

## Myth, Folklore, and Spirituality in Nollywood: Preserving African Oral Traditions through Film

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### Abstract

*This study explores the intersection of myth, folklore, and spirituality in Nollywood, the Nigerian film industry, and its impact on preserving African oral traditions. Through a qualitative analysis of "Arugba" (2008), "Igodo: The Land of the Living Dead" (1999), "The Figurine" (2009), and Mami Wata (2023), Nollywood films, it examines how these narratives are retold and translated through the medium of film, highlighting the role of storytelling in preserving cultural knowledge and traditions. By focusing on the themes and symbols present in these films, this study seeks to understand how Nollywood is contributing to the preservation and dissemination of African oral traditions in a digital age. Ultimately, this study aims to shed light on the importance of film as a tool for cultural preservation and the role of Nollywood in shaping and representing African narratives for global audiences. The study found that While Nollywood operates under the shadow of Western media dominance, it also functions as a tool of cultural resistance, preserving and rearticulating African myths, folklore, and spirituality in contemporary forms.*

### Keywords

Nollywood, Myth, Folklore, Spirituality, Oral Traditions



### I. Introduction

The film industry in Nigeria has been greatly influenced by traditional myths, folklore, and spiritual beliefs, and this is evident in the themes and narratives of many Nollywood films. Through the medium of film, these traditions are not only being preserved, but also introduced to a wider audience. The use of local languages, traditional music, and costumes in Nollywood films adds to the authenticity and cultural significance of these stories. In particular, the film 'Myth, Folklore, and Spirituality in Nollywood' highlights the importance of preserving African oral traditions through film. By depicting the struggles and triumphs of characters who are deeply connected to their cultural traditions, the film showcases the richness and diversity of African folklore and spirituality.

Through its powerful storytelling and visual representation, 'Myth, Folklore, and Spirituality in Nollywood' serves as a valuable tool in educating and increasing awareness about the importance of preserving African oral traditions. This is in line with UNESCO (2009), as cited in Idakwo, & Akpovye (215). It also serves as a means of ensuring that these traditions continue to thrive and be passed down to future generations. Nollywood's incorporation of traditional myths, folklore, and spirituality in its films plays a crucial role in preserving African oral traditions. Through the film 'Myth, Folklore, and Spirituality in Nollywood', audiences are able to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for these traditions, and their significance in Nigerian culture."

**"Arugba" (2008) – Directed by Tunde Kelani. The film is Rooted in Yoruba tradition, Arugba is shot in Yoruba language and subtitled in English. It explores the**

annual Osun-Osogbo festival, highlighting themes of spiritual duty, divine femininity, and cultural rituals. The Folklore elements in Arugba is the Osun River goddess, traditional rites, and sacred female roles. While the Spiritual layer is the intersection of modern life with ancient religious customs.

**"Igodo: The Land of the Living Dead" (1999) – Directed by Andy Amenechi** is a classic quest narrative based on Igbo mythology. A group of men enter a forest filled with ancestral spirits to retrieve a powerful sword. The Folklore elements in Igodo is Ancestral spirits, magical artifacts, and traditional Igbo beliefs. While the Spiritual layer Explores the idea of destiny, sacrifice, and ancestral intervention.

**"The Figurine" (2009) – Directed by Kunle Afolayan** blends traditional folklore with psychological thriller. It centers around a mythical figurine believed to bring seven years of good luck and then seven years of doom. The Folklore elements in Figurine appears to be the Myth of Araromire, fate, and traditional deities. While Spiritual layer: Explores belief systems, fate vs. free will, and cultural superstition.

**Mami Wata (2023) Director: C.J. "Fiery" Obasi** was shot in West African Pidgin English, Fon Mami Wata is a black-and-white fantasy thriller based on West African folklore, Mami Wata explores themes of identity, power, and the supernatural. The film centers around the mythical water spirit Mami Wata, delving into the complexities of belief systems and the interplay between tradition and modernity. The film offers a contemporary interpretation of African myths, highlighting the enduring influence of oral traditions in shaping cultural narratives.

### **a. Statement of the Problem**

"African oral traditions have long been an important aspect of the continent's cultural heritage. Some film scholars have noted the decline in the preservation and transmission of these traditions in recent years. Africa's rich heritage of myth, folklore, and spirituality has traditionally been transmitted through oral storytelling. However, with globalization, urbanization, and the erosion of indigenous knowledge systems, these oral traditions face the threat of extinction (Okpewho, 1992). In response to these cultural shifts, the Nollywood film industry has emerged not only as a tool of entertainment but also as a means of cultural preservation and expression. Through cinematic narratives rooted in African mythology and spirituality, filmmakers are increasingly reimagining and preserving these traditions in visual form.

Despite this, academic attention has largely focused on Nollywood's commercial success, neglecting its role as a modern archive of African belief systems and oral heritage (Haynes, 2016). Moreover, there is a need to critically examine how effectively Nollywood interprets and sustains indigenous worldviews, particularly through films that explore mythic structures, folkloric motifs, and spiritual cosmologies. This study therefore seeks to investigate how Nollywood engages with African myths and spiritual traditions, using film as a medium for preserving and transmitting oral cultural heritage in the 21st century.

### **b. Objectives of the Study**

The broad objective of this study is to explore and analyze the role of Nollywood films in preserving, transmitting, and reinterpreting African myths, folklore, and spiritual beliefs, highlighting how these cinematic works contribute to the safeguarding and transformation of indigenous cultural practices and oral traditions in the modern world.

In essence, the study aims to investigate how Nollywood functions as both a cultural repository and a modern medium for cultural expression, blending traditional African

narratives with contemporary film techniques to keep African spiritual and cultural heritage alive for future generations. To achieve the overall interest of this study, the following objectives are set to:

1. Examine how Nollywood films incorporate African myths and folklore into their narratives
2. Investigate the role of spirituality in Nollywood films and its connection to African belief systems.
3. Assess the effectiveness of Nollywood as a medium for preserving and transmitting African oral traditions.
4. Analyze the cultural impact of Nollywood films in reshaping modern perceptions of African myth, folklore, and spirituality.
5. Explore the relationship between traditional African oral storytelling and modern cinematic techniques in Nollywood.

### **c. Research Questions**

Based on the problem statement and research objectives, the following will serve as the basic tools of scientific inquiry:

1. What are the mythological figures, legends, and cultural archetypes that are depicted in Nollywood films?
2. How do Nollywood films represent African spiritual beliefs, and what role do these representations play in reflecting or reshaping traditional African worldviews?
3. In what ways does Nollywood effectively preserve and transmit African oral traditions through its storytelling, themes, and portrayal of indigenous culture?
4. How have Nollywood films influenced contemporary perceptions of African myth, folklore, and spirituality among Nigerian audiences?
5. How do Nollywood filmmakers incorporate traditional African oral storytelling techniques into modern cinematic forms, and what impact does this fusion have on the audience's understanding of African culture?

### **d. Significant of the study**

the significance of this study lies in its ability to preserve, analyze, and promote African cultural identity, deepen academic understanding of Nollywood's role in cultural transmission, and provide insights into how modern cinema can contribute to the continuation and evolution of oral traditions in a rapidly changing world.

### **e. Scope of the Study**

Geographically, this study will specifically focus on Nollywood, the Nigerian film industry, as it is the largest and most influential film industry in Africa. While the study may reference other African cinemas for comparison, the central focus will remain on Nollywood films, particularly those that engage with African myths, folklore, and spirituality. Nigerian and African Cultural Context, Given that Nollywood is rooted in Nigerian cultural traditions, the study will explore Nigerian oral traditions (particularly from the Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa cultures), while also making relevant comparisons to broader West African and sub-Saharan African mythological themes.

The scope of this study is focused on Nollywood films (2000–present) that depict African myths, folklore, and spirituality, with an emphasis on how these films preserve and transmit oral traditions. The research will analyze films primarily in the Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa traditions, while examining the use of modern cinematic techniques in adapting

traditional African narratives for contemporary audiences. The study will contribute to the understanding of how Nollywood serves as a medium for cultural preservation, education, and globalization of African cultural values.

## II. Review of Literature

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is built upon two main theories: Cultural Imperialism and Cultural Hybridity. These theories offer a lens through which the study can examine how Nollywood films interact with African cultural traditions, particularly through the representation of myths, folklore, and spirituality.

These two theories will guide the study in understanding the complex relationship between Nollywood cinema, African oral traditions, and global cultural flows, shedding light on how the industry preserves and redefines African cultural heritage through its portrayal of myth, folklore, and spirituality.

### 2.2 Cultural Imperialism Theory

Herbert Schiller in his 1976 work "Communication and Cultural Domination" proposed the use of the term "cultural imperialism" to describe and explain the way in which large multinational corporations, including the media, of developed countries dominated developing countries (Rothkopf, 1997). It is also worth noting that Schiller operated with a model of effects very similar to that of Schramm and other development scholars (Schille, 1970). This theory explains how dominant cultures—especially Western cultures—use media and other communication channels to force their values, beliefs, and customs on subordinate cultures. Local economies may suffer, cultural traditions and identities may be lost, and cultures may become more homogenized as a result of this process.

Cultural Imperialism theory describes how dominant cultures, particularly Western cultures, impose their values, beliefs, and practices on less dominant cultures, often through media and other forms of communication. This process can lead to the erosion of local cultural traditions and identities, homogenization of cultures, and a weakening of local economies.

### 2.3 Cultural Imperialism and Nollywood's Preservation of African Oral Traditions

Nollywood the Nigerian film industry has emerged as a site of cultural negotiation, where filmmakers actively resist Western cultural hegemony by embedding African myths, folklore, and spirituality into their narratives. This aligns with the idea of "cultural resistance" within cultural imperialism theory, where marginalized cultures use media to assert their identity (Schiller, 1976). Though The process of globalisation is frequently assumed to have negative implications for developing societies according to Tomlinson, (1996), but Nollywood's preservation of African oral traditions reveals a complex interplay of resistance, adaptation, and compromise.

Many Nollywood films, such as *Living in Bondage* (1992) and *Igodo* (1999), prominently feature African mythologies, ancestral spirits, and traditional belief systems, effectively resisting Western secular narratives that dominate Hollywood. By dramatizing oral traditions and spiritual worldviews, these films act as repositories of indigenous knowledge and serve as a form of cultural preservation. As Okome (2007) notes, Nollywood serves as "a counter-hegemonic medium" that re-centers African cosmologies within modern storytelling frameworks.

### 2.4 Hybridization as a Response to Cultural Imperialism

Globalisation has been discussed by different scholars like Tomlinson (1999), Moore (1966), Nettl and Robertson, Khondker, (2000), However, Nollywood's production and distribution methods are not free from the influence of global capitalism and Western media norms. The industry often adopts Western cinematic structures such as linear plots, Western-style hero tropes, and technical aesthetics to appeal to broader audiences, both within the diaspora and globally

(Haynes, 2016). This process, often referred to as cultural hybridization, illustrates how cultural imperialism does not always erase indigenous content but may alter its expression. The presence of Western influences in costume design, language (use of English over indigenous languages), and narrative structures reflects a subtle internalization of cultural imperialist norms. Yet, rather than being fully subsumed, African cultural elements adapt, blending local and global forms to create a unique genre identity (Adesokan, 2011).

## 2.5 Economic Pressures and Cultural Autonomy

Economic aspects of cultural imperialism are also relevant. Hollywood's dominance in global film distribution limits Nollywood's reach and profitability, forcing it to operate within marginalized markets and informal economies. This economic inequality can influence content choices, leading filmmakers to cater to Western expectations to secure international funding or festival recognition, potentially diluting indigenous themes (Larkin, 2008). Nonetheless, platforms like YouTube and Netflix have allowed some Nollywood filmmakers to reach global audiences while retaining cultural authenticity. Films like *King of Boys* (2018) and *Aníkúlápó* (2022) demonstrate a growing confidence in centering African spiritual and mythological elements, signaling a shift toward reclaiming narrative sovereignty.

## 2.6 Theory of Cultural Hybridity

The principal theorists of hybridity are Homi Bhabha, Néstor García Canclini, Stuart Hall, Gayatri Spivak, and Paul Gilroy, whose works respond to the multi-cultural awareness that emerged in the early 1990s. The Theory of Cultural Hybridity originates from postcolonial studies and describes the blending of cultural elements from different traditions to create new, hybrid identities and expressions. Coined and popularized by Homi K. Bhabha, hybridity challenges the binary logic of colonizer versus colonized, instead emphasizing the "in-between" or "third space" where cultures interact, negotiate, and transform (Bhabha, 1994). In this space, traditional identities are neither wholly preserved nor erased but reconstituted through dynamic processes of exchange and adaptation. Hybridity is not merely a harmonious fusion—it is often marked by tension, power asymmetries, and cultural contestation. According to (Pieterse, 1995), it allows for resistance to cultural domination (e.g., Western hegemony) while also admitting the inevitability of cultural influence and mixture in a globalized world.

Through the lens of cultural hybridity, Nollywood can be understood as a space where African myths, folklore, and spirituality are preserved, not by resisting modernity or global influences outright, but by strategically blending them. This hybrid practice ensures the survival and evolution of oral traditions in a rapidly globalizing world, asserting cultural agency while engaging international audiences.

Film Analyses Through Cultural Imperialism and Cultural Hybridity

## 2.7 ARUGBA (2008) Directed by Tunde Kelani

Plot Summary: *Arugba* tells the story of a young university student who is also the "virgin girl" chosen for the traditional Osun festival. The film juxtaposes contemporary life, academic aspirations, and gender dynamics with traditional Yoruba spirituality. Secondly traditionally we were thought that it is an honour to be Divirgin by our husband, that a man doesn't come visiting a woman in her parent's house unless on the ground of marriage. That is either bringing him to show your parents after you have accepted his proposal or him coming for introduction, which I think the figurine maintained in this story by projecting a single lady in the university who is a virgin.

## 2.8 Cultural Imperialism

**Resistance to Western Secularism:** The film challenges Western notions of religion as separate from everyday life by portraying Yoruba spirituality as deeply integrated into identity, community, and womanhood. **Language and Costuming:** Use of Yoruba language, traditional

rites, and music resists cultural erasure by showcasing indigenous cultural aesthetics, pushing back against dominant Western standards.

**Cultural Hybridity:**

**Modern-Traditional Blend:** Arugba is both a modern woman and a spiritual figure symbolizing hybridity. The university setting coexists with sacred rituals, showing how tradition evolves within a contemporary society. **Cinematic Techniques:** Western film grammar is used to tell a deeply African story, a classic example of Bhabha's "third space."

**IGODO (1999) Directed by Andy Amenechi**

Plot Summary: *Igodo* is a fantasy adventure about a group of warriors who journey into the spirit world to retrieve a mystical sword to save their village from evil spirits.

**Cultural Imperialism**

**Affirmation of Indigenous Epistemologies:** The plot directly centers African cosmology, treating African gods, spirits, and oracles as legitimate knowledge systems—subverting Western portrayals that often dismiss such beliefs as primitive or irrational.

**Distribution Limitation:** Despite its cultural richness, *Igodo* lacked global distribution, reflecting the marginalization of African spirituality in global film markets.

**Cultural Hybridity:** Narrative Fusion: Combines oral storytelling techniques (e.g. narration, proverbs, archetypes) with cinematic pacing and fantasy elements akin to Western hero-quest tropes. Aesthetic Hybridization: Though the content is indigenous, the film's action-adventure style reflects the influence of Hollywood genres (e.g., "Lord of the Rings"-type epic journey) while centering African mythos.

**THE FIGURINE (2009) Directed by Kunle Afolayan**

Plot Summary: A group of friends discovers a figurine linked to an ancient deity. Initially bringing them good fortune, the figurine later triggers misfortune, raising questions about fate, spirituality, and belief.

**Cultural Imperialism:**

Interrogating the Supernatural: The film plays with ambiguity—rationality vs. spiritual causality—mirroring a postcolonial struggle between Western rationalism and indigenous beliefs. Modernization of Myth: The figurine is recontextualized in urban, educated settings, challenging Westernized Nigerian audiences to reconsider traditional belief systems.

**Cultural Hybridity:**

Genre Blend: A horror-thriller using Western suspense structures to explore Yoruba mythology. The narrative format mimics Western psychological thrillers while rooted in African spiritual logic.

Visual and Thematic Fusion: Modern technology (phones, labs) coexists with the spiritual influence of Araromire, showing the coexistence and tension between modernity and myth.

**MAMI WATA (2023) Directed by C.J. "Fiery" Obasi**

Plot Summary: Set in a matriarchal African village where a sea goddess (Mami Wata) is worshipped, the community's stability is disrupted by modern ideologies and external pressures.

**Cultural Imperialism:**

Confrontation with Modernity: The film critiques the intrusion of Western ideologies and structures (like militarism, masculinity, and capitalism) on indigenous matriarchal systems. Black-and-White Aesthetic: The unique visual style resists Western cinematic norms by offering a non-Eurocentric beauty and rhythm to the film.

**Cultural Hybridity:**

Myth Reimagined: Mami Wata originally a West African water spirit—is modernized in form and visual representation. Though steeped in oral tradition, she's portrayed in an avant-garde, cinematic style.

Gender Politics: The film blends traditional mythology with global feminist discourses, showing hybridity not just of form but of ideology.

Synthesis of Theories Across All Films

Film Cultural Imperialism Highlights

Cultural Hybridity

Highlights

Argba – Resists western secularism asserts Yoruba Region. University	Traditional rituals in modern
Igodo – Centers African Cosmology marginalised globally tropes	Myth told using fantasy/action
Figurin – Modern Nigerian elite challenged by old Myth Yoruba deity	Western thriller Aesthetics with

### **Mami Water**

Challenges Patriarchal, western imposed power structure modernity	Visual and thematic of myth and
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## **2.9 Oral Traditions as Foundations of African Knowledge Systems and The Role of Nollywood as a Contemporary Griot**

African societies have historically relied on oral traditions including proverbs, epics, songs, folktales, and mythologies—as primary tools for preserving and transmitting knowledge, values, history, and spirituality (Finnegan, 1970). These traditions are not merely entertainment; they are performative, communal, and spiritual acts tied to cosmology, morality, and identity.

“In Africa, the past is alive in the present through oral storytelling.” Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (1970)

Nollywood functions today much like the traditional griot or oral historian transmitting cultural memory in visual form. As the most prolific film industry in Africa, Nollywood reaches audiences both locally and across the African diaspora, making it a vital medium for preserving and reinterpreting oral traditions in modern contexts. Oral tradition is no longer confined to the spoken word but adapted into **visual storytelling**, often retaining key structural elements such as: Circular narratives, Didactic moral lessons, Supernatural intervention, Communal resolution of conflict. It’s clear now why Haynes (2016), noted that “Nollywood films offer a dynamic space where orality and modernity converge.”

## **2.10 Preservation vs. Reinvention: A Critical Balance**

The use of “preserving” in here suggests continuity and safeguarding. However, preservation in this context is not passive archival work it is often reinventive. Nollywood doesn’t merely document myths or folklore; it re-narrates them through:

Modern themes (e.g., migration, urban life, gender roles). New platforms (e.g., Netflix, YouTube) Hybrid aesthetics that blend oral motifs with global cinematic techniques. This aligns with Homi Bhabha’s notion of cultural hybridity (1994), where cultural forms evolve through encounters, negotiation, and adaptation, rather than remaining fixed. Tradition is not preserved in formaldehyde it is lived, rearticulated, and hybridized.” Bhabha (1994).

Spirituality and Myth in the Cinematic Frame

Film uniquely allows for the visualization of mythic and spiritual elements that are central to African oral traditions ancestral visitations, gods, taboos, and ritual practices. In doing so, it preserves intangible cultural heritage in ways oral narration alone may not. The spiritual realm, often dismissed by colonial discourse as “primitive,” is granted legitimacy and power in films like Igodo, The Figurine, and Mami Wata. These cinematic depictions reaffirm African epistemologies and offer resistance to cultural imperialism. “Film becomes a sacred space for narrating African spiritual ontologies in defiance of colonial erasures.” Okome (2007).

Challenges and Implications

While Nollywood plays a key role in preservation, the medium is also influenced by: Economic pressures (e.g., need for market appeal), Global aesthetics and funding models, Linguistic choices (e.g., English vs. indigenous languages)

These tensions raise questions: Is the oral tradition being preserved or rebranded? Who is the audience local communities or global consumers? “Preservation through film is always a negotiation—between heritage and market, authenticity and accessibility.” Adesokan (2011).

“Preserving African Oral Traditions through Film” captures Nollywood’s cultural mission and artistic power. Far beyond entertainment, Nigerian films act as modern vessels for the survival and evolution of African myth, folklore, and spirituality transforming oral traditions into living cinematic legacies.

### **III. Research Methods**

The study makes use of secondary data from significant books, periodicals, newspapers, government publications, historical records, and the Internet. Nonetheless, the study was limited to information that was recorded, currently accessible, or documented regarding the topic of inquiry (Sabiu & Aondover, 2023). The study employs content analysis as its analysis approach, which considers the corpus of existing literature.

#### **3.1 Population of the Study**

The population of this study consists of Nollywood films produced within the last two decades (2000–2025) that prominently feature themes of African mythology, folklore, and spirituality. These films will be selected based on their portrayal of indigenous beliefs, rituals, spiritual practices, and cultural narratives drawn from oral traditions. Specific attention will be given to films that explore: Mythological Figures and Folkloric Archetypes: Films that directly reference or incorporate African gods, spirits, legendary heroes, or mythological creatures. Spiritual Practices and Rituals: Films that depict religious ceremonies, rites of passage, ancestral worship, and spiritual beliefs within African communities. Cultural Narratives Derived from Oral Traditions: Films that either adapt traditional stories or present new narratives rooted in the cultural and philosophical ideas of African societies, often passed down orally.

### **IV. Conclusion**

Nollywood has emerged as a vital cultural force in preserving and revitalizing African oral traditions through film. By centering indigenous myths, folklore, and spirituality, Nigerian filmmakers challenge the homogenizing pressures of cultural imperialism and offer a cinematic space where African epistemologies thrive. Through the lens of Cultural Imperialism, we see how Nollywood resists the marginalization of African identity by asserting the legitimacy of its spiritual and mythological heritage. Simultaneously, the Theory of Cultural Hybridity helps us understand how these traditions are not preserved in static forms but reinterpreted through a fusion of indigenous content and global cinematic techniques.

This dynamic interplay ensures that African oral traditions remain culturally relevant, accessible to new generations, and resonant across diverse audiences. However, the preservation is not without challenges pressures from Western aesthetic norms, funding dynamics, and language shifts can dilute or reshape these traditions. Still, Nollywood continues to prove that cinema is not only a tool of entertainment but also a powerful medium of cultural transmission, resistance, and renewal.

#### **Recommendations**

The study recommended that:

1. Scholars and cultural theorists should continue to treat Nollywood not just as entertainment but as an archival mechanism for intangible heritage, especially oral

- traditions. This encourages more interdisciplinary research combining film studies with anthropology, linguistics, folklore studies, and African philosophy.
2. There is a need to move beyond Western media paradigms (e.g., auteur theory, genre conventions) and develop theories rooted in African narrative traditions, such as the communal storyteller model, cyclical time, and spiritual causality.
  3. The Governments and NGOs should create funding schemes specifically for Nollywood films made in indigenous languages and focusing on folklore and spirituality. This ensures the preservation of both language and narrative forms, which are closely linked in oral cultures.
  4. Films like *Igodo*, *The Figurine*, *Arugba*, and *Mami Wata* should be part of African Studies and Film Studies curricula to teach students how oral traditions evolve through visual media.
  5. Cultural institutions should build digital repositories for films that preserve African oral traditions. Metadata should include cultural themes (e.g., "Yoruba Cosmology," "Ancestral Spirits") for easier research access.
  6. They should Encourage African film festivals and streaming platforms to have dedicated categories or labels for "Oral Tradition & Spiritual Heritage Films" to increase visibility and educate global audiences.

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