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Research Article

How Sellable is "Black Reel Christ" to the African Christendom? A Socio-Cultural Analysis of African Audiences' Reception of Black Jesus Films

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Abstract: Black Jesus films contribute in no small measure to reclaiming the Christ and de-westernising global evangelical cinema. They also contribute, in some ways, to the African struggle against the whitewashing of Christianity in Africa. In theory, these films give an African twist to Bible stories and clearly reflect the African liberation theology as well as the African cultural hermeneutics. As culturally sensitive adaptations of the Gospel narrative, they may speak to diverse African Christian communities. In view of the politico-cultural dimension of these filmic productions, one may hypothesize that Black Jesus films are friendly to the Afro-optimism movement and would likely be lauded by the majority of African audiences, particularly those having a pride for African cultures. Using insights from recent studies and relevant literature, this paper examines the extent to which the aforementioned hypothesis is plausible. Specifically, the paper attains three objectives. In the first place, it explores the extent of the popularity of Black Jesus films in African cinemas. In the second place, it examines the motivations as well as the evangelical and theological merits of these African Jesus films. In the last place, the paper analyses the extent to which African audiences (particularly critics) positively receive the concept of black reel Jesus. The paper argues that, in spite of its afro-optimistic dimension, the Black Reel Jesus concept is disdained by African (Christian) audiences for reasons that range from mental colonialism to anachronistic film aesthetics.

Keywords: Jesus Films, Black Liberation Theology, Reel Jesus, African Film Audience, De-Westernization, African Cultural Hermeneutics

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1. Introduction

The art of cinematizing biblical stories – and screening Jesus Christ in particular– is as old as cinema itself. According to historical sources, this art saw the light of the day shortly after the establishment of the film medium and many years before the release of Sidney Olcott's *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) (Moore, 2025; Merz, 2010; Telford, 1997; Engelbrecht, 1995). Film historian Shepherd (2016) actually observes that the "Silent Jesus" films followed from the Passion Play traditions of Medieval Europe and proliferated as from 1897. In the same line of thought, Telford (1997) affirms that films involving biblical characters (including Jesus) and set in biblical times have been a staple of filmmaking right from the birth of Western cinemas. This partly followed from the fact that the holy scriptures presented filmmakers with material that was not only popular but also dignified. Telford (1997) adds that before Cecil B. DeMille created his epic *The King of Kings* (1927), there had been at least thirty-nine earlier versions of the Christ story. Thus, it is difficult to talk of the history of cinema without mentioning Jesus films.

The aforementioned popularity of Jesus films has survived over decades. In fact, up to today, Jesus Christ remains the most depicted character in films, particularly in Western cinema (Derrenbacker, 2025). As Telford (1997) puts it, "one of the earliest 'stars' of the silent era, and one of the brightest 'stars' to shine [continually] in the cinema's firmament has been Jesus of Nazareth" (p.1). Indeed, Jesus is depicted symbolically, allegorically or literally in both religious and non-religious films, depending on film directors' individual art philosophies.

However, much of the filmic depictions of Jesus has followed some Eurocentric currents and favored Western religious, ideological and cultural interests. In effect, these depictions have mainly sold the idea that Jesus Christ is a blue-eyed Caucasian and that Christianity is, from many indications, a

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Western religion. Grey and Esplin (2021) affirm that right from the silent era, Western biblical films have depicted Jesus in ways that closely parallel the European artistic traditions with which religious audiences have long been familiar. These depictions reflect Jesus's divinity but distance him from the first century Palestinian native Jew that he was. The depictions also make it difficult for non-Western audiences to perfectly connect with Jesus on a cultural and emotional level. Apart from very rare productions such as Blair Underwood's *Second Coming* (1992), Jean-Claude La Marre's *Color of the Cross* (2006) and Jeymes Samuel's The *Book of Clarence* (2023), that variedly tap into the Black liberation theology, Western films mostly depict Jesus Christ in ways that whitewash Christianity or subtly preach White hegemony.

This scenario has triggered many non-Western artists, storytellers and ideologues to think of alternative and de-colonial approaches to representing Jesus Christ (Jong, 2023; Leeb, 2020; Chattaway, 2014; Brinkman, 2009). In tandem with this, some apologists of the African liberation theology and the African cultural hermeneutics do make a case for cinematic or artistic representations that speak directly to African communities and tap deeply into the controversial – but emancipatory – concept of Black African Jesus (Omotoso, 2019; Nollywood Reinvented, 2012; Gqubule, 1974). In line with this, a handful of "Bantu Jesus films" – that is films depicting Jesus as a sub-Saharan African individual – have seasonally been released since the middle of the 2000s. Good examples include Mark Dornford-May's *Son of Man* (2006), Frank Arase's *Agony of the Christ* and Collins Chidiebe's *Cross of Jesus* (2023), which respectively depict Jesus as being of the Xhosa (from South Africa), Akan (from Ghana) and Igbo (from Nigeria) ethnicities.

The aforementioned African films contribute in no small measure to de-westernizing religious cinema and arresting the whitewashing of Christianity in Africa. In theory, these films give an African twist to Bible stories and clearly reflect the African liberation theology as well as the African cultural hermeneutics. As culturally sensitive interpretations of the Gospel narrative, they may speak to many African Christian communities. In view of the politico-cultural dimension of these filmic productions, one may hypothesize that Black Jesus films are friendly to Afro-optimism and would likely be lauded by Black African audiences, particularly viewers with a pride for African cultures. Using insights from recent studies and relevant literature, this paper examines the extent to which the aforementioned hypothesis is plausible. Specifically, the paper attains three objectives. In the first place, it explores the extent of the popularity of Black Jesus film productions in African cinemas. In the second place, it examines the motivations as well as the evangelical and theological dimensions of these African Jesus films, and finally the paper analyses the extent to which African audiences (particularly critics) positively receive the concept of Black Reel Christ.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Issues

2.1. Black Reel Jesus

The term "Black Reel Jesus" is a fusion of two words: "reel Jesus" and "Black Jesus". The former is used by Telford (1997) in an article that examines the images of Christ in Western cinemas. In Telford's understanding, the concept of "reel Jesus" refers to the various appearances of Jesus in Western religious and non-religious films. These ways range from allegorical and symbolic to guest appearance and leading role. Telford explains that, Jesus's appearance is described as allegorical when his manifestation is indirect through the acts and thoughts of a hero with Christlike qualities, for example, in Stuart Rosenberg's *Cool Hand Luke* (1967). Jesus's appearance is said to be symbolic when it is implied on screen through the presence of body parts (a hand, both hands, feet or even a headless trunk) that are clearly or subtly relatable to Christ, for example in *Ben-Hur*, (1925; 1959). The guest appearance takes the form of visions granted to the principal characters of a film, notably in Merian C. Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1935). Finally, Jesus's appearance may come in the form of a "leading man" as in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).

"Black Jesus" – otherwise called "Black Messiah" – on the other hand is born from a diversity of phenomena including colonialism, racism, African spirituality and the Black liberation theology among others. The latter phenomenon (Black liberation theology) in particular, is a contextual theology originating among African American seminarians and scholars. It is focused on liberating the Black people from historical and ongoing oppression. This theology arose out of Black religious thought and activism. In its original version, it appeared as an application of the liberation theology to the

largely gloomy African American historical and contemporary experience. Black Liberation Theology is a systemic call to action against the widespread poverty, social injustice and oppression suffered by the Black people. Apologists of this theology advance the thesis of a historical Jesus who was racially black (Luka, 2024; DeYoung, 2009; Cleage, 1968) and who would likely identify with today's poor, downtrodden and oppressed people, given his humble social background (Cone, 1999; Hayes, 2000). Cone (1999) in particular argues that the blackness of Jesus Christ lies less on the color of his skin than on his propensity to stand on the side of those who are poor and oppressed.

Thus, the aforementioned apologists of the Black liberation theology weaponize the concept of Black Jesus as a figure of liberation and solidarity with the oppressed. This concept is meant to challenge the Eurocentric representations of Christ that have often been used to justify the political oppression of Black community and the whitewashing of Christianity (Konadu & Boafo, 2022; Nnoruga & Osigwe, 2023; Verwoerd, 2020). It also aims at deconstructing the representation of blackness in religious arts. Additionally, the Black Jesus concept has profound theological implications. It provides a sense of identity and belonging for Black Christians, serving as a powerful symbol of hope and resistance in the face of socio-political and religious injustice (Martey, 1993). It stresses the value and dignity of Black lives within a theological framework.

Manifestations of this "Black Messiah" concept are diverse in the popular culture prevalent in Black communities. It is for instance seen in the artistic tradition of representing Jesus with darker pigment in view of suggesting his African heritage. A good example is the Coptic Icon of the Black Madonna and Child. Another example is the depiction of Jesus as black in such films and TV programs as Jean-Claude La Marre's *Color of the Cross* (2006), Jeymes Samuel's *The Book of Clarence* and Aaron McGruder and Mike Clattenburg's *Black Jesus* (2014-2019). The concept of Black Messiah is therefore part of a wide spiritualo-cultural and political movement driven by Black or pro-Black theologians, and aimed at constructing the Jesus figure as a deity and liberator who perfectly identifies with the Black ethnicities and who is fully aware of these Black people's struggles and sufferings in both history and contemporary times. A Black Messiah not only has darker skin tone but also behaves as a native African.

For the Black people, he is "the humane concentration of the divine power that healed the sick, expelled spirits, etc" (Petersen, 2022, p. 3).

2.2. African cultural hermeneutics

Otherwise called "African Biblical Hermeneutics", the African cultural hermeneutics is a method of interpreting holy scriptures and ancient texts that essentially considers the African cultural context. It recommends the reading of the scriptures from the premeditatedly Afrocentric perspective. Its ultimate goal is to make all interpretations of the scriptures culturally relevant to the African audiences. As explained by Adamo (2015), this method "reappraises ancient biblical tradition and African world-views, cultures and life experiences, with the purpose of correcting the effect of the cultural [and] ideological conditioning to which Africa and Africans have been subjected in the business of biblical interpretation" (p.59). The African Biblical Hermeneutics partly emanates from a Black/African spiritual frustration: that of being compelled to understand and practice the Christian faith in the terms of a foreign culture. In his preface to *African Theology en Route*, Ghanaian theologian Kofi Appiah-Kubi (1981) expresses the aforementioned frustration. Drawing on Psalms 137:4, the theologian writes: "how can I sing the Lord's song in a strange land, in a strange language, in a strange thought, in a strange ideology" (p.viii). He adds that:

> […] for more than a decade now, the cry of the Psalmist has been the cry of many African Christians. We demand to serve the Lord in our own terms and without being turned into Euro-American or Semitic bastards before we do so. That the gospel has come to remain in Africa cannot be denied, but now our theological reflections must be addressed to the real contextual African situations. Our question must not be what Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, or any other Karl has to say, but rather what God would have us do in our living concrete condition (Appiah-Kubi, 1981, p.viii).

Thus, as a method, the African Cultural Hermeneutic aims at challenging Eurocentric readings of the Bible (Maken, 2025; Enegho et al., 2018; Ola, 2022; Nwangwu, 2023; Mokoena, 2017). It may also help a Jesus film maker in their exploitation of historical sources as well as their interpretation or adaptation of the Gospel accounts of Jesus life, ministry and death.

3. The Concept of Black Jesus Film in Africa

Many Hollywood Jesus films are lauded not only for their original take on the Scriptures and their dramatic impact, but also for spreading the gospel of Christ in countries across the world, including the remotest parts of the African continent (Jesus Film Project, 2017; Baugh, 2011). As Merz (2014) rightly observes, these films have become "iconic of the use of media mainly by evangelical missionaries". They have now gained in prominence and are "praised in evangelical circles with an unrestrained optimism "as one of the greatest evangelistic success stories of all time" (Merz, 2014, p. 9). Films like Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) and *The Nativity Story* (2006) are actually not only avidly consumed in Africa but also regarded as powerful evangelical tools in the hands of Christian organizations within the continent. In effect, Africa-based churches are fond of using dubbed or subtitled versions of these biblical films for soul winning or to spice up their religious programs. In a study devoted to the reception of John Heyman-pr*oduced Jesus* (1979) – among other religious movies – in Benin republic of West Africa, Merz (2014) observes that the popularity of Hollywood Jesus films in Africa is enabled less by their contents than by the use local Christian communities make of them. This popularity is sometimes difficult to rationalize given that even films considered by cinema scholars as being too mediocre (notably Heyman's *Jesus*) are avidly consumed in some parts of Africa.

In spite of this popularity, Hollywood Jesus films (including those with huge commercial success) have their fair share of flaws or weak points. These flaws have caught the attention of critics. An example of such pitfalls is the fact that they (Hollywood Jesus films) are culturally distant to African audiences. This distance reduces, in some ways, the films' dramatic power and evangelistic verve. Merz (2014) confirmed this truism in his comparison of John Heyman-pr*oduced Jesus* (1979) and some Benin-made religious films (*Yatin* and *La Solution*). He notes that: "Due to the marked cultural distance to its Beninese audiences, the film *Jesus* allows for much more variety of interpretations than the Benin-made *Yatin*. This implies that *Jesus* is not actually a particularly good evangelistic tool. People can watch the film and simply enjoy it" (Merz, 2014, p. 259).

Another weak point of the Western Jesus films is their Eurocentric depictions of Jesus's life, ministry and death. Actually, being greatly inspired by European artistic traditions, these depictions have mainly served Western cultural, ideological and religious interests. As noted by Baugh (2011) most Hollywood Jesus film directors claim their depictions of Jesus Christ is conform or faithful to historical texts and holy scriptures. But the truth is that these depictions are more ideological and political than authentic expression of truth. In other words, these depictions seek to naturalize and perpetrate pro-Western ideologies notably the White supremacist concept. In the same line of argument, Nelson (2025) argues that the widespread depiction of Jesus as a White man in Hollywood has risen to become a conflicted icon of white supremacy. To many proponents of the African Liberation Theology, the ideological or White supremacist nature of Hollywood Jesus films warrants the adoption of Black aesthetics in African films. South African theologian Simon Gqubule (1974) underlines the aforementioned imperative, in a subtle bashing of Western cinema Jesus traditions. Gqubule writes:

> I remember how, some years ago, I was horrified by a religious film in which Jesus was made to speak with an American accent. His gestures, movements and his whole attitude seemed to me to be American. I went home feeling that this was horrible, how can Jesus be depicted as an American? As I thought further on this experience, it occurred to me that in films when Jesus was presented as speaking with an English accent I had never questioned this, because I had grown to accept it as such. If Christ could speak English with an English accent why should he not also speak with an American accent? If he is to speak to the American in his situation then he must speak to the American in an accent which the American will recognize as his own. In the same way if Christ is to be relevant to the Black man he must speak with the accent of a Black man, through the life experiences of the Black man, reacting to life situation in ways that would be recognizable to the Black man as his own. This is the essence of what is called Black Theology. (p. 18)

Thus, the white aesthetics and supremacism celebrated in Hollywood Jesus films have often elicited criticism from proponents of the African liberation theology. Not only theologians, but also filmmakers and avant-garde artists have called for African cinema-based efforts aimed at countering the White supremacist Jesus tradition that characterizes Hollywood.

As argued by Tshaka (2020), the white Jesus portrayed in Hollywood films is a "political picture meant to support the unjust wars of conquest in Africa. To just accept that without critiquing it, is to be theologically and politically ingenuous" (p.8).

3.1. African Jesus film as a decolonial movement

The urge to challenge the aforementioned Eurocentrism and construct culturally sensitive images of Jesus Christ that speak to African film audiences, has led to various decolonial and emancipatory religious film projects in some African countries. In an interview granted Reuters (*SouthAfrica.info*, 2006), filmmaker Mark Dornford-May, makes allusion to the emancipatory spirit mentioned above. The South African film director somewhat situates his Black Jesus film (Knave, 2022) within some de-colonial and African cultural hermeneutics frameworks. In an attempt to rationalize his artistic approach, he confides that "We wanted to look at the Gospels as if they were written by spin doctors and to strip that away and look at the truth".

Dornford-May's *Son of Man* (2006) is the gospel story reclaimed as an African fable. It sets the universal story of the Son of God in a South African context marked by racial discrimination and political oppression against the black majority. In other words, the film dramatizes this gospel story in a context of apartheid South Africa; and intelligently philosophizes on what could be the take of Jesus Christ on racial segregation and political oppression of the Black people in apartheid South Africa. The film follows the life of a religious leader, Jesus (Andile Kosi), who is born in the fictive state of Judea in Southern Africa, and who is compelled to grow his spiritual movement amidst a situation of social and political violence and poverty. When civil war breaks out in Judea, Jesus exhorts his disciples to shy away from corruption and warfare and to diligently cultivate peace. His teachings are not really subversive to the corrupt government in place but one of his apostles, Judas, goes and frames him up before some state authorities. Judas convinces these authorities that his master's teachings are seditious and may constitute a political threat in Judea. Following this conspiracy, Jesus is secretly kidnapped, incarcerated in a secret prison, and interrogated through very muscular means. The ultimate goal of this muscular ploy is to oblige the religious leader to desist from his "politico-religious activism". Jesus resists his detractors' pressure but is finally killed and secretly buried. His brutal death triggers agitations led by his mother Mary, and followers. During this agitation indigenous protest tools such the Toyi-Toyi dance are used.

By choosing to cast a Marxist kind of Christ who appears fully engaged in an intellectual battle against racism and political oppression in South Africa, Dornford-May evokes the Black liberation theology praxis as well as the concept of Black Messiah. Actually, May's Christ is too conscious of the sufferings of the Black majority in South Africa, as he exhorts them to flee from the corrupt practices observed in the apartheid government. In one of the film's scenes, Jesus lambasts the undemocratic and inhumane South African Apartheid government saying: "when those with imperial histories pretend to forget them, and blame Africans' problems on tribalism and corruption while building themselves new economic empires, I say we have been lied to. Evil did not fall" (Knave, 2022).

Elsewhere, Jesus makes a case for civil action in view of positive socio-political change. He declares that:

> We are too busy with moral trivialities, as if they are the most important things. If you constantly find fault with yourself, you will lose the struggle against real sin. All authority is not divinely instituted. If you follow me we will have peace (Knave, 2022).

Thus, Dornford-May's reel Jesus identifies with all these Black communities who were marginalized in apartheid South Africa. Additionally, the film director suggests that historical/biblical Jesus would have suffered the same maltreatment as the righteous – but persecuted political activists – who dared to denounce the ills of government in apartheid South Africa. No doubt, film critic Roger Ebert argues that May's Jesus "says the same sorts of things he says in the Bible, is not 'updated' except in some of his terms of reference, and yet sends an unmistakable message: if Jesus were alive today, he would be singled out as a dangerous political leader, just as he was the first time around" (SouthAfrica.info, 2006).

Like Dornford-May, many other African filmmakers and film critics stress the urgent need to retell the story of Jesus Christ along African idioms and idiosyncrasies. These filmmakers strongly believe that the indigenization of the gospel story will increase the dramatic impact of the universal

narrative about Jesus. That's perhaps why in its critique of Frank Arase's Agony of the Christ (2008), the online magazine Nollywood Reinvented (2012) lauds African initiatives aimed at indigenizing and Africanizing successful Hollywood Jesus films. The magazine asserts that: "the fact that we're attempting to make some version of "Passion of the Christ" […] is ambitious but also interesting. I think it's a step in the right direction as per making 'different' movies". A similar opinion is voiced by Nigerian film director Ohis Ojeikere in a 2021 interview granted the online tabloid Gospel Film News. Like Nollywood Reinvented, Ojeikere makes a case for African replicas of Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ (2004). He says:

> The Passion of [the] Christ is indeed the main gospel film that has taken over long before now but funny enough, filmmakers in Nigeria are yet to domesticate that film. The best we have seen has been a dubbing [of the film] in pidgin English and some native dialects such as Igbo, Bini, Hausa among others for purposes of evangelizing rural areas. However, the possibility of recreating the movie in a Nigerian way is quite high and should be looked into by gospel filmmakers or better still, something originally Nigerian and not necessarily copying The Passion of Christ as it were (Gospel Film News, 2021).

Ojeikere doesn't clarify what he really means by "domesticating" *The Passion of the Christ*. But his contention would appear a little bit exaggerative if it aims at suggesting a total absence of Nigerian Jesus films that speak specifically to Nigerian ethnicities. Actually, since 2020, the Nigerian video film industry (codenamed Nollywood) has witnessed the production of some religious movies that set the story of Jesus in a Nigerian context. A case in point is Tchidi Chikere's *Our Jesus Story* (2020). This film follows the life of Tumbiika (Frederick Leonard), a young man sentenced to death by the whiskers in an African/Nigerian pagan village. The man succeeds to escape to a faraway country and few years later, he converts to Christianity and receives a divine call to go back to his village and win souls for Christ. Tumbiika accepts the call. On returning to his village, he meets his old detractors animated by the same mortal desire that, years back, made him flee the village. The villagers' persistent disposition is however no source of worries for Tumbiika, given that he is now Christ's incarnate; and as an incarnate of the Son of God, Tumbiika is more than ready to bear his own cross up to crucifixion.

Like Dornford-May's *Son of Man* (2006), Tchidi Chikere's *Our Jesus Story* gives an African twist to the gospel story and evokes a number of religious notions intimately related to the concept of Black Jesus or Black Messiah. One of such notions is that some contemporary African founders of homegrown churches are Jesus incarnates. A case in point is Nigeria's Immanuel Olufunmilayo Olumuso (alias Jesus Oyibgo), who founded the Universal College of Regeneration. In June 1959, Olumuso claimed to be an incarnate of Jesus Christ. The religious leader is known to have declared that: "I am He. I am Jesus Christ, the very one whose second coming was foretold in the New Testament. I have come, and those who believe in me will have an everlasting life and joy. I am the missing of the trinity. I have come to prepare the faithful for the judgment day" (Ukah, 2020, p. 326). Another case of living Black Messiahs is Olumba Olumba Obu, who during his lifetime claimed to be a divine revelation beyond the Christ. In Chikere's *Our Jesus Story*, Tubiika incarnates Jesus Christ and is deployed as both a Black messiah and a powerful symbol of Black power.

A similar incarnation scenario is observed in Collins Chidiebe's *Cross of Jesus* (2023) where Kelechi (the protagonist [played by Ken Erics]) morphs into historical Jesus and experiences all the key stages of Jesus's life, ministry and death. As Jesus incarnates, Kelechi becomes an agent of spiritual revival in his pagan Nigerian community: he appoints his twelve disciples, preaches the good news, pulls large crowds of expectant villagers, performs the same miracles historical Jesus performed; heals all manner of sickness in the village and even forgives sins to the immense surprise of all villagers. His growing popularity soon attracts both the envy and wrath of some powerful village elders. The latter connive and frame him before local village authorities. They get Kelechi arrested, flagellated and condemned to death by crucifixion.

Through his film, Chidiebe gives credence to the African liberation theology as well as the African cultural hermeneutics in at least two ways. First, he associates his Jesus with the African concept of Black Messiah and second, he portrays the Christ as an apologist of the syncretized or Africanised versions of Christianity. In effect, Chidiebe's Jesus collaborates with apostles who walk and worship barefooted. This culture – of walking and worshiping barefooted – is typical of home-grown Nigerian churches like the Brotherhood of the Red Cross and Stars, the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC) and the

Church of the Lord Aladura. These local Christian movements are all known for their syncretized and Africanised doctrines (Eboussi Boulaga, 2002). Thus, Chidiebe portrays the Christ as a symbol of both African spiritual power and creolised Christianity. The film director's aesthetical choices are in line with Simon Gqubule's (1974) contention which stipulates that for the Black Reel Jesus to be relevant to the African audiences, he must speak with the accent of an African man. He must also go through the life experiences of the African man, "reacting to life situation in ways that would be recognizable to the Black man as his own" (p.18).

Another case worth mentioning at this juncture is Frank Arase's *Agony of the Christ* (2008), a Ghanaian production which similarly harps on the concept of Black Jesus's incarnate and provides a culturally sensitive depiction of the Christ. The film is set in an Akan (Ghana) cultural context. It narrates the story of a young man Jamah (Majid Michel) who is condemned by a wicked female witchdoctor to be offered as human sacrifice to the gods of his backward Akan village. This young man escapes with the help of a Christian family and flees to a distant village. He later converts to Christianity and receives a divine call to go back to his village and win his people to Christ. The young man accepts the mission and returns to his village. There, he elaborates his evangelism approach and his efforts bear fruit. However, he is soon antagonized by the village female prophetess who uses both physical and spiritual weapons to neutralize him.

The case studies explored in the preceding paragraphs are not exhaustive. Many other cases could be mentioned. These cases show that the Black Jesus film tradition is taking root in various parts of sub-Saharan Africa. And this religious cinema tradition is contributing in no small measure to indigenizing, Africanising and decolonizing the global evangelical cinema.

4. African Audiences' Reception of Black Jesus Film

With all the buzz around afro-optimism, decolonization and African liberation theology in the "Black Continent", African Jesus films were logically supposed to be well received among African audiences and film critics. In effect, the fact that these Black Jesus films reclaim the image of Jesus Christ, sell core African cultural values through their narratives and glorify African Christianities as a valid expression of Black spirituality could be veritable attractions to Black film audiences. However, insights from recent research suggest the contrary. In other words, the Black Reel Jesus praxis is paradoxically controversial in nature. Many African audiences tend to prefer Western Jesuses and Western religious films to African ones. With the same disposition, they tend to doubt or reject the Jesus figure portrayed in African religious films. To them, these African Jesuses are either inaccurate representations of the historical and biblical Jesus or paradoxical to the notion of the universality of Jesus's message (Boddie, 2024; Tshaka, 2020; Omotoso, 2019; Merz, 2010). Ndishua (2026) for instance holds that the tendency to Africanize Jesus, can lead to "a reduction of the universal significance of Christ" (p.36). Similarly, Bible scholar Ottuh (2015) equates the Africanization of Jesus figure with the troubling culture of using Jesus Christ as a tool or object for racism. To him Africanization risks overshadowing the universal symbolism attached to the figure of Jesus Christ. Tshaka (2020) observes a similar skepticism among some members of the African intelligentsia. He laments that:

> When I ask even my most learned friends why a white picture of Jesus is normative, and goes unchallenged, some of the responses I often get, mostly from black folk, is "who cares?" I invariably answer, "I care," and I find it rather repulsive that many black people do not care about the color of Jesus. (p.8)

The pessimism exhibited or decried by the aforementioned Bible scholars is shared by many members of the African film audiences. In a 2014 study aimed at measuring some Beninese audiences' reception of Western Jesus films and some local religious films, Merz observed that African audiences have a greater propensity to accept Western/White Jesuses. The Beninese audiences considered in Merz's study unquestionably embraced Heyman's Jesus as authentic to his historical cousin, irrespective of the fact that Heyman's adaptation of the gospel story is considered as one of the most mediocre in the history of the Jesus film tradition.

In a similar study carried out in South Africa, Omotoso (2019) obtained identical results. Actually, Omotoso exposed some Black South African audiences to four Western Jesus films of the *Lumo Project* together with Dornford-Mays' *Son of Man*. She then interrogated these South African audiences' responses to the films. She also interrogated the respective film makers' intentions in light of ethnic

identity, music, and fidelity to the biblical text. Her study revealed that although the Black audiences recognized the topicality and relevance of decolonizing Christianity and its symbol, majority of them rejected Dornford-May's construction of Black Jesus. These audiences disregarded or downplayed the decolonial dimension of *Son of Man* and negatively received the idea of setting the Jesus figure within the Xhosa universe and along some Southern African ethnic rituals and traditions. In her words:

> All the audiences preferred *The Lumo Project* and many had much disdain for *Son of Man*. Clearly, the 'White man's Jesus' has done a great job on the African continent. Ironically, more than 25 years after apartheid, and in spite of the strong tradition of black liberation theology in Southern Africa, the white Jesus still appears to be etched in the cultural memory of contemporary South African Christians. (Omotoso, 2019, p. 5)

Omotoso (2019) contrasted the Black South African audience's reception of *Son of Man* with that of their White UK counterparts and noted some serious divergences in the two groups' understanding and measurement of fidelity to historical sources. She writes:

> It appears that *Son of Man* particularly posits itself within strange parameters of its own audience. U.K. audiences for the most part fully embraced *Son of Man* and believed that in no way the film undermined biblical fidelity. Yet, in South Africa, a film with a black, Xhosa Jesus was challenged as to whether it maintains the gospel truth.

The tendency of disdaining Black Reel Jesus is not confined to sub-Sahara African audiences. It is a cinema culture that has been deplored by many commentators studying African Diaspora's reception of Black Jesus films (Chow & Bates, 2021; Coleman & Lawrence, 2019). In a critique of McGruder's live-action-comedy series named *Black Jesus*, American film critic Boddie (2024) notes for instance that, irrespective of the popularity of the liberation theology among African American communities, Hollywood black Jesus figures have in many situations, elicited accusations of cultural incongruity and blasphemy from both black and white Christian communities in the USA. Many of the Black Jesus figures shown in Hollywood productions have not been well received even among Black communities in the US. It has actually, not been uncommon to come across Black film critics and members of the African American audience who refer to Hollywood black Jesus figures as "trashy Jesuses" (Coleman & Lawrence, 2019; CBS News, 2006). Thus, although further research is needed to have a grander and clearer picture of the sub-Sahara African audiences' attitude towards the cinematic representation of the Black Messiah concept, one thing remains evident: the concept of Black Reel Jesus is subject to controversy in African communities as well as in diaspora. Reasons for this perceptible African disdain towards Black Jesus figures are multiple. This article focuses on three of these reasons namely mental colonization, incoherent and anachronistic film aesthetics and the make-believe principle.

4.1. Mental colonization

Over the decades, depictions of Jesus as a blue-eyed native European man dressed in a white robe and having long hair and beard, have been popularized and engraved in the Black African cultural consciousness. Cultural globalization, religious communication and more especially, ubiquitous media representations have contributed in naturalizing an Anglo-American Jesus as the official portrait of the historical Jesus Christ. Hollywood cinema – through its greatest successes – from Ralph Fiennes's *The Miracle Maker* (1999) to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) – have sold this depiction of Jesus Christ to cultures across the globe, including black Africans. In tandem with this, many sub-Sahara Africans are today more and more prone to internalize the idea of the absolute and unchangeable whiteness of the Christ. These Africans, as Tshaka (2020) rightly observes, seem to look up to the image of a white European guy and expect their salvation to come from those who do not look like them.

Thus, although decolonial and up-lifting for the Black race, the notion of Black Reel Jesus appears inherently, weird, heretic and postmodern to many (Christian) Africans. The latter's attitudes towards the concept of Black African reel Jesus tend to suggest that they (the African audiences) don't feel in a position to question the white aesthetics deployed in Hollywood film traditions. The attitudes also suggest, these audiences don't feel in a position to determine the trajectory that is going to lead to effective African self-determination (Tshaka, 2020). Thus, the aforementioned complex makes African film audiences reluctant to wholeheartedly praise the African liberation theology. The complex also makes them more inclined to facilitate a systemic and institutionalized system of whiteness. Merz

(2014) observes this phenomenon in his study of some Beninese audiences' reception of White Jesus films. He argues that the aforementioned complex or notion pushes many African film audiences to automatically associate Jesus and Christianity with whiteness or European culture.

As he writes, audiences, "who are less well disposed towards Christianity, use the obvious whiteness of Jesus as evidence that Christianity is indeed a foreign and 'white' religion" (p. 250).

4.2. Anachronistic aesthetics

The good intentions of some African Jesus filmmakers do not translate to convincing depictions of historical and biblical Jesus. In other words, some film directors deploy questionable creative approaches that usually cause their depictions of black Jesus to be marked by cultural incongruities and contextual and technological anachronisms. The ultimate result of such aesthetic choices is that these African film directors construct black Jesus figure that Black (Christian) communities find rather exotic. In effect, it is hard for some African audiences to connect with some Black Reel Jesus at the cultural or psychological level. Some of these black Jesus figures are even so grotesquely depicted that critics do not hesitate to use derogatory terms such as "trashy Jesuses" in reference to them. The president of the Catholic League (a US-based activist organization), Bill Donohue uses this term to refer to McGruder's depiction of the Christ in the TV show called *Black Jesus* (Menzie, 2014). In effect, although set for a comedic show, McGruder's black Jesus is a compendium of contradictions and controversial traits: though an advocate of peace, compassion, unity, love and the like, he strangely smokes weed, drinks forties and at some point, supports the cultivation of Marijuana. Such a Jesus can only be controversial and function as the symbol of blasphemy for some puritanical Christian movements (Marquel, 2020; Menzie, 2014; Allen, 1997).

Similar derogatory thoughts have been expressed with respect to the Black Jesuses portrayed in some African films. For instance, Dornford-May's Jesus (Andile Kosi) in *Son of Man* is criticized by many observers for being or appearing psychologically distant to the audiences as well as for being too strange. This Xhosa Jesus does not exhibit the kind of mannerism that can command respect and admiration from Afro-optimist audiences. Knave (2022) for instance argues that Andile Kosi "has no real charisma at all as Jesus and the film is more interested in placing him in interesting visual compositions than it is in actually letting us connect with him on a human level or hear any of his actual teachings". Black Jesus is supposed to exude black power and light to elicit admiration and validation. Yet, Dornford-May's Jesus exhibits no charisma. Knave (2022) adds that "You'd think this whole thing about the 'Jesus' in a Jesus movie not really registering would be pretty crippling, but I think the idea here is that this isn't a movie to watch if you have no idea who Jesus is and haven't heard the story before".

Similar negative comments have been made in relation to Frank Arase's depiction of black Jesus in *Agony of the Christ* (2008). The Nigerian online tabloid, *Nollywood Reinvented* (2012) criticized Arase's Jesus (Majid Michel) finding his acting to be too emotionless, thus lacking religious charisma. As the tabloid argues, "there's something that sticks out in all the acts in this movie and it's their lack of facial expressions. They're just not emoting. It's all stone faced… stoic… to the book…". Thus, like in *Son of Man*, Jesus in Arase's *Agony of the Christ* is psychologically distant to the audiences. African audiences are likely to find it hard to connect with him.

4.3. The Make-believe principle

African Jesus films are generally based on symbolic rather than literal adaptations of the gospel story. In other words, they just make allusion to the biblical narrative through an auxiliary fictive story. This implies that they are primordially and structurally based on the make-believe principle and are bound to deploy mere "twists of the historical truth". African audiences are often too conscious of this make-believe and twists in their various patterns of reception of black Jesus films. This disposition usually generates reticence to the concept of Black Reel Jesus portrayed in African religious films. Merz (2014) somewhat highlights this phenomenon in his study of some rural Beninese audiences' reception of a white Jesus film (Heyman's *Jesus*) and two Beninese religious films containing Christ figures and having redemptive qualities (*Yatin* and *La Solution*). Merz particularly underlines two things: first, he stresses Black African audiences' tendency of dissociating White Jesus films – that are literal adaptations of the gospel – from the notion of make-believe; and second, these audiences' disposition to view the Beninese movies as being secondary and less redemptive than the White Jesus

films. He quotes a Beninese member of the audience as saying:

> [John Heyman-pro*duced Jesus*] shows the true face of God. It shows us that God has sent Jesus. And it [the film] is direct. … People have not made it. All the other films, we know that people of this country have made them. … But for Jesus, when you watch it, even if they tell you that people have made it, you'll refuse. It's as if the film shows directly the birth of Jesus, Son of God, how he came to earth. … It's direct; it's powerful. (Merz, 2014, p. 256)

Merz (2014) also quotes another interviewee who relegates the Beninese redemptive movie to a rank inferior to the White Jesus movie. This interviewee says Heyman's *Jesus* is more important than *Yatin* and *La Solution* "because it treats a topic that the other two films only treat superficially. But the last film [Jesus] treats the actual source, the origin. I could say that the two other films [*La Solution* and *Yatin*] are based on the third [Jesus]… In other words, the Jesus Film is much richer than the others" (Merz, 2014, p. 256). Additional research is needed to have a clearer picture of the situation; however, the phenomenon Merz (2014) highlights in the aforementioned quote is likely to be observed in Black African audiences' reception of Black Jesus films.

5. Conclusion

This paper explored the extent of the popularity of Black Jesus film productions in African cinemas. It also examined the motivations as well as the evangelical and theological dimensions of these films and analyzed the extent to which African audiences (particularly critics) positively receive the concept of reel black Christ. The paper argues that the concept of Black Reel Jesus is a valid decolonial concept. In spite of its relevance, it is yet to gain traction due not only to mental colonialism among Black/African communities but also because of the anachronistic aesthetics and the diminished theological effects of these films. This scenario suggests that African communities still have a long way to go to effectively decolonize the image of Jesus Christ. Additionally, the scenario warrants that better representational approaches be adopted by African religious filmmakers. Wanting to decolonize the story of Jesus Christ is one thing; doing it effectively through the most appropriate aesthetical tools is another.

The age-old proliferation and popularity of the white Jesus images in African (Christian) communities have constituted one of the obvious indexes of Western cultural imperialism. Countering this imperialism warrants the adoption of systematic and systemic counter-hegemonic strategies. Black Africans need to cultivate a degree of cultural resistance that is abreast of the Western cultural imperialism that keeps Jesus's image predominantly white and pro-European in Africa. This paper focused on Black Reel Jesuses' ability to really fuel the liberation theology and African renaissance. Further studies could interestingly devote their attention to the ability of the so-called "trashy Jesuses" (mentioned in the preceding sections of this paper) to either contribute to the spread of some version of Christianity or undermine and misrepresent the Christian message.

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