his siblings consulted to help them make a propitiatory sacrifice to the gods), the witches wear their red and black coven attire. In many Yoruba movies, witches wear white, red, and black clothing, depending on their character. Benevolent witches wear white clothes and paint their bodies with white paint to show their holiness, while malevolent witches wear red and black colours to symbolize their evil antics and destructive power. Although this is standard fare in Yoruba films, I argue that this colour arrangement does not concord with the symbolism of colours in the Yoruba worldview. This is because "there is no hierarchical scaling of white, red, or black *àjẹ́* in traditional orature" (Washington 2005, 25). Instead, this study claims that the colour arrangement alludes to the cinematic aesthetics that Ogunde created and that Ajileye copied. In some Yoruba proverbs and idioms, both *dúdú* and *pupa* signify beauty and lustrousness. For example, *ó dúdú bi kóró iṣin* ('as lustrous as the seed of the ackee apple [Blighia sapida]') and *ó pupa bí ọ̀lẹ̀lẹ̀ ààwẹ̀* ('as fair in complexion as a Ramadan bean-pudding with excess red oil'). In both examples, *dúdú* (black/dark) and *pupa* (red) do not refer to evil or destruction. Instead, they describe beauty and sheen. Surprisingly, too, *Ìya-Àjẹ́* introduces a new dimension that substitutes the black and red costumes with black and green robes. Generally construed, green symbolizes nature, and it suggests an attempt by the filmmaker to reimagine *àjẹ́* as the vital life force that sustains the earth, since the earth itself is referred to as "mother earth," and the witches are addressed as *àwọn ìyá wa* ('our mothers').

Besides using colours to designate malevolent witches, *Ìyá-Àjẹ́* and *Àgbà-Mẹ́ta* portray witches as antisocial and cannibalistic. Lanlope eats her son Dapo's penis to punish

Figure 3: Malevolent witches (dressed in black and red attire) fight Radeke, a benevolent witch (wrapped in white linen) in *Ìyá-Àjẹ́.*

him for stealing her money, and sacrifices Radeke to be eaten by the coven, while Àyọ̀ká, Kòṣòfẹ́, and Àmọ̀pé gobble up the entrails of Olúṣọ̀gá. In Yoruba cosmology, the activities of witches are said to be hidden away from ordinary human eyes, but in *Àgbà-Méta,* witches leave remnants and trails of their victim's blood for the non-initiated to see. For example, Akin takes home pieces of human flesh that the witches keep under their meeting tree. He tries to cook the meat but finds that the meat takes longer to cook. In the end, he throws out the meat after a neighbour warns him not to pick up meat at the crossroads. While they are at odds with Yoruba philosophy, these cinematic representations mimic people's social imagination.

Nollywood films are shaped by the filmmakers' social realities as well as by ongoing events in the world. Similarly, representations of witchcraft are also influenced by the stories people tell about witches and the social events that chronicle their manifestations. Because witchcraft provides a social diagnosis of misfortune, Nollywood filmmakers face a herculean task of representing the phenomenon in ways that resonate with their audiences' imaginations. Also, because many filmmakers do not have access to advanced special effects technology, they often resort to pedantic representations that translate the occultic into the ordinary. The general belief that witches "work harm against others" and that they "are capable of their nefarious deeds through their possession of mysterious powers unknown and unavailable to ordinary people" has an ambiguous twist to it (Washington 2005, 6). The ambiguity is premised on the social understanding of the phenomenon and the effects of our rapidly modernizing society. The monochromatic representation of witchcraft often shows witches' decisions to punish those who offend them, though such portrayals never reveal the motivations behind their decisions (Awolalu 1979).

As my analysis shows, the filmmakers do not deny the availability of the *àṣẹ* vital force as a potent supernatural power that is

Figure 4: Malevolent witches feasting on the flesh of their victims in *Ìyá-Àjẹ́* and *Àgbà-Méta.*

available to witches, but they criminalize their potential as a destructive force. Nevertheless, in Yoruba philosophy, *àṣẹ* is a neutral force, which means that individuals who use the *àṣẹ* power trigger its potency, and they can decide whether to use it for good or evil (Drewal 1974). In other words, "the mothers, who use their special power for both the detriment and benefit of individuals and communities, evoke a striking image of duality" (Drewal 1974, 1). Drawing from Drewal, *àṣẹ* is a force for creation; simultaneously, it is a destructive power to possess, should the bearer decide to use it for evil purposes. Therefore, witchcraft is a relative metaphysical power that cannot be fitted into a mould of resident evil. Instead, it operates on a context-by-context base.

The benevolent witch / *àjẹ́-funfun*

Ajẹ́-funfun (a white-robed witch) is regarded as merciful and holy. In the film *Ìyá-Àjẹ́,* Radeke is symbolic of this type of witch. She is the opposite of Lalonpe and her cohorts. Even though she was once a hapless victim of the witches, she later becomes a powerful emissary of the divine God – *Olódùmarè* – who is sent to liberate all the people Lalonpe torments. The white markings on her body and the white apparel she wears signify the filmmaker's intention to represent her as a benevolent power of the mighty God. The benevolent witch seeks humanity's goodwill and showers blessings on the powerless majority by granting them wealth, prosperity, good health, and protection (Washington 2005). In a general sense, Yoruba culture regards *àjẹ́-rere* ('a good witch') as motherly and caring. These caring witching mothers are also known as *àjẹ́ ọlọ́mọ* ('motherly witches'). Radeke, who was a child when the witches killed her, transforms into a mother when she reaches heaven. Through death, she metamorphoses from a child to a fully-fledged heavenly being. Her passage through the abyss of death turns her into an older woman. In the Yoruba worldview, a dead person is transformed into an eternal new body, and s/he assumes the role of an ancestor to the living family members

on earth. Hence, the Yoruba maxim "*ó fi ikú ṣe àgbà*" ('s/he becomes a senior from the rear through death'). It is this transformative logic that bends the seniority structure for Radeke to become a 'saint' who will eventually conquer Lalonpe and her cohort.

The notion of *àjẹ́-funfun* as a merciful and holy witch is derived from the cultural symbolism of the Yoruba people, where *mímọ́* suggests 'purity' and 'transparency' (native knowledge). This idea becomes apparent in the heavenly setting that the filmmaker assigns to Radeke before she returns to earth to destroy Lalonpe. In the heavenly setting, the moving white sky depicts the absolute power of *Olodumare* (the Supreme God) and his ability to liberate the oppressed. Towards the end of *Ìyá-Àjẹ́*, Radeke confronts the witches to deliver justice. She expresses the mandate of her mission to them as follows: "He asked me to destroy this evil place because the cry of your victims has reached the creator. Then we will build another house for the salvation of humans." Here, Radeke, a benevolent witch, refers to Lalonpe's coven as "the evil house", which alludes to the bifurcation of witchcraft/the supernatural into the forces of God and those of Satan. The assumption is that the *àjẹ́-dudu* ('black-robed witch') and the *àjẹ́-pupa* ('red-robed witch') are malicious and profoundly evil because they destroy destinies, beauty, wellness, as well as causing chaos, misfortune, pain, and gargantuan doom. So Radeke, representing the good mothers, that is, the benevolent *òṣòròmọ̀nìgà*, is given the responsibility of destroying the powers of the malevolent witches. Thus, she commands fire and thunder from heaven to burn down Lanlope's coven. As she harangues the witches, she says, "Talk before I ask God to send thunder and fire to destroy this place."

In a comparative critical perspective, the scene has religious undertones: it parallels the scenario that played out between Elijah and the prophets of Baal in the Bible, where Elijah commands fire and thunder from heaven to burn his sacrifice to prove that Baal is a powerless deity (1 Kings 18: 38). By alluding to a higher power from heaven, Radeke positions herself as the dedicated agent of God and situates her mission in a liberatory context. Her role as a good spirit of God is similar to the interventionist roles both Ẹ̀ràǹdẹ̀dẹ̀/Ọ̀ṣẹ́ẹ̀túrá and Ẹwàtómi play in Ogunde's *Aiyé* and Ajileye's *Kòtò Aiyé*. In all three films, the white-robed witch delivers oppressed human beings from the clutches of Satan and his agents. However, the liberating power that the white-robed witch possesses is also a quality that witches have in Yoruba cosmology. In times past, witches used to tie three cowries strung together on their ankles to indicate to the general public that they possessed the extraordinary power of *àjẹ́* (Elebuibon 2008); however, this cultural practice of self-identification among witches is no longer common nowadays.

The heavenly abode that is reserved for good witches like Radeke is premised on the Yoruba worldview of the sky/heaven as the origin of creation. In Yoruba cosmology, the sky is considered to be the seat of the supreme God, and it carries great religious importance for the people. Also, because the sky is above the land and the sea, the people designate it as the abode of the benevolent witch, otherwise known as *ẹ̀lẹ̀yẹ̀-òkè* ('native knowledge'). Before Radeke could actively perform her role as a saviour, she had to pass through the labyrinth of death to ascend to *Ọ̀run* ('heaven') so that she could return to the earth as *àjẹ́-funfun*.

However, if one considers the Yoruba lexical terms *rere* and *búburú* ('good' and 'bad'), one will notice the inconsistency in the naming of *àjẹ́-funfun*/*dudu*/*pupa* as benevolent and malevolent witches. Lexically, Yoruba has words to express goodness/piety/holiness (*daada/rere/mímọ́)*, and evil/wickedness (*buruku/buburu)*. Linguistically, malevolent witches should be referred to as *àjẹ́-buruku/buburu*, and not as *àjẹ́-dudu*/*pupa* in the standard Yoruba language. Similarly, holy/good witches should answer to *àjẹ́-rere/dada*, and not *àjẹ́-funfun*. These qualifiers (*funfun*, *pupa* and *dudu*) promote the symbolic meta-

fiction of colours, which ultimately denotes an inferior/superior dichotomy. Moreover, we can read the dichotomy as the direct influence of non-indigenous religions, such as Christianity and Islam, which undergird the models that Ogunde and Ayileye have created, which contemporary Yoruba language filmmakers deploy in their films.

The strong influence of non-indigenous religions on the portrayal of witchcraft attests to the rapid social changes occurring in Yoruba society; it also underscores the ebbing popularity of African traditional religions. Similarly, these changes indicate the schism between Yoruba philosophy and twenty-first century modernity. In contrast to the binary arrangement and stratification of witches, Yoruba philosophy and the Ifá religion describe witches differently, especially in the *Ọ̀sá-Mẹjì* verse that tells of the origins of the supernatural power that witches possess. The Ifá verse goes thus:

Nígbàtí wọ́n ńbọ̀ l'áyé,
Àwọn obìnrin, wọn kò rí nkankan yàn
Lá t'ọ̀dọ̀ Olódùmarè
Wọ́n ń bi ara wọn pé agbára wo ni àwọn ní
Láti ṣe gbogbo nǹkan t'áwọ́n fẹ́ ṣe láyé
Àwọn ọkùnrin bẹ̀rẹ̀ sí yan àwọn obìnrin jẹ
Wọ́n ń lò wọ́n bí ẹrú, àti bí kò ti yẹ
Àwọn obìnrin bá tọ Olódùmarè lọ
Àánú wọn ṣe Olódùmarè
Ó sì fún wọn ní agbára
Tíó kọjá gbogbo ti àwọn ọkùnrin lọ
Olódùmarè ló gbé àṣẹ fún àwọn obìnrin
Ó ní àwọn àjẹ́ kò gbọ́dọ̀ ma lòó láti
Dí 'yà jẹ ẹnikẹ́ni.

(Opefeyitimi 1994)

Translation:
When they were coming to the earth
Women had no powers from *Olódùmarè*
Women asked themselves what powers they had
To do all that they wanted on earth
Men were maltreating women
Men enslaved them and treated them harshly
Women returned to *Olódùmarè* and reported the case
Olódùmarè was moved with compassion
Olódùmarè promised them a power
Higher than that of men
Olódùmarè gave women power over men
Olódùmarè endowed women with the power of *àjẹ́*
Women were instructed not to use the power indiscriminately.

According to the above Ifá verse, the supreme God, *Olódùmarè,* granted witches their power, which is supposed to be used for the collective good of their community. Although to be a 'good' person is relative and highly contextualized, "a good person (*ènìyàn rere*) is a person who helps others, who does not want bad things to happen to their fellow human beings" (Hallen 2000).

Therefore, the idea of *àjẹ́* as *ènìyàn rere* ('a good person') indicates that witches are women with superior powers to those of men and who belong to mystical and esoteric female cults. These cults act as custodians of the 'power' that regulates and sustains all other aspects of the society's cosmic experience; such cults can be benevolent or malevolent, depending on the circumstances (Olajubu 2012, 28). Radeke, as a benevolent witch, embodies the Yoruba notion of *ènìyàn rere* ('a good person') in *Ìyá-Àjẹ́*. She deploys her spiritual might to fight and vanquish the malevolent witches in defense of the hapless victims whom the witches torment. In the end, she functions more like a tool for retributive justice. She triumphs over Lalonpe and her coven because she carries the power of *Olódùmarè*.

Conclusion

Ìyá-Àjẹ́ and *Àgbà-Mẹ́ta* reimagine the legend of *àjẹ́* in contemporary Yoruba society. On the one hand, the films emphasize how supernatural powers, such as witches, interfere in people's lives in a rapidly modernizing world. On the other hand, they show how superior transcendental powers restore the equilibrium that the witches have disrupted. These films also reveal the subtle attempts by Yoruba filmmakers to contextualize retributive justice. In this article, I argue that Yoruba filmmakers have inherited the narrative style that they deploy in their witchcraft-themed movies from the duo of Ogunde and Ajileye. Ogunde and Ajileye, I argue, represent witchcraft in 'either/or' binaries that result in the stereotypes about witches that have circulated among audiences for many years. According to Okuyade (2011, 5), "The thrust of the religious films of Nollywood is the persistent struggle between the forces of evil/the devil and good/God." The extended musical scores, the coven settings, and the scary costumes Lalonpe and other witches wear in *Ìyá-Àjẹ́* and *Àgbà-Mẹ́ta*, the paper posits, originated from the movies of Ogunde, which Ajileye later copied.

Regarding the division of witches into good/evil, this paper submits that Christianity and Islam have heavily influenced such a binary classification. For instance, since witches are considered 'our mothers', why can we not have films that portray witchcraft as a power that helps women fight oppression and institutional exploitation? *Àjẹ́*, if construed from the Ifá religion, symbolizes a feminine power that only women possess, and which they can use to fight oppression and abuse. Femininity as embodied in women intersects with the *àṣẹ* vital force; this force can be used to protect women's rights, and it can also function as a potent tool for protesting against inequality. In many African cultures, women use their nakedness as a weapon to fight injustice and inequality, and they have been successful in their naked protest.

When women disrobe and bare their naked bodies in public, they invoke something beyond the everyday episteme (Diabate 2020, 3). They are translating their femininity as a rhetorical site of power. In this way, they are retooling their bodies, that men have underprivileged, as a weapon against patriarchal and hegemonic masculinity. On the one hand, the audacity to expose their nakedness, especially the vagina, as a form of protest suggests that African women invoke their *àṣẹ* power to call attention to their plight only when they are out of other possible options. On the other hand, it reflects the cultural knowledge that African men have about women's *àṣẹ* power, which is said to be hidden away in their vaginas. In critical terms, therefore, if the *àṣẹ* vital force is essential to the *àjẹ́* phenomenon in Yoruba culture, it means, then, that it is a feminine power that could serve more secular functions if well-articulated. As Diabate (2020, 2) has noted, "the attention that nakedness in protest begets, and because of its nature as signifying shorthand, the gesture is subject to mediation and translation, and it demands exploration." Not only do African cultural studies scholars need to explore the underlying meanings that naked bodies convey during protests, but they also need to research the intersectionality between *àjẹ́* and female sexuality. I therefore propose the term *ajẹ́ism* as a useful critical handle that can help scholars explore the connections between African witchcraft and social justice. In that way, *àjẹ́* will be translated from its mystical origin to a secular site of appropriation.

I am aware of the representational challenges that might arise in translating *àjẹ́* into a secular rhetorical tool. However, I think the twenty-first century's global modernity allows such multimodal investigations. This means that filmmakers are ready to "recapture the vanished splendor of traditional Yoruba culture in all its metaphysical, social, and aesthetic integrity" (Haynes 1995, 13). The spiritual integrity means that beyond the fetishization of malevolent witches, Nollywood filmmakers

can also focus their cinematic attention on other possibilities that witchcraft can engender in Yoruba society and in Nigeria. The 'either/ or' binary categorization polarizes witchcraft, and it does not provide other useful pragmatic insights that the audiences can gain from the cultural phenomenon. Since culture is a window through which a society reflects its values and ethos, its representation in films does "not only provide external participants and foreign audiences information about African cultures; it also indicates how cultural mediators/creative artists are willing to critique it [culture] in modern times" (Soetan 2018, 9). This shift in point of view could be an invitation for Yoruba filmmakers to bracket their religious biases about witches and embrace representations that underscore contemporary insights that reflect the ontology of witchcraft in Yoruba cosmology.

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