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Spiritual Cannibalism in Occult African Cinema: A Semiotic Perspective on Cameroonian and Nigerian Films' Depiction of "Soul Eating"

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ABSTRACT
The popular imagination in Cameroon and Nigeria associates voodoo or black magic with a host of horrific practices one of which is "soul eating". Also known as spiritual cannibalism or soul cannibalism, this "soul eating" is a situation where some witches or paranormal entities spiritually or mysteriously consume a human being's soul or vital energy, thereby causing the latter to suffer a physical sickness, a mysterious accident or any inexplicable circumstance that can even be mortal in real life. Although a product of folktales and legends, the myth of "soul eating" has become strongly rooted in Cameroonian and Nigerian societies. This myth has inspired many Nigerian and Cameroonian video films, some of which even attempt vivid and sensational depictions of the phenomenon (spiritual cannibalism). The cinematic techniques deployed in these occult films to represent the "soul eating" myth/practice are diverse, interesting, but understudied. In view of filling this gap in knowledge, the present article uses semiotics and secondary sources to show how the cinematic language used in the depiction of "soul eating" in Cameroonian and Nigerian video films is mainly metaphoric and euphemistic. The paper argues that Nigerian and Cameroonian horror film directors mainly use indexes and symbols in the form of special effects, diction and ellipses to represent horrific spiritual cannibalism. These symbolic and indexical approaches – which may largely be attributed to low film budget – most often lead to euphemistic representations of a supposedly gory and frightening experience.

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Introduction

Cannibalism – otherwise called "man-eating" or anthropophagy – is one of the most notorious and popular subgenres of horror movies. The popularity of the subgenre stems from a multitude of factors, one of which being the fact that the act of eating human flesh is inherently horrific and grotesque. The act also has some psychological aspects. In line with this, Paige (2018) contends that anthropophagy is "the embodiment of what is thematically desired in horror films". Paige's contention hinges on cannibalism's physical and psychological dimensions. In effect, from a physical point of view, anthropophagy is gory, repulsive, gruesome and usually involves murder which makes it an excellent driver of horror. Meanwhile, psychologically speaking, the horrifying effects of cannibalism go beyond mere physicality. These physical and psychological characteristics have made cannibalism to be firmly rooted as a "longstanding horror genre" (Paige

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2018). In tandem with this, cannibalism-themed films have been in the rise not only in Western cinemas but also in African film industries, including Nollywood and Collywood which respectively represent the Nigerian and Cameroonian video film industries. Movies involving spiritual cannibalism are for instance visibly preponderant in the Nollywood and Collywood video film industries (Santanera 2019; Endong 2024).

In spite of its popularity, cannibalism as a cultural subject, a theme or a visual metaphor in horror films is mainly read as sensationalism and/or a material that is subject to controversy. Hobbs (2013) associates this negative reading with the gloomy connotations of the man-eating concept across cultures of the world and times in history. Hobbs (2013) actually contends that anthropophagy is "heavily steeped in taboo and stigma. Therefore, the word itself carries a series of connotations which inherently invokes a sensationalist reading linked to notions of violence and criminality" (Hobbs 2015, p.82). The aforementioned connotations and pre-conceptions imply that the representation of cannibalism follows well calculated and well-chosen aesthetical approaches (Pedelton 2023; Brown 2013; Genette 1997). In Western cinemas, film directors often deploy the cannibal figure not necessarily in a literal sense, as a human flesh eater, but dominantly as "an allegorical figure capable of harbouring a vast array of values and relevancies through its continued othering" (Hobbs 2015, p. 82). The cannibal figure in this cinema is usually deployed to *other* an abhorrent group or individual, or reflect the abhorrent facets of the western culture (Brown 2013). Italian exploitation films such as Ruggero Deodato's *Cannibal Holocaust* particularly evoke the colonial cannibal figure. Through this figure, the West is usually presented as the aggressive/predatory force that cannibalises Africa the "Other." Films that hinge on such a metaphor depict the white colonialist as the cannibal who consumes land, culture and societies at will in Africa. The metaphor of cannibalism in films is however not confined to *otherisation*. In Hollywood movies such as *Society of the Snow* (2021) for instance, cannibalism is rather deployed as a metaphor for love. In the film, Jackie (one of the leading characters) is at a point eaten by her lover Shauna. In an attempt to explain the love dynamics between Shauna and Jackie, scriptwriter Jonathan Lisco (the film's screenwriter) affirms that "The eating of a person is the ultimate way to dignify that person and keep her with you forever, while at the same time destroy her and dominate her" (cited in Pendleton 2024, p. 10).

The filmic representation of cannibalism is more cautious and complex in context where it (the cannibalism) is spiritual in nature, notably in occult Black African films. In effect, many African movies that involve voodoo, black magic or blood money represent anthropophagy as a form of magic enactment called "soul eating" or spiritual cannibalism. In such soul eating context, some sorcerers cannibalise their human victims only in spirit, not physically (Ruickbie 2012). The spiritual act is naturally shrouded in secrecy and the filmmakers are compelled to "penetrate this secret realm and reveal stories about it" (Haynes 2008), a task that usually depends on the cautious use of excellent visual metaphors and signs. In representing this spiritual act (soul eating) in their movies, Nollywood and Collywood film directors most often use techniques which range from metaphors and ellipses to meta-textuality. These techniques and aesthetic approaches have remained understudied. In effect it is hard to stumble on previous research works that give a modicum of attention to the representation of spiritual cannibalism in African cinema.

In view of filling the aforementioned gap in knowledge, the present article uses semiotics and secondary sources to show how the cinematic language used in the depiction of soul eating in Nollywood and Collywood films is mainly metaphoric and sensational. The paper argues that Nigerian and Cameroonian horror film directors mainly use indexical and symbolic special effects to represent horrific spiritual cannibalism. These symbolic and indexical approaches – which may largely be attributed to low film budget – most often lead to euphemistic representations of a supposedly gory and frightening experience. In line with the aforementioned objectives, the article

is divided into three main parts. The first part provides a conceptual framework on spiritual cannibalism. The second part examines the phenomenon of "soul eating" in the Cameroonian and Nigerian imagination, while the last part semiotically analyses depictions of soul eating in relevant Nollywood and Collywood movies. This analysis also shows the extent to which the depictions mentioned above are in line with popular myths about witchcraft in the two countries and how effective they may be in conveying the filmmakers' messages.

Methodology

This paper is based on the descriptive research design. It specifically sought to determine the characteristics of Cameroonian and Nigerian films' representations of "soul eating." The paper hinged on two principal methods of data collection and analysis namely critical exploitation of secondary and textual analysis. The exploitation of secondary sources consisted in collecting relevant data from a variety of sources including encyclopaedias, peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, working papers, newspapers and online tabloids. This method in particular proved relevant to build the background to the study as well as to construct the conceptual and theoretical frames of the study. The textual analysis on the other hand consisted in the analysis of over five relevant Nigerian and Cameroonian films whose thematic focus revolved around black magic and spiritual cannibalism. The five films considered for the study included Teco Benson's *End of the Wicked*, and *Highway to the Grave*, Jude Egbe's *Black Vampire*, Ernest Obi's *Black Forest*, and Blaise Ntedju's *Cauchemar Vivant* [Nightmare].

The researcher used a purposive sampling technique to select the five films under study. The choice of this sampling technique followed from the fact that not all Nigerian and Cameroonian video films are on the themes mentioned above. Thus, only relevant films had to be exploited for the study. The textual analysis of the films was based on semiotics. By definition, semiotics is the study, use or interpretation of signs and symbols in a filmic text (Barthes 1964). The study thus, sought to show how Nigerian and Cameroonian filmmakers deploy symbols, indexes and icons to represent "soul eating" in their films. It should be noted that a symbolic representation is a situation where the signifier and the signified are visually or materially different things; for instance, the use of a flower to signify love or the use of the black colour to signify death (Barthes 1964). An indexical sign is a situation where two or more closely connected things work in association to signify a concept; for instance, the use of smoke to signify fire or the use of a gun to signify danger. Finally, an iconic representation is a situation where the signifier and the signified are one and the same thing. For the sake of clarity, the semiotic analysis of the film was organised into well-defined sub-topics. These include 1) the use of symbols of transubstantiation in the films, 2) the use of signs of will eating and 3) the application of ellipses to convey spiritual vampirism.

Conceptual Literature

The term "cannibalism" is derived from the Spanish word "caribales" or "canibales" meaning a person originating from Carib, a West Indies tribe known in history for their practice of cannibalism (Adam 2024). Observed in almost all continents of the world, cannibalism is an age-old human custom. It actually dates back to the period before anatomically modern *Homo sapiens*. This thesis is supported by anthropological evidence found in the cave dwellings of *Homo antecessor* – the common ancestor of modern humans and Neanderthals. In effect, anthropologists have found "de-fleshed" human bones dating back to 600,000 years in these cave dwellings. In addition to this, the earliest *Homo sapiens* bones discovered in Ethiopia show signs of de-fleshing by other humans. Also, varied corpuses of Egyptian magical literature (Pyramid Texts) found in some very earliest tombs suggest that cannibalism was practiced by some Egyptian pharaohs as ritualized acts. One of such Pyramid Texts cited by Ben (2017, para 8) relays a "Cannibal hymn" which reads: "Pharaoh is [he]/Who lives on the being of every god,/Who eats their entrails …

/Pharaoh is he who eats men and lives on gods." All these elements of evidence suggest the age old nature of anthropophagy.

According to the popular fantasy, cannibalism is a primitive culture mainly – nay only – observed in such places as the Pacific islands, Africa and among Native American tribes. This belief is myopic, given that the practice is global in that, it has existed in cultures across the planet (Klose & Thulin 2016; Duggan 2013; Islam 2011). It has just varied in terms of form/pattern and meaning from one culture to another (Nyamnjoh 2018; Staller 2019; Herrmann 2022). The bulk of the extant literature actually numbers at least two types of anthropophagy: cannibalism for survival and ritualised cannibalism or cannibalism for transcendence. The former refers to situations where food shortage or hunger is the main motive for eating human flesh. Missiologist Kirkaldy (2005) documents cases of cannibalism for survival among the Bapedi people of South Africa in the 1860s. He mainly associates this cannibalism with widespread hunger which was usually engendered by wars and political crises in the Bapedi kingdom. Kirkaldy also documents the testimonies of some Bapedi survivors who claimed that "some groups [of Bapedi people] made human flesh their food. What they first did out of need, they later did out of enjoyment" (Kirkaldy 2005, p.27). This quote shows how cannibalism for survival can, in some contexts, morph into a festive culture.

Ritualised or sacred cannibalism, on the other hand, refers to a context where cannibalism is enshrined in sacred rituals, and deals in taboos. In such a context, the man-eating act is regarded as a holy or spiritually empowering practice. Ben (2017) explains that the term taboo here, means more than proscribed action. In a deeper sense, it denotes "the very points where the sacred and profane *converge.*" In addition to this, it means a, paradox where, an act is simultaneously "unclean" and profoundly holly. In Ben's words:

> Anthropologists often define taboo as an act deemed *too sacred* to perform under ordinary circumstances, an act that invites the greatest peril while invoking the most tremendous power. Cannibalism is one of the strongest taboos of all, and that might be the very reason why it's been considered one of the most holy rituals around the world and far back into the depths of prehistory. (Ben 2017, p. 4)

Ritualised cannibalism is for instance observed among contemporary Aghoris, a sect of Hindi ascetic. For this sect, cannibalism is the way par excellence to transcend the boundaries between the world of the living and that of the dead. Like many other cultures, Aghoris believe the bodies of their ancestors bridge the gap between the worlds of the living. By eating the flesh of their ancestors, the Aghoris aim to transcend all dichotomies, see through the illusory nature of all human categories, and attain nirvana by becoming one with the ultimate reality. Like their Aghoris counterparts, the Fores peoples of Papua Guinea ate the hearts and brains of their deceased elders in view of honouring them and ensuring that these deceased people remain a part of the community and pass on their knowledge and wisdom to the younger generation (Riehl 2020).

Similar cases of ritualistic cannibalism have been reported by the international medical charity *Medecins Sans Frontieres* in the early 2000s among militias in such African countries as Sierra Leone, Liberia, Congo and Uganda. The medical charity actually reported cases of "ritualised cannibal feast" among soldiers of various militias operating in war ridden countries notably Liberia and Congo. In Sierra Leone particularly, forces of the RUF and National Patriotic Front of Sierra Leone usually cannibalised their conquered enemies in well-structured rituals for spiritual motives: it is widely believed – not only among Africans, but even among ancient Iroquois and Fijians of the Pacific islands – that by eating the flesh of defeated enemies, an army absorbs the spiritual powers of their vanquished enemies (Riehl 2020). Besides empowering the soldiers spiritually, the cannibal feasts organised by the Sierra Leonean rebel forces mainly satisfied at least two functions. First, they served a propagandist function, instilling fear in the hearts of the

enemies. Second, the cannibal feasts also played the role of an initiation ritual for child soldiers. Such a ritualised cannibalism was a spiritual tool aimed at transforming a boy (the child soldier) into a man and making him feel sanctified, spiritually empowered and safe under the hails of bullets. The soldiers' cannibal feasts are in a way, reminiscent of ancient and highly ritualised cultures whose origins are found in prehistory, when warlords of the Nile Delta feasted on the flesh of their conquered enemies and called it holy.

Although both cannibalism for survival and ritualistic cannibalism conjure up a physical act, some forms of anthropophagy are strictly spiritual. The concept of "soul eating" literally suggests this truism. By definition, "Soul eating" – otherwise called soul cannibalism – is a situation where some witches or paranormal entities spiritually consume a human being's soul or vital energy. Such spiritual consumption causes the victim to suffer a physical sickness, a mysterious accident or any inexplicable circumstance that can even be fatal/mortal in real life (Murray 2017, Geschiere 1997; 1998). On the basis of ethnographic data collected among some north western tribes of Cameroon, Horton (1996) defines soul eating as a form of witchcraft attack where a witch "eats" its victim's heart, will and volitional actions, thereby paralysing the latter spiritually and causing him or her to lose inner strength and their life. In a slightly different perspective, Omoyeni, Oyetade and Omoyeni (2015, p. 368) make allusion to soul eating in their exploration of witchcraft beliefs among some eastern Nigerian tribes. They refer to soul eating as "incorporeal vampirism" in which a sorcerer removes the soul of a victim and transforms such a soul into a goat, a sheep, a cow or any animal of their choice that will later be eaten. By this spiritual act, the sorcerer causes their victim to suffer a slow disease and to eventually die physically. Masquelier (2008) on her own part, hinges on some ethnographic data collected among Arewa dwellers of Niger (Africa), to associate soul eating with spiritually predatory acts that involve some "blood-sucking spirits" locally called "Doguwa spirits". These spirits possess sorcerers and power the latter into feeding on the souls of their victims, thereby causing the unfortunate spiritual preys to lose inner strength and later die, unless a counter spiritual strategy is applied to block the sorcerer's attack.

Thus, the extant literature represents the soul eater as a cannibal figure related to the traditional belief systems of some tribes and groups of people. This figure is known for consuming the spirit of their human victims, causing the latter (the victims) a wasting sickness that can lead to death. Although preponderant in urban tales and legends about witchcraft in Africa, the soul eater is a folklore figure that transcends traditional religions across the globe. The concept of soul eater exists in the Greek mythology, in ancient Egyptian belief as well as in non-African traditional religions such as Chickasaw, Choctaw and Natchez of North America and groups of the Mount Hagen area of Papua Guinea. In spite of this trans-cultural and trans-racial nature of the soul eater phenomenon, some differences must be established between the sub-Sahara African soul eater and his non-African counterparts. The former is a spirit mainly operating in the underworld while the latter is a human being operating in the physical realm.

Soul Eating in the Cameroonian and Nigerian Popular Imagination

In spite of growing levels of modernism and westernisation, religion remains prevalent in Nigeria and Cameroon. This observation follows from the fact that religion – Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion (ATR) – tends to affects all facets of life from politics, through business to education. In effect, Traditional African Religion – often presented as the less influential – is still present in the two countries, and even manifests subtly in the doctrines and mantras of imported religions such as Christianity and Islam, as well as in the various popular cultures observed in both countries. According to this African Traditional Religion, the universe is organised into two interrelated realms: the visible world and the spiritual world. According to popular beliefs, these two worlds are interwoven and easily accessible by some entities with high esoteric or spiritual powers. Among these entities are witches and wizards, as well as native priests commonly called

Babalaos, *Ngangangs* and *Marabouts*. The witches in particular are believed to use the spiritual realm to operate various horrific and life threatening acts, one of which is spiritual cannibalism. In line with this, almost all tales and social constructions of witchcraft in the two countries unfailingly include soul eating. In some Nigerian and Cameroonian indigenous languages for example, witchcraft is automatically equated with spiritual cannibalism. The Hausa people of Northern Nigeria and Cameroon for instance, use the term "Maye" to mean "witch." This term is literally translated into English as "soul eater." Barkaw (1974, p. 2) explains that a Maye is "a man who is believed to hunger for souls. He can at will bring up from his stomach colored pebbles or granules (Kankara)." Some other myths suggest that Mayes are rather people who have been cursed by witches. The curse makes them to spiritually cannibalize others to survive. Thus, the Hausa language, like some other local Cameroonian and Nigerian tongues associates witchcraft principally with soul cannibalism (Regis 2003; Schmoll 1993).

According to Cameroonian and Nigerian social constructions, soul eating can take at least three forms. The first technique used by the soul eaters consists in using spiritual/magical procedures to transform the human body of their victims into a consumable substance (comestible flesh, food and the like), before eating. This technique can be likened to what Catholic Christians call "transubstantiation" in the context of the Eucharistic. By definition, transubstantiation is the spiritual process by which the bread and wine taken during communion in Church, becomes the real flesh and blood of the Christ. As Riehl (2020) puts it, transubstantiation is "the literal presence of Christ in the Eucharist. In other words, when one consumes the wafer, they are consuming the literal body of Christ."

Nigerian and Cameroonian myths suggest that, in the context of African voodoo, transubstantiation transforms the human flesh of victims of witchcraft into comestible foodstuff for the sorcerers' cannibal feasts. In most cases, these foodstuffs are ordinary eatable meat notably mutton, beef or pork. Hinging on beliefs among the Okulosho people of Edo State (Nigeria), Inagbor and Obinyan (2023) explain how the aforementioned transubstantiation manifests. The two authors comment that one of the powers, Okulosho people attribute to witchcraft is that of "turning human beings into animal form" before using them as sacrifice and food in their coven. The two authors add that "in the coven, the spirit of a victim that is already condemned by [the sorcerers' court] is summoned/invoked to appear before members [of the coven] in an animal form. Once the animal is slaughtered and consumed by members, [The victim's life comes to an end]" (Inagbor & Obinyan 2023, p. 158).

The second soul eating technique consists in mystically eating the victim in their human nature. This popular belief about soul eating is particularly suggested by the concepts of "blood sucking spirits," "foetus eating" and "spiritual vampirism" used in the extant literature devoted to witchcraft (beliefs) in Cameroon and Nigeria (Enemchukwu 2024; Murray 2017; Nguimfack 2016; Omoyeni, Oyetade & Omeyeni 2015; Guischiere 1997; Horton 1996; Baeke 1984). Local tales that propound beliefs in this second technique often talk of witches who, work in darkness, mainly at the middle of the night: they use mysterious powers to pass through closed doors and get to their sleeping victims whose blood they suck and feed on. The same type of tales also mention cases of pregnant women who overnight lost their foetuses to some predatory baby-eating witches. The witches in such stories mysteriously snatched the foetuses before eating them in spirit. In his book titled *Delivered from the Forces of Darkness*, Emmanuel Eni (1996) – an occultist turned evangelist – uses his first-hand experience with Satanism to give a description of spiritual vampirism. Eni (1996) relates an instance in which he was initiated in such spiritual vampirism thus:

> Early one morning, she [a partly human and partly spirit being called Alice] told me there was an important ceremony to be performed in the house. At 2.00 a.m. she brought a crawling child, a girl, alive. Before my eyes, Alice [the hybrid entity] used her fingers and

> plucked out the child eyes. The cry of that child broke my heart. She then slaughtered the child into pieces and poured both the blood and the flesh into a tray and asked me to eat. (Eni 1996, p. 15-16)

Eni's (1996) testimonial is in tandem with social representations of witchcraft among the Beti people of Cameroon and Gabon. In these representations, witchcraft is metaphorically associated with predation and bestiality. In other words, the Beti people tend to view witchcraft as a situation where a feline of some sort, prey on weaker animals to ultimately eat their flesh. French anthropologist Bonhomme (2012, p. 194) actually reviews some of the metaphors mentioned above. He writes that the Beti people construe the witch as someone who: "'devours' their victim as if the latter was 'meat'. This witch sucks the victim's blood and may even devour fetuses that are still in their mothers' wombs. No doubt, women's bareness and miscarriages inevitably engender suspicions of witchcraft among the Beti people. Thus, witchcraft is tantamount to predation and raw flesh-eating in the Beti popular imagination" [My translation].[1]

The third technique of spiritual cannibalism consists in eating the victim in a spiritual form. One particularity of this technique is that the soul eaters place emphasis on consuming the vital energy and the volitional actions of their victims, rendering them weak, psychologically sick, strange and ultimately dead. According to the popular fantasy, the victims of this type of soul eating are usually zombielike, they are types of walking corpses. Their disagreeable end is just a matter of time, unless they are spiritually rescued by a powerful "medicine man" or a native priest. In her study of the Wuli people of North West Cameroon, ethnographer Horton (1996) underlines local beliefs in this mode of soul eating among the people. She subtly invokes the aforementioned belief in her contention on local Wuli people's definition of witchcraft. She writes: "Witches are described as someone who 'eats hearts'. Either quickly or over a longer period of time, the witch's presence is felt by the loss of will". Horton explains further that: "In effect, the witch is 'eating will', feeding on volitional action, paralysing the victim with loss of initiative, loss of inner strength. 'Eating will' is what witches here do. It is a type of soul murder" (Horton 1996, p. 9).

Closely connected to the three soul-eating techniques mentioned above is the myth that covens of witches most often apply a rotational system in choosing their human victims. By this system, each member has their turn to offer the human sacrifices that will collectively be eaten by the coven. According to popular beliefs in Cameroon and Nigeria, the human sacrifice to be offered during cannibal feasts in covens, is most often a kin to the coven member who has their turn. One of the principles guiding this rotational system is that each member is compelled to not fail to "offer" their kin whenever their turn to sacrifice a human being comes. The failure to respect this principle is always seriously sanctioned, sometimes by the killing of the defaulter. In line with this, you will easily hear of stories of suspected witches who are believed to have died because they failed to donate their kin to the coven when their turn came (Bonhomme 2012; Teixeira 2008; Guischere 1997). With close respect to the Okulosho people of Nigeria, Inagbor and Obinyan (2023) evoke the aforementioned principle. The two authors affirm that when members of witches' covens get their respective shares of a victim, they are usually mindful that they will one day obligatorily repay with the same coin (by donating a member of their family in sacrifice). Inagbor and Obinyan explain thus:

> Those who take their shares [of the human sacrifice] home do so for two purposes. First, whenever they are asked to donate a relative they like, they simply go home and repackage the shares of the meat given to them in the coven and return everything to members; in

1 Le sorcier « bouffe » sa victime comme une « viande ». Il se repaît de son sang et va jusqu'à dévorer les fœtus in utero (c'est pourquoi la stérilité féminine et les fausses couches déclenchent inévitablement des soupçons de sorcellerie). Prédation et dévoration vont donc de pair dans les représentations de la sorcellerie.

> which case, he/she is not owing any members of the guild, and therefore they have no right to demand or request for anything from such a member. The second reason is that the meat can be used for initiation. Whoever eats from the meat knowingly or unknowingly automatically becomes a member of the guild. [...] People who keep such meat and do not want their children to be initiated keep it out of reach from the children. (Inagbor & Obinyan, 2023, p. 159)

In the aforementioned citation, Inagbor and Obinyan (2023) also make allusion to popular myths suggesting that the proceed of spiritual vampirism could be used as bait or instrument to initiate non-witches into witchcraft and soul cannibalism. In line with this, it is common to come across stories of people who are believed to have been initiated into witchcraft through comestible takeaways from festive occasions such as parties. The comestible stuffs were offered them in the form of ordinary eatables. Meanwhile in reality, these stuffs were human flesh and blood, a substance aimed at spiritually poisoning the receivers' souls and changing them to initiated witches. A popular tale in Cameroon even says that some nursery school pupils were initiated into witchcraft after they naively ate food that was offered them by fellow class mates during birthday parties organised at their school campuses.

Semiotising Soul Cannibalism in Nollywood and Collywood

Nollywood and Collywood respectively refer to the Southern Nigerian and Anglophone Cameroonian video film industries. The former sprang up in 1992 amidst an economic recession and in just few decades, it became a $590-600 million global giant (Oh 2014; New Africa Magazine 2013). The latter, on the other hand, saw the light of the day in 2008 and has not really attracted an extensive scholarly attention. This latter cinema movement is popularly considered to be Anglophone-Cameroonian only. However, given that Francophone-Cameroonian agency is visible in it, this paper will define Collywood as both Anglophone and Francophone Cameroonian video films industry.

Nollywood is known as the second most prolific film industry in the world after Bollywood (given its ability to produce more than 50 film per week), while Collywood is popularly regarded as an offshoot of the Nollywood. Both Collywood and Nollywood films are windows into their respective societies of origins. Furthermore, the two video film industries are mainly characterised by small budget films. These films are generally shot quickly, following non-conformist or un-Hollywood production paradigms. Most films within the two industries hinge on a star system and their makers are driven more by capitalistic motives. In other words, these filmmakers mainly shoot films for a business and profit making purpose than for the sake of satisfying a well-articulated artistic philosophy or political ideology (Santanera 2019; Robold 2017). This primordial search for profit most often pushes them (the filmmakers) to prioritise populist/popular themes in their films as well as the most sellable film genres.

Popular genres in Nollywood and Collywood vary from romantic comedy to horror. However according to most critics, voodoo or black magic-themed films are predominant in the two industries (Robold 2017; Haynes 2011). The film that kick-started Nollywood in particular, Obi Rapu's *Living in Bondage* (1992), is a good example of the black-magic themed movies that are every week released in Nigeria. Recognised as one of Nollywood's highly grossing films, *Living in Bondage* has encouraged the release of many other horror movies. Some of these movies include *Billionnaire Club*, *Issakaba*, *Karashika*, *Nneka*, *the Pretty Snake*, *Obiye; The Comforter* and *Mami Wata* among others. Collywood's replicas of the aforementioned horror films include *Black*

Vampire, *Sangoura*, *Sur le Chemin d'un Ange* [On the Way of an Angle] and *Kuvah* among others.[2]

Many Nollywood and Collywood horror films related to witchcraft do represent soul eating in a variety of ways. In this section, attention is given to three such ways. They include 1) the use of symbols of transubstantiation, 2) the use of signs of will eating and 3) the application of ellipses to convey spiritual vampirism. Analysis in this section will be based on semiotics, the science of signs and symbols. The section will also show the extent to which the aforementioned representational approaches are vivid and in line with popular myths on witchcraft.

Symbols and Indexes of Transubstantiation

As earlier mentioned, popular Cameroonian and Nigerian myths about witchcraft suggest that sorcerers use cannibalistic approaches that involve some kind of transubstantiation. By this transubstantiation the flesh and blood of their human preys/victims mysteriously morph into some substances that are culturally (more) comestible. The above myths actually purport that the cannibal witches mysteriously turn their human victims into such domestic animals as goats, cows, sheep, or chickens whose flesh is believed to taste great. Thus, transubstantiation occurs in typical spiritual cannibalism when the cannibal witches eat a food stuff which organically/chemically is not human flesh, but which, spiritually, remains the body of their human victims. Nollywood and Collywood filmmakers symbolise this spiritual process (transubstantiation) by using different types of foodstuff, ranging from cooked food and beverage to fruits. A case in point is Teco Benson's *End of the Wicked* (1999) which contains various soul eating scenes, where human victims' flesh (in the spirit world) is represented as cooked rice and stew (see Plates 1 and 2).

Scripted and produced by Liberty Church founder, Helen Ukpabio, the film *End of the Wicked* is about a coven of witches who constantly meet in the spirit world with Beelzebub to plan horrific schemes against humanity. This coven plan and mystically execute series of devilish works that cause human deaths, incurable sicknesses, infertility, and some marital problems in a good number of spiritually unfortified families. The coven also initiates some children into their witchcraft industry thereby making these hitherto innocent infants to become terrible weapons used by Beelzebub to progressively destroy the human race. In Plate 1 and 2, the aforementioned witch children are shown, cannibalising an unfortunate male victim in spirit. The scene is taking place at the middle of the night, when the victim is in a deep sleep. The scene is thus conceived in a way as to convey that the witch children's spiritual initiative is a good example of what Nigerians and Cameroonians commonly call nocturnal spiritual attack by witches. In Plate 1, the victim is represented as a delicious plate of rice and stew, while in Plate 2, this victim is devoured with relish in spirit, by the witch children. The subsequent scenes of the movie show the victim developing a wasting sickness that end up causing his death.

Plate 1: In this shot extracted from End of the Wicked, Teco Benson illustrates how victims of voodoo attacks are spiritually turned to some kind of food before being eaten by witches.

[2] For more on Nollywood and Collywood, refer to Endong (2022), Santanera (2019), Robold (2017) and Haynes (2008).

Plate 2: In this shot extracted from End of the Wicked, Teco Benson illustrates how sorcerer eat up their human victims.

Like many similar horror films, Teco Benson's *End of the Wicked* relies on popular social narratives and meta-textuality to make its soul eating scenes understand-able or legible to the typical Nigerian/African audience. In effect, the popular African belief about witches who turn their victims into comestible foodstuff functions as a clue. Such a belief provides some preliminary framework for superstitious African audiences to understand the soul eating scenes contained in *End of the Wicked*. Besides this popular belief, the soul eating scenes in Teco's *End of the Wicked* are clear re-enactments of similar gory and gloomy scenarios graphically presented up-front in two avidly consumed publications authored by Helen Ukpabio, the producer of *End of the Wicked*. These publications are titled *Seat of Satan Exposed* and *Unveiling the Mysteries of Witchcraft*. Issues such as the invisible realm and witch children who spiritually cannibalise their victims are evoked in the two books. Soul eating scenes in Teco's *End of the Wicked* are somewhat a filmic version of the ones evoked or represented in Ukpabio's publications. Anyone who has read the two publications, will likely understand the symbols and indexes (cooked rice, stew and meat) used in *End of the Wicked* to represent transubstantiation in Teco Benson's film.

However, Teco Benson's use of a plate of food in the soul eating scenes shown in Pates 1 and 2 may be confusing to some extent. This plate may give "non-initiated" viewers (those who know less about African myths on witchcraft) the impression that the witch children are eating something else; and that, their meal is placed only by chance on the back of the sleeping victim. A more effective post-production technique/FX would have therefore been an image manipulation that clearly integrates the cooked food with the body of the sleeping victim. Such a manipulation/image montage could lead to a scene where the rice and stew physically appear as entrails of the victim, which the little soul eaters devour with relish.

Indexes and Icons to Convey the Notion of Spiritual Vampirism

While some witches are believed to mysteriously turn their victims to comestible foodstuff before consuming them, others are thought to eat these victims in spirit, while the latter are in their human form. To represent this esoteric act, Nollywood and Collywood filmmakers usually use a variety of indexes. In the Cameroonian film titled *Black Vampirism* (2008), costumes, makeup and special effects are used, to construct violent spiritual vampirism scenes. The tools mentioned above contribute in representing the spiritual cannibal as a carnivorous predatory beast and the victim as a vulnerable prey subjected to devouring. The film is about a young man who resorts to witchcraft for power and money. As he gets initiated into witchcraft, he turns to a vampire that serially kills and eats dwellers of his neighbourhood.

In the scene shown in Plate 3, a reddish and meaty substance is applied in the open mouth and on

the teeth of the cannibal. This is done to suggest spiritual vampirism. This reddish and meaty substance is indexical not only to human flesh but also to raw flesh-eating and spiritual vampirism. In spite of its technical imperfections, the aforementioned vampirism scene reflects the popular myth stipulating that some sorcerers mystically devour their human victims while the latter are in their human form. African audiences' preconceptions about spiritual vampirism may help understand the film's message. A slightly modified version of the aforementioned myth is observed in Ernest Obi's *Black Forest 1, 2, & 3*. Obi's movie is about a witch coven who embark on avenging all the bad deeds they suffered in the past from their contemporaries living in a sinister African/Nigerian village. The coven's revenge is marked by horrific mystical attacks on villagers. These attacks lead to the mysterious death and the zombification of many villagers.

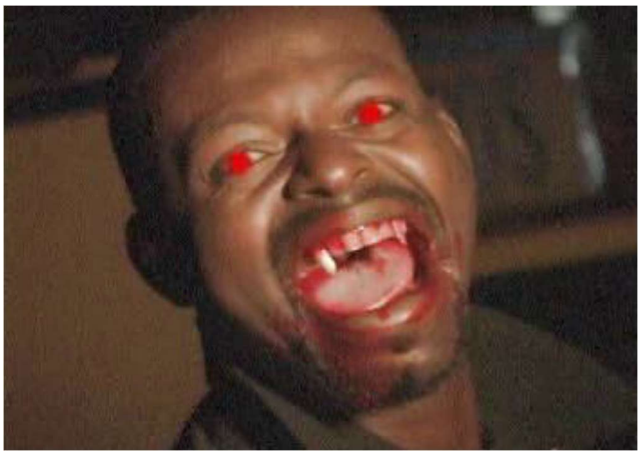

Plate 3: A Flesh-Eating sorcerer in Black Vampire (2008)

Like *Black Vampire*, Ernest Obi's film is replete with spiritual vampirism scenes. The only difference may be that, while human victims are eaten raw in Collywood's *Black Vampire*, Obi's cannibalised characters are cooked by their spiritual aggressors before being eaten. In other words, Ernest Obi's *Black Forest* is replete with scenes showing witches who mystically cook their victims before eating them. The cooking is usually done in a kind of giant mystical pot which can contain an entire human being. In Plate 4 for instance, the leader of the coven is shown stirring a steaming bloody soup which the witches are about to relish in their nocturnal feast. Like in other similar scenes of the film, the cinematographer carefully avoids close ups of the human flesh that is being cooked in the witches' giant pot. By such avoidance, the cinematographer creates some ellipses which play a euphemistic function. The function is said here to be euphemistic because explicit exhibition of human flesh-like material may be too gory and/or sensational. Another possible reading of this technical choice may be that, explicit depiction of human flesh may necessitate the use of more sophisticated visual effects which might be unrealistic, given the meagre budget on which Nollywood video films usually rely.

Plate 4: The leader of the witch coven is coking their human victim.

In spite of the ellipses deployed in the scene (shown in Plate 4), the spiritual vampirism message is still sufficiently conveyed through indexes such as the stirring of the soup, the vapour that oozes from the interior of the giant pot and even the incantations that accompany the nocturnal culinary art. This incantation (mentioned below) points somewhat to the type of cannibalism that is represented in the scene under study:

Mothers of the night
Lords of the skies
Our food
Blood of the unfaithful
Our hearts
Darken by hates
Our souls
Caged by Osepuluwa (God)

The aforementioned incantation represents what Roland Barthes (1964) calls "anchor" in his *Rhetoric of the Image*. According to Barthes, the "anchor" is any constitutive element of the text that helps the reader overcome incidence of polysemicity in the message conveyed by the author. In a nutshell, the anchor gives the preferred meaning of a polysemic message. In the scene shown in Plate 4, the cooking performed by the witches could at first sight be read as a mere nocturnal culinary art. The incantation however, provides clues that will enable the audience understand that it is human flesh that is being cooked for consumption.

Symbols to Convey Vital Energy-Eating

If not eaten in their human or transubstantiated form, the human victims of spiritual cannibalism are consumed in a spirit form. This style of consumption usually involves feeding on the vital energy of the victim. Collywood and Nollywood films usually hinge on ellipses, special effects or dialogues to convey this notion of energy eating. A case in point is Blaise Ntedju's *Cauchemar Vivant* [Nightmare in Live] which recounts the story of a young man, Ngando, who joins a secret esoteric society in search of wealth and power. After his initiation into the secret society, Ngando is compelled to deliver his only daughter in sacrifice to the secret society. This is done in exchange for wealth. His daughter dies after being eaten in spirit by members of the esoteric society. The consumption of Ngando's daughter is done at night, while the latter is in her sleep. Her spirit is summoned to appear in the spirit realm before the esoteric society. In unison, members of the esoteric society swallow the vital energy of their little victim. After this spiritual act, Ngando's daughter is left to die in the visible realm.

Plate 5: The witches chant incantation to swallow their victim's soul in Black Forest

The notion of swallowing the victim's vital energy is similarly evoked in Ernest Obi's *Black Forest*, through a handful of cannibalism scenes. In one such scenes (see Plate 5), members of a witch coven are heard reciting incantations which subtly provide some details about the coven's cannibalistic modus operandi. This modus operandi includes sucking the soul of their victims. Presented as a dialogue between the coven leader and floor members of the coven, the incantations go thus:

> COVEN LEADER: Life for life. Death begets death, sorrow and pain. [...] Mothers of the night, winged lords from the depths of the hereafter, I seek solace, death solace. I seek peace, death peace. I seek vengeance, death vengeance.

> MEMBERS OF THE COVEN: Seek for what is yours. For what was taken from you, Must be returned. Drink their blood till they have nothing to give. Chew their flesh till only bones are left. Grind their bones till they become dust. Swallow their souls for Osepuluwa (God) cannot save them.

Thus, Obi uses an evocative diction notably "swallow their souls" which is indexical to the notion of "energy-eating" and "will-eating". Like in all the preceding examples considered in this paper, spiritual cannibalism is here portrayed without the use of explicit and very gory material. Actually, Obi uses simple indexes to convey the essential: African audiences' beliefs around soul eating. This tendency of using just the essential – that is, symbols and indexes – to convey very complex and secretive witchcraft practices may variously be interpreted. While some observers may attribute the modest cinematic approaches to the shoe-string budgets of Nigerian and Cameroonian occult films, others might associate the modesty with the fetish mindset of some occult filmmakers. Santanera (2019) evokes this fetish mindset in a study devoted to resilient filmmaking in Douala, Cameroon's economic capital. She writes that:

> In the course of my fieldwork, I gathered rumors saying that Ebenezer (the founder of the famous group "*Les deballeurs*", whose artistic sobriquet is Mintoumba) was using *Vicious Circle*, a [horror] TV series he personally scripted, to expose various mystical practices peculiar to his secret cult. One of Kepombia's rivals claimed that "He (Kepombia) was drawing on his mystical experience with his cult. And that he could not cross some limits […] He could only show what everybody already knew about his cult, for fear of being expulsed from the esoteric group. [My translation][3] (Santanera 2019, p. 729)

The aforementioned citation suggests that local social critics and audiences in Nigeria and Cameroon view cinematic representations of occultism as a ritualistic act which must be performed with the use of the most appropriate signs. In line with this belief, an issue such as soul eating should be represented only with sings that will convey what African audiences already know about witchcraft. Crossing some limits might be detrimental to the occult filmmaker.

Conclusion

The popular fantasy in Nigeria and Cameroon associates voodoo or black magic with a host of horrific practices one of which is "soul eating". Although a product of folktales and legends, the myth of soul eating has become strongly rooted in Cameroonian and Nigerian societies. The soul eating myth has inspired many Nigerian and Cameroonian cineastes. Some of these filmmakers have even attempted vivid and sensational depictions of this horrific practice in their films. The cinematic techniques often deployed by these cineastes to represent this soul eating myth in their shoe-string films have been diverse. Using semiotics, this paper addressed three such techniques namely symbols/indexes of transubstantiation, signs of spiritual vampirism and indexes of energy-eating.

The paper argues that Nigerian and Cameroonian horror film directors mainly use simple indexes and symbols – in the form of special effects, diction and ellipses – to convey the essential: African audiences' beliefs around soul eating. This tendency of using just the essential – that is simple symbols and indexes – to convey very complex and secretive witchcraft practices may variously be interpreted. While some observers may attribute the modest cinematic approaches to the shoe-

[3] Lors de ma recherche sur le terrain, les rumeurs affirmaient qu'Ebenezer (le fondateur du célèbre groupe Les déballeurs, plus connu sous son nom de scène, Mitoumba) révélait les pratiques mystiques de sa secte dans la série télévisée *Cercle vicieux* […], qu'il avait lui-même écrite. Un réalisateur parmi ses concurrents, affirme qu'il « s'inspir[ait] de ce qu'il a lui-même fait. Mais il ne peut pas en faire voir trop... Il ne fait voir que ce que tout le monde sait déjà, sinon ils l'expulsent de la secte

string budgets of Nigerian and Cameroonian occult films, other critics may see in this modesty, attempts by the cineasts to avoid crossing some esoteric lines.

This paper focused exclusively on the ways in which spiritual cannibalism is represented in Nigerian and Cameroonian video films. Further studies could focus on a number of related issues. For instance, it could be interesting to know the effects of Nollywood and Collywood films' representation on popular beliefs about spiritual cannibalism in Cameroon and Nigeria. Also interesting are local filmmakers' perceptions of audiences' reception of their cinematic representations of spiritual cannibalism. The aforementioned interesting issues could therefore be addressed in subsequent studies.

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