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The Theology and Culture of Marriage in Nigerian Evangelical Film

Elizabeth Olayiwola

Nigerian evangelicals have embraced filmmaking as a way to share Christian truth, but their transnational films expose the significant worldview differences between Christian cultures in Nigeria and the West. This article probes the somewhat mixed messages that appear in videos by Nigeria's best-known evangelical film producer, Mike Bamiloye.

Historical background

Nigeria's initial contact with filmmaking dates back to colonial times. The first film exhibited in Nigeria was at the Glover Memorial Hall in Lagos in 1903. In 1926, Geoffrey Barkas produced *Palaver*, the first film shot in Nigeria and the first to feature Nigerian actors. After Nigeria's independence, indigenous filmmakers emerged and flourished until the 1980s, when it became apparent that they could no longer afford to shoot on celluloid film. Filmmakers began to experiment with video technology, which was cheaper and easier to produce.

By the early 1990s, video production had become a commercial success¹ as producers in the secular world (known as mainstream Nollywood) continued to grapple with the video technology. An evangelical filmmaker, Mike Bamiloye—founder of Mount Zion Faith Ministries (MZFM)—and his team also began shooting in video format. In 1986, MZFM attempted to produce two videos, *The Secret of the Devil* and *Separated Forever*. The Broadcasting Corporation of Oyo State, Nigeria rejected *The Secret of the Devil* for poor quality and the second film never reached the editing stage.

After these failures, Bamiloye and his group continued staging dramas at churches all over the country and in neighbouring countries such as Ghana. Eventually Bamiloye became a prominent figure in Christian filmmaking, drawing widespread attention to the Nigerian Christian film industry.

Sarah Zylstra, writing for the American evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* in 2009, declared Nigeria the 'Christian movie capital of the world'.² She

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¹ See Onookome Okome, 'Introducing the Special Issue on West African Cinema: Africa at the Movies', *Postcolonial Text* 3, no. 2 (2007); Onookome Okome, 'Video Film in Nigeria: Preliminary Notes on an African Popular Art', *Voices* 2 (1999): 51–69.

² Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, 'Nigeria: Christian Movie Capital of the World', *Christianity Today*, 27

stated that Nigerian Christians were contributing significantly to the national film industry as well as witnessing to the gospel through their films. Bamiloye continues to be a leading figure amongst these evangelical filmmakers. When the *Jesus* film project wanted to embark on a more Africa-relevant initiative, under the title *Walking with Jesus*, Bamiloye was contracted to write the script.

Bamiloye reached age sixty on 13 April 2020 and received hundreds of congratulatory messages from disciples and fans all over the world. His admirers had planned a big, multi-day birthday celebration, including the premiere of a feature-length film called *The Train: The Journey of Faith* (based on Bamiloye's own life story),³ before the coronavirus epidemic intruded. *The Train* (2020) focuses on the struggles of Bamiloye's early years and the establishment of the ministry. Also, Pastor Seun Jonathan, an alumnus of Bamiloye's Mount Zion Institute of Christian Drama (MZI), produced a documentary titled *Celebrating Mike Bamiloye at 60.*⁴ The documentary contains comments from notable figures such as Pastor Enoch Adejare Adeboye, general overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God; other US-based co-producers of MZFM videos; and MZI alumni.

When the pandemic prevented MZI from holding its annual May training session, it instead organized a five-day Zoom workshop on church drama. With a registration fee of \$15, the workshop attracted more than four hundred participants, with hundreds more on a waiting list. As a result, MZI quickly assembled a second workshop, and then a third. The one I attended had participants from twenty-six countries on all six continents. In short, Bamiloye has become a brand and a force to reckon with internationally.

This article traces the trajectory of Mike Bamiloye and his organization as it has transcended his home country and entered into transnational space. In an earlier article,⁵ I provided an introductory note on transnational evangelical videos, tracing the spread of these videos and their makers to other African countries and beyond. In this article, I pay specific attention to their spread outside Africa—mainly to the United States—and I draw on two videos (*A Crack in the Wall* and *Filling in the Crack*, both 2009) to analyse Bamiloye's theology of marriage.

The making of Mount Zion

I use the term *Nollywood* to describe the entire Nigerian film industry, but this realm is actually quite heterogeneous. Almost every region of the country has its own vibrant film industry.⁶ In addition, a flourishing religious video sector oper-

October 2009, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/octoberweb-only/7.17.html.

³ The Train is available on Damilola Mike-Bamiloye's YouTube channel, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCGyPHwlkRV_Ai7aLRXpXJow. Damilola is the firstborn son of Mike Bamiloye and his wife Gloria.

⁴ This documentary is also available on Damilola Mike-Bamiloye's YouTube channel.

⁵ Elizabeth Olayiwola, 'Transnational Evangelical Video: Notes on the Growth and Spread of Mount Zion Evangelical Videos'. *JOTAMS: A Journal of Theatre and Media Studies* 2, no. 1 (2017): 255–67.

⁶ See Jonathan Haynes, 'Video Boom: Nigeria and Ghana', *Postcolonial Text* 3, no. 2 (2007); Akinwumi Ishola, "In Whose Image?" in Ogunleye Foluke (ed.), *Africa through the Eye of the Video Camera* (Swaziland: Academic Publisher, 2008), 7–15; *Uba Abdalla Adamu*, 'Transgressing Boundaries: Reinterpretation of Nollywood Films in Muslim Northern Nigeria', in Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome (eds.), *Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film*

ates independently of the secular or mainstream sector. Evangelical filmmakers⁷ use the phrase 'secular Nollywood' to create some distinction between themselves and mainstream Nollywood.

In 1985, Mike Bamiloye founded Mount Zion Faith Ministries (originally Mount Zion Christian Productions) to evangelize through drama. Most of its early members were students at the Oyo State College of Education, from which Bamiloye himself had just graduated. MZFM is an inter-denominational organization with various arms, including Mount Zion Film Productions (MZFP), Mount Zion Christian Drama Institute (MZI) and the Women Intercessors for Drama Ministries. MZFM regularly holds quarterly night vigils, as well as retreat sessions mainly for drama ministers. Bamiloye is also chairman of the board of trustees of the All Nigeria Conference of Evangelical Drama Ministers.

In the early 2000s, most evangelical filmmakers including Bamiloye did not regard themselves as part of Nollywood but as an alternative to it, often using the title 'evangelist' for themselves. Over time, however, these artists became more conscious of their art and began to think critically about Nollywood in relation to their work. In an interview with me, Bamiloye described himself and his colleagues as the Christian bloc of the Nollywood industry. Although they now view themselves as part of Nollywood, they still strive to create a distinction between themselves and secular filmmaking. Bamiloye has stated that the message differentiates between actors and ministers, noting that whereas the secular industry primarily entertains, evangelicals deliver a message.

Omolara Ayoola, a contemporary evangelical actress and MZI alumna, made a similar distinction when she described an encounter with a non-evangelical filmmaker:

Remember in 2009 a friend invited me to his house. When I got there, he said, 'Florence, you are a fantastic actress, you have the face and the features, and I want you to take your acting to a new level, you will go far. I want to introduce you to someone. He is my very good friend. He is a good Christian but not into Christian film.' I said okay. I asked him who, he mentioned the name and said, 'He will mentor you and help you in your acting career; you will also make money too along the way.' I told him thank you, and I said God has called me into Evangelical film and that I may not go in the direction he wants me to go, I went further to tell him that I would be going to the Mount Zion Institute for training in Evangelical movies. He looked at me and made a statement that day; looking very serious he said, 'Don't greet me if I dare see you in Mount Zion film.' I laughed that day and left. I proceeded to the institute a few days later with the help of Pastor Adenike Adeyemi; she encouraged me and told me to go and fulfil God's purpose and answer his call on my life. That was how God used this destiny helper to launch me into purpose and destiny. It's been God all the way. What if I had listened to that young man that day? I don't even want to imagine where I would be. I may

Industry (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 287-305.

⁷ I use this term for all Nigerian filmmakers who seek to evangelize through drama, not as a demarcation between shades of Christianity.

have fame and money by now, but I can never have this peace and fulfilment that I have now doing it for my creator and winning souls for Jesus Christ. So I CAN BOLDLY SAY THAT I am a drama minister by grace. I am acting the word; I am called to do it not just passion. I owe no one an apology. I will stay in this assignment. Nothing can stop me because it's grace that brought me here. Soul winning and eternity is my goal. God help me.⁸

Ayoola's post emphasizes how seriously Nigerian evangelical filmmakers see their art as a call to ministry, not just to the profession of filmmaking.

MZFP became well-known on the Nigerian screen in the mid-1990s. At that time the primary source of visual entertainment for the Nigerian audience still consisted of pirated versions of Hollywood, Bollywood and Chinese martial arts films. Mount Zion's first job was to sell itself as an alternative to existing art forms of the time and to create a unique cultural space. So from the onset, Mount Zion positioned itself as an alternative to other existing film cultures in Nigeria. In an interview with Victoria Odelami, Bamiloye stated, 'When the ministry started in 1985, the initial main objective ... was to produce Christian films and teledrama for the propagation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and to counter the effect of the prevailing few secular films of that time.'9

In an article titled 'We Are God's Alternatives!' Bamiloye stressed the oppositional nature of his type of film—in contrast not just to Nollywood but to other industries across the globe:

The majority of children movies are no longer clean. Many of the films, including ordinary children cartoons, are laced with subtle witchcraft, occultism, and immorality. Youth movies made by Hollywood have been worse since the production and release of *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings*. Hollywood has suddenly discovered goldmines in films full of subtle occultism, witchcraft, black magic, and sorcery. In light of all these, what is the mandate of Nigerian Drama Ministers given to us by the Lord? We must be determined and committed to this calling. WE ARE GOD'S ALTERNATIVE to the craziness of Hollywood and Nollywood.¹⁰

Bamiloye and his transnational films

After Mount Zion stabilized its artistic production within Nigeria, it and its videos began to migrate outside Nigeria. The concept of transnational film covers a broad spectrum. Linda Basch defines transnationalism as 'the processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin

Faith Ministries International), December 2012, 2.

⁸ Omolara Ayoola, 'Remenber in 2009', Facebook, 3 October 2017, https://m.facebook.com/story/graphql_permalink/?graphql_id=UzpfSTY5MjUwNjk50DoxMDE1NTQ4MTg0MTk50Q%3D %3D.

Victoria Odelami Oluremi, 'Development and Management of Christian Theatre in South-Western Nigeria' (PhD dissertation. Department of Theatre Arts, University of Ibadan, 2009).
Mike Bamiloye, 'We Are God's Alternatives!' *Drama Mission Fields* (newsletter of Mount Zion

and their country of settlement'. This definition aids our understanding of Bamiloye's transnational video filmmaking. Building on Basch's interpretation, we can infer that transnational films build on links between home countries and diaspora settlements. Jonathan Haynes¹² explains that transnational Nigeria video filmmaking encompasses both movies shot in Nigeria with the illusion of settings abroad and those actually shot outside the country. In either case, transnational films or videos have the goal of dissemination beyond the nation of their makers' origin. Whether produced within one country and exported elsewhere or created by a national filmmaker outside his or her homeland, such films aim to attract transnational discourse.

In 1999, MZFM made its first official trip outside Nigeria, to Ghana. After that, the group visited Kenya in 2001, and it subsequently toured other African countries as well as Europe and America, making the beginning of the now-booming transnational video production tradition of MZFP.

Gradually Mount Zion began to network with Nigerian transnational churches, the Redeemer Christian Church of God being prominent among them. Mount Zion collaborates with these churches to produce transnational videos as its aim of re-evangelizing the world coincides with Nigerian churches' efforts to carry out reverse or foreign mission.

Bamiloye's transnational videos usually centre on the need for African diaspora Christian families to hold on to the fervency and energetic brand of Christianity that they practised back home before their migration. Many of the videos touch on marriage-related themes, often highlighting the fact that marriages in modern societies, especially in the West, are easily dissolved. Bamiloye believes that successful marriage is a key to successful Christian living, and that attacking Christian marriages is high on the devil's agenda. He has made this stance clear in several films.

In the opening of Bamiloye's transnational film *The Return* (2014), the devil sends his demons to destroy godly homes. The first dialogue of the film involves a demon who says, 'Homes, marriages—we hate it. Especially godly marriages that produce solid homes where godly children are raised, to live a righteous life in this rotten society. Therefore it is our desire to attack homes and make marriages undesirable!' The demons continue, 'When the home is broken, we tamper with the destiny of the children.' After the demonic scene comes one displaying a couple in combat; the audience immediately understands that the demons are responsible for the fight.

Several factors that Bamiloye considers unusual in the lands in which diaspora Nigerians have settled find their way into his transnational scripts. For instance, the idea of women having the right to call for the arrest of a husband seems strange to him. In *The Finest Wine* (2013), Bamiloye frowns on a system that empowers wives to kick their husbands out of the house; this is contrary to Nigerian norms, where the wife is usually the one sent packing in the event of unreconcil-

¹¹ Afe Adogame. The African Christian Diaspora: New Currents and Emerging Trends in World Christianity (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 7.

¹² Jonathan Haynes, 'The Nollywood Diaspora: A Nigerian Video Genre', in Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome (eds.), *Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 74.

able differences. In *The Return*, the home mortgage is financed by the wife, yet the film makes it clear that the husband, as head of the family, has greater control over the house. *The Prodigal Ones* (2008) similarly draws attention to a wife who contributes a higher amount of earnings than her husband towards the mortgage. Whereas in the Western world, women making a decent living or earning more than their husbands are usually not a cause for concern, in Nigeria and its diaspora community they still are. This is an example of how cultural differences influence the practice of Christianity. Nigerian Christianity remains largely tied to patriarchy. Thus, even when Bamiloye tries to profile a biblical solution, he still finds himself struggling with the cultural interpretation of manliness. Women's financial emancipation remains a sensitive matter in Nigerian Christian marriages.

Two examples of Nigerian-born pastors are illustrative. In a Pentecostal church in Nigeria, I once heard a full-time preacher (in his early forties) mention that he was the financial manager of his home, and that therefore his working-class wife's debit card was in his possession and used at his discretion. On the other hand, Enoch Adeboye, the widely known general overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (a man in his seventies), had a somewhat different take on the economic role of husbands and wives. In one sermon, he opined that God created man to be the breadwinner and thus 'It is a shame for a man to be fed by his wife.' ¹³

I will now turn to two films in which Bamiloye examines issues of marital relations, fertility and rape.

A marriage influenced by Nigerian cultural views

A Crack in the Wall (2009) and its sequel Filling in the Crack (2009) tell the story of a young couple, Fred and Linda. They are Africans in diaspora, living in Dallas, Texas. The couple has been married for four years without having a child. Linda seems more worried about the situation than Fred. She has gone for three fertility tests, which confirmed that she is fit to bear children. Fred, on the other hand, refuses to go for any fertility tests. This leads to a series of tensions that leave Linda frustrated, vulnerable and defenceless.

A Crack in the Wall opens with a prologue, in which Linda stands by the window at night, unable to sleep. She reflects back on an episode with her mother-inlaw, who visited from Africa. The following conversation took place between them:

Mother-in-law (sitting with a cup of tea in the dining room): Linda? Linda (walking in with shopping bags): Ha! Mama.

- M: I asked you a question this morning and you did not respond. You have turned me into a radio that speaks without its listeners responding.
- L: You did not ask me any question this morning, Mama.
- M: Arguing with me, aren't you?
- L: I don't seem to remember any question anymore.
- M: When are you going to give my son a child?
- L: When the Lord gives me one, Mama.

¹³ Patience Kadiri, "It's a Shame for a Man to Be Fed by His Wife—Adeboye', *Redeemer's Torch*, October 2016. 1.

- M: No! I cannot accept that answer. My people will not accept that answer. They are asking me questions.
- L: What questions?
- M: They are asking me if you still have a womb. (Linda is shocked and speechless.) They are asking, you might have spoiled yourself before you came the way of my son. They are asking why after four years of marriage you are yet to produce a child?
- L: God will give me a child, a perfect one at his appointed time.
- M: (springing to her feet, moving towards Linda and tapping her by the shoulder): When is the appointed time? Is it after four years of marriage?
- L: (teary-eyed): What do you want me to do, Mama? (Linda grabs her bags to leave.)
- M: (pulling her by the hand): Go and give my son a child or do something about yourself.
- L: I cannot kill myself.
- M: I am going back to Africa next week. I will tell my people that my son married a he-goat.
- L: (crying): Ha! Mama, you called me a he-goat.
- M: Go and give my son a child.

The above scenario is not unusual in Nigeria; however, one would think that the diaspora community would be spared such discomfort. In many Nigerian marriages, even Christian ones, interference by relatives is a leading concern. This is so because of the type of kinship relationships that are entrenched in most Nigerian cultures.

As the film continues, the pressure on Linda over being childless after four years of marriage grows. We see Linda lost in thought again, sitting on the staircase inside the house. Linda tells her husband she needs a doctor for the pain of childlessness, more than for the leg pain regarding which Fred wanted her to see the doctor. Fred responds, 'Do not rely on the doctor for he is just but a man.' Linda answers, 'The doctor is not any man but a specialist sent by God to help me.'

Realizing that he won't win this argument, Fred says it is too early for such conversation and rises to leave for work. Then, on second thought, he quotes Psalm 127 to his wife: 'Except the Lord builds a house, they labour in vain that build it. Except the Lord keeps the city, the watchman watches but in vain.' In irritation, Linda helps Fred to complete the following verse: 'It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his beloved sleep.' She is not willing to hear any of Fred's sermon, and we soon realize the cause of her annoyance.

As noted above, Linda has taken three fertility tests, all of which have shown that she is fine. The doctor has suggested that Fred should also come in for a test, but Fred refuses. In one such debate, Linda tells Fred he is probably the cause of their infertility since he won't go for a test. Fred responds, 'I am okay, my dear; I believe I am fearfully and wonderfully made. I am complete in him. And a man needs not to confirm to me what God has already confirmed.' Linda says with frustration, 'Stop this religious talk and let's talk reality.' A heated argument ensues, and Linda repeats her suspicion: 'Maybe you have a problem fathering a child, who knows.' Fred becomes angry, his male ego bruised, and slaps Linda, who falls to the ground, crying.

Soon afterwards, Fred repents of his anger and returns to apologize to his wife,

but he again tells her that she should believe the report of the Lord rather than the report of man. Fred assures her that he will go for the fertility test, but he keeps postponing it until Jacob comes to visit. Jacob, a former schoolmate of Fred and Linda, is coming to town for business and plans to stay with the couple for about two weeks.

Fertility is a crucial issue in Nigerian marriages; unions often collapse because the woman did not get pregnant. Moreover, it is conventionally assumed that infertility in marriage is due to a malfunction in the women's reproductive system. Even in churches, when a call is made to pray for married members seeking to have children, invariably it is the woman who comes for prayer. It is a cultural assumption that the woman is responsible for childlessness; she is interrogated by her in-laws, whereas the man is barely questioned. This norm of the wife bearing sole responsibility for childlessness is played out in the film as Linda goes alone for fertility testing.

While Fred is away on travel, Linda and Jacob begin talking, and Jacob shares the story of another man who refused to go for a fertility test, knowing that he was incapable of fathering a child but keeping the information secret from his wife. This further heightens Linda's fear, and she asks Jacob to talk to her husband, since they are close friends from college. On one of Linda's tear-filled nights, Jacob offers consolation and then walks Linda into her bedroom as he urges her to go to sleep. In the next scene, we see Linda filled with rage and crying out, 'Jacob, you raped me!' Jacob offers apologies, claiming he does not know what came over him, after which Linda throws him out of the house.

Fred returns from his trip the following day to a sobbing, devastated wife who summons the courage to report the incident to her husband. As soon as he hears the news, his concern changes to anger—but towards Linda, not Jacob. Fred calls her careless, spiritually weak and unable to resist temptation in her husband's absence.

The hostility between them continues until their pastor intervenes, insisting that Fred should love his wife and support her in her trying times. In the course of his counselling, the pastor says that Fred should forgive his wife. The audience is left wondering what her offence was, or if it is a sin to be raped. This exchange highlights the common situation in which survivors of rape are further traumatized as they are forced to share in the blame for what happened to them.

Fred rebuffs the pastor's pleading, however. Days later, Linda confronts him, saying that he set her up to be raped by leaving her alone with Jacob despite her objections. She then locks herself up in a room for hours and will not take his calls nor those of their pastor. Fred again calls the pastor, who breaks into the room and reunites the couple. As the film ends, the couple reconcile, with Fred apologizing and Linda accepting his apology.

In the sequel, *Filling in the Crack* (2009), the peace is again broken when Linda becomes pregnant. The couple is initially happy—until they realize the timing of the pregnancy seems to coincide with the rape. Fred becomes mad again, declaring that he won't father a product of rape. He suggests that Linda instead start talking with Jacob, the father of the child she is carrying. Linda's sorrow begins anew. She and their pastor try to convince Fred otherwise, but he won't listen.

Linda wisely refuses to involve Jacob but instead goes back to the hospital and asks if the doctor would tell her the exact time of her pregnancy. In the course of her conversation with the doctor, she discovers that they didn't hear him correctly when he broke the news of the pregnancy. The doctor had told them that it began

three months ago, not two—meaning she was already pregnant before the rape.

Linda pleads with the doctor to inform her husband. Having heard the new information, Fred returns home to make up with his wife, but she is no longer there; she has packed her things and left him a note. Fred rushes to the pastor's house. The pastor and his wife rebuke him, saying that he should have loved his wife as Christ loves the church. Seeing Fred's remorse, the pastor's wife eventually tracks Linda down. He apologizes profusely to his wife, they are again reconciled and have their baby, and the film concludes with a happily-ever-after ending.

A somewhat mixed message

Bamiloye provides a theological perspective on two sensitive issues: fertility and rape. Bamiloye's primary response is 'Husband, love your wife as Christ loved the church and gave up himself for her.' In all of Bamiloye's films, marriage is forever; thus, regardless of the gravity of the offence, couples are encouraged to forgive and make up. However, the wife is expected to do more and sacrifice significantly to ensure a peaceful home.

Although Bamiloye prescribes that husbands should love their wives as Christ loves the church, the body of the film struggles with the homegrown cultural worldview of a family setting. The film reflects how Nigerian marriage is understood. In Nigeria, the idea of a man leaving his father and mother and cleaving to his wife is farfetched. Often, in accordance with the prevailing Nigerian cultural view of marriage, the man pulls his wife from her parents and brings her to join him and his entire family. The couple and the husband's relatives may not all physically live together, but specific structural factors and measures demonstrate that the wife is to join the husband and the rest of his family.

When a woman is getting married in the Yoruba culture, she is said to be leaving for *Ile Oko* (her husband's house). Thus, she is the one leaving her family to join her husband and his family. In the Yoruba tribe, the wife is usually referred to as *Iyawo mi* (my wife) by any relative of the husband's family who was born before she got married. This collective sense of ownership can sometimes be problematic. On one hand, the wife enjoys care from every member of the family, since they see it as their responsibility to show concern for her. But she has to reciprocate by submitting to a great number of in-laws in addition to her husband! This notion empowers Linda's forceful mother-in-law. In Bamiloye's transnational filmmaking; the stereotypical Nigerian mother-in-law still finds her way into the scene, even in the United States, because Fred's relatives are assumed to be major stakeholders in the marriage.

One of Bamiloye's goals is to reach the world with the message of Christ through drama, but the prominence of features of a Nigerian worldview may be largely responsible for limiting his audience mainly to members of the African diaspora. In an interview with him, I asked who his transnational audience was, and he responded that they were 'unfortunately' Africans in diaspora, expressing regret regarding his difficulty in reaching white audiences. Although Bamiloye's Christian message is universal, the content of his transnational films remains very much wrapped in Nigerian culture.