Living in Bondage, Part I (1992) and II (1993)

Alessandro Jedlowski

dir. Chris Obi-Rapu aka Vic Mordi (Part I), Chika Onukwafor aka Christian Onu (Part II); prod. Kenneth Nnebue; screenplay Okechukwu Ogunjifor, Kenneth Nnebue. VHS, color, 163 mins. Nek Video Links, distrib. Nek International Co.

LIVING IN BONDAGE
(IGBO VERSION) PART 1
18
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Defining film genres in the southern Nigerian film industry Nollywood has always been tricky. Nollywood has tended to develop its own forms, combining elements from local narrative and aesthetic traditions as well as from international canons and trends. Within this context, the categories produced by international scholars did not always take into account local producers' and audiences' definitions (Haynes 2016; Okome). »More than most genres, melodrama takes different forms in different times and places, and developing the term in [the Nigerian] context would certainly not be to cram the Nigerian videos into some precise pre-existing model« (Haynes 2000, 22-23). While melodrama as a theatrical form has a specific history originating in 18th century post-revolutionary France, melodrama as a generic category has become a popular culture meta-genre that informs different narrative modes in literature, theater, and cinema all over the world. Peter Brooks' suggestion to move from the substantive (»melodrama«) to the adjective (»melodramatic«) seems particularly useful when looking at the example of Nollywood. The early Nollywood classic *Living in Bondage*, which, according to many, marked the commercial birth of the industry, is a perfect example in this sense, as the film can hardly be contained by any single generic category. Rather, the two-part film helped kickstart a number of narrative trends in Nollywood, all heavily infused with melodramatic elements.

Written in English but performed in Igbo, *Living in Bondage* tells the story of a young modern Nigerian couple, Andy Okeke (played by Kenneth Okonkwo) and his wife, Merit (played by Nnenna Nwabueze). Despite living a relatively comfortable life, Andy is jealous of his friends' economic success, in particular the achievements of his old friend Paul (played by Okechukwu Ogunjiofor). His frustration leads him to accept his old friends' invitation to enter a cult, which includes dubious figures such as Merit's boss, Ichie Million (Francis Agu), and Chief Omego (Kanayo O. Kanayo). The cult is supposed to help its members become successful, but Andy quickly discovers that its secret practices involve violent money-making rituals and human sacrifices. In order to become a member, he is asked to bring his wife to the sacrificial altar. He tries to cheat the congregation by instead bringing a sex worker he picked up on the street, but she interrupts the sacrifice by deploying her Pentecostal beliefs against the sect's »satanic« practice and invoking the »blood of Jesus.« Andy is unmasked and told that without the sacrifice of his wife, he will perish. As a result, in the following sequence, Merit is sacrificed, and her blood is drunk by all members of the cult.

The central part of the narrative shows Andy's quick social and economic success: profitable deals, nice and expensive cars, lavishing parties, and beautiful women—all symbols of achievement on which the camera insists with lengthy long take shots. But Merit's ghost begins to haunt Andy, appearing to him each time he achieves a new success: during the ceremony when given the chieftaincy title, when he signs a sumptuous commercial deal, or when entering his house with his new wife. Andy loses his mind, is abandoned by his wife, and ends up living under Lagos' highway bridges, eating rubbish and food stolen from street markets. Just when his fate seems irreversible, an old acquaintance of Andy's recognizes him on the street and rescues him. His mental health is restored through prayer and evangelical exorcism, and he is allowed to start anew.

Living in Bondage was the first Nigerian film to put on screen the terrifying rumors of human sacrifice and blood thirsty cults populating Nigerian imagination at the time (Barber; Bastian), after the 1980s had been marked by rapid economic decline, social insecurity, military duress, and the spreading of the »occult economies« that had come to define neoliberalism in Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff). The film was shot on a string budget of less than $10,000 but involved several people with experience as technicians as well as actors in television series produced by the Nigerian national broadcaster, NTA (see Haynes 2016), or with stage experience connected to the Yoruba travelling theater (Barber). Both forms were imbued with melodramatic elements, along the lines of what Brooks calls the »logic of the excluded middle« (18), a narrative structure constructed around a system of radical polarizations and excessive, Manichean moral oppositions. They were marked by an »aesthetic of exhortation« (Adesokan) that provided moral lessons, but, above all, that questioned the audience's moral position in relation to the fictional drama unfolding before them (Jedlowski 2018). To these elements, *Living in Bondage* added what Brian Larkin describes as an »aesthetic of outrage,« which used »spectacular transgression, luridly depicted to work on the body, generating physical revulsion« (Larkin 186). And it featured a particular form of realism, in part due to the technical failures and budget limits that characterized early Nollywood productions. This »contingent realism« (Jedlowski 2017) made the film appear incontestably close to the audience's lived reality. In one of the sacrifice scenes, for instance, a lamb is slaughtered on Andy's head and his face is covered in real blood. In a scene at the end of the film, where Andy wanders around a city market, the limited production budget allowed for neither extras nor the standard procedures to isolate the shot from the real vagaries of urban life, and the scene is therefore shot as if an amateur filmmaker followed a person on the street: Passers-by look into the camera, some reacting with surprise toward Andy's unruly behavior. The film's audience is thereby pushed to believe that Andy is indeed a real person whose life has accidentally been caught on camera.

These elements all became recurrent features in subsequent Nollywood releases and anticipated the emergence of more clear-cut local genres such as the Pentecostal-infused »religious films,« the »money making ritual films« (or »occult films«), and even the more recent, higher budget, more standardized Nollywood »horror movies« that attempt to refashion early Nollywood's obsession with witchcraft in more contemporary and internationally palatable ways (as seen in *The Figurine*, *Araromire*, and *Living in Bondage: Breaking Free*). *Living in Bondage* has thus contributed to shaping what might be defined as Nollywood's melodramatic imagination—something that can be meaningfully differentiated from the melodramatic forms that have emerged in Western traditions.

As many have emphasized (Brooks; Singer), melodrama entertains a particular relationship with the emergence of European modernity, and thus with a precise epistemological moment that melodrama itself »illustrates and to which it contributes« (Brooks 14). This epistemological moment is connected to the affirmation of Enlightenment philosophy, the emergence of secularism, and the decline of the Catholic Church's influence on European politics and culture. Within this context, melodrama is a narrative form that explores the »moral occult«—that is, »the domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality«—but is not itself »a metaphysical system; it is rather the repository of the fragmentary and desacralized remnants of sacred myth« (Brooks 5). When we look at Nigerian video films like *Living in Bondage*, this interpretation of melodrama's deep structures of meaning needs to be reformulated. As Ravi Vasudevan has suggested in relation to Indian cinema, »if we are to theorize the validity of the melodramatic mode in the Indian case, it must be in such a way as to reformulate the terms of the modernity within which melodrama emerges« (42)—and something similar can be argued in relation to Nigerian film. While it is undeniable that *Living in Bondage*, like many other Nollywood films, is deeply concerned with the ethical questions arising from the sphere of »the moral occult,« the reasons for this diverge from those that informed 18th century French melodrama and subsequent related narrative forms.

The birth of the Nigerian video market and film industry is deeply connected to the economic crisis that affected the country, and the sub-Saharan African region more generally, throughout the 1980s (Haynes 2016; Larkin). In many ways, for Nigerians, this crisis generated widespread disillusion toward the promises of welfare, wealth, and socioeconomic development represented by the idea of a post-colonial modernity. While melodrama in Europe emerged as a result of the dreams and anxieties generated by the newly rising modern era, in *Living in Bondage* and the early Nigerian video films it inspired, melodramatic narrative arose rather from the failure of the ideals that this same era attempted to universalize throughout the world. If European melodrama resulted from the affirmation of a new society, *Living in Bondage*'s melodramatic imagination developed from the acknowledgment of the partial failure of the project for a new society (pointed to by political independence and the infrastructural projects of the Oil Boom era). This does not mean, however, that the principles of this project were radically abandoned or refused. The ideal of modernity persisted, but it began to be inhabited by the awareness of its limits, its fragmentation, its haunting opposites—the magical, the irrational, the violent. As a result, *Living in Bondage*'s melodramatic imagination did not emerge from the affirmation of the individual over the collective, nor the secular over the sacred. Instead, it sprang up from the affirmation of the religious over the secular, and the collective over the individual.

It is important to underline here that through the use of dichotomies like »collective/individual« and »religious/secular,« I do not intend to reproduce the mystifying dualisms that have been widely criticized in African studies. I refuse theoretical schemes based on an evolutionary conception of time (e.g. from collective to individual, from religious to secular), according to which the return of the »religious« and »collective« at the center of social organization would symbolize a backward step on a linear itinerary of progress. My intention, on the contrary, is to underline how, within a highly modern context such as in the case of Nigeria, the ideal of modernity itself can be progressively dissociated from the aspects often considered its key attributes: secularism and individualism. As much scholarship on African modernity has shown, and as a film like *Living in Bondage* aptly demonstrates, the large propagation of ethnic conflicts, occult practices, and Pentecostal beliefs in contemporary African societies represents neither the »end« of modernity on the continent nor its radical failure (Comaroff and Comaroff; Geschiere et al.). It represents, rather, the fact that, with the failure of a state-driven initiative of modernization, the ideal of modernity has become, if possible, more complex, more hybrid, and more plural than ever.

In this sense, if the European melodrama is »the drama of morality« (Brooks 20) the individual must play when entering the modern condition, *Living in Bondage*'s melodramatic imagination represents »the drama of morality« that society has to face once the ideal of a linear, progressive modernity has collapsed. This is a fundamental difference, which constitutes, in my view, an important dimension of early Nigerian video films' narrative and aesthetic originality.

What is left of these specificities in today's globalized Nollywood is an entirely different matter, to which recent Nollywood studies scholarship has begun to provide tentative answers (Adejunmobi; Ryan).

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