Summary. The elegant portrayal of the transcendental in F. W. Marnau’s Nosferatu, the artistic representation of mysticism in Peter Jackson’s Lord of the Rings, and the scenes of horror in Francis Ford Coppola’s filmic adaptation of Bram Stoker’s Dracula, are reflections of belief in the mystical in all cultures across the world. This archetypal phenomenon stems from universal valourisation, utility, and the relationship between man and the transcendental. The popular notion of the transcendental lends credence to its artistic exploration in the Nigerian home video film enterprise, popularly known as Nollywood. In fact, the genesis of the Nigerian film industry, attests to this as first generation filmmakers incorporated themes of mystical contentions. Thus, belief in mysticism and the spiritual have influenced the content of Nigerian home video films. It is against this backdrop that this study examines the mystical contest in Andy Amenechi’s film, Oduduwa. It argues that transcendental contests in Nollywood home video films are a portrayal of the Nigerian belief system. Using pictorial illustrations, I adopt historical and content analysis methods to analyse the film, Oduduwa. Among other findings, it comes to the fore in this study that mysticism holds sway in cinemas across all cultures and that Andy Amenechi’s Oduduwa could be located in this category. I therefore conclude that Nigerian filmmakers and cineastes across the world, should fully explore themes of mysticism in their films, to facilitate a documentation and propagation of this cultural component.

Keywords: Nollywood, neo-Nollywood, mysticism, Oduduwa, contest

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Introduction

In traditional African societies, there are spiritual forces that are believed to control the affairs of man. The potency of these powers is predicated on man’s intimate relationship with them. Sometimes, these powers are exercised by man in his attempt to pacify the divine, to bridge the nexus between him and the supernatural, and also in an attempt to fortify himself against the danger of the unknown and evils perpetuated by enemies. This gives credence to Austin Anigala's statement, in his article entitled *The Mystical Contest in J.P. Clark's Ozidi*, that “through superhuman powers, initiates of the coven destroy, kill and cause confusion in the society.”\(^1\) In fact, Mbiti\(^2\) also expatiates that “Africans are a notoriously religious people,” and this religious consciousness has greatly influenced the philosophy of the African art, and Nigerian art in particular. The film art has incorporated religious themes to such an extent that there is hardly a Nigerian film of the historical and folkloric genre that does not feature one religion or another.

Nollywood home videos are a reflection of the mores, traditions, and ways of living of Nigerian societies. Indeed, they are a mirror of the customs and the totality of the belief system of a particular culture. Among these beliefs is mysticism or the preternatural. Films in this category explore the spiritual, the transcendental or a show a metaphysical contest. One major portrayal of mysticism in Nollywood home videos is the mystical contest. Usually, these supernatural contests are discharged in the quest for dominance, power and supremacy. “Belief in the function and dangers of bad magic, sorcery and witchcraft is deeply rooted in African life”\(^3\). And this is the fulcrum of Nollywood home video films which include *Izaga, Agbako, Exile, Mark of the Beast* and *Amadioha*. It is against this backdrop that this study examines the mystical contest in Andy Amenechi’s film, Oduduwa. It argues that transcendental contests in Nollywood home video films are a portrayal of the Nigerian belief system.

Conceptual clarification

Mysticism is a spiritual discipline used to make contact with the divine. Belief in union with the divine nature by means of ecstatic contemplation, and belief in the power of

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spiritual access to ultimate reality, or to domains of knowledge closed off to ordinary thought. The mystical event is a personal experience during which one feels as though one has been touched by some higher or greater power. This may occur inside or outside of a religious setting within or outside a religious tradition.4

Also, mysticism is applied derogatorily to theories that assume occult qualities or agencies of which no empirical or rational account can be offered. Furthermore, some societies (especially in Africa) “believe that there are invisible forces and powers in the universe. It is also believed that certain human beings have the knowledge and the ability of how to tap, control and use these forces. Some have greater skill and knowledge than others”5. For this paper, the term ‘mystical’ is used as any action taken that entails a force transcending the physical.

### An exploration of mystical contest in Nollywood home videos

The Nigerian belief in mysticism has led to its depiction and representation on the silver screen. From its inception, film has portrayed the transcendental with much plausibility and authenticity, unlike in the theatre where the audience suspends its disbelief whenever such scenes are performed. Hollywood films such as Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings*, F. W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922) and Werner Herzog’s *Nosferatu: The Vampyre* (1979), Stephen Sommers’s *Van Helsing* (2008) and Francis Ford Coppola’s *Dracula* (1992) are artistic and creative explorations of mysticism. Indian Bollywood cinema in particular also has films such as *Nagin*, and *Jaani Dutchman* and so on, which are also in the framework of the mystical.

Thus, an exploration of this theme in Nollywood is not just a result of Western imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism, but it is pertinent to note that mystical contests are an ingredient of Nigerian cultures. The Nigerian theatre for instance has a repertoire of plays with components of mysticism in them. In J. P. Clark’s *Ozidi*, the eponymous character, with the help of his witch mother, Oreame, avenges his father’s death. Wale Ogunyemi’s *Ijaye* portrays a display of the mystical, Austin Anigala’s magnum opus, entitled *The Living Dead* (2006) and Zulu Sofola’s *Wedlock of the Gods* (1972), are also representations of the diabolical. In fact, Austin Anigala’s *The Living Dead* depicts the tragic character, Eze, in a spiritual duel with his enemies – witches and wizards. The mystical, therefore, is a point of intersection between

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4 *What is Mysticism?*, www.bodysoulandspirit.net [23.08.2017].

5 J. Mbiti, *African Religions...*
these plays. In appraisal of the spirit of the supernatural in J.P Clark’s dramaturgy, Simon Obikpeko Umukoro asserts that:

The recreated universe of Clark’s play is a microcosm of the African religious experience of his universe. It is dualistic, consisting of natural and supernatural aspects. The two aspects are not separate; they co-exist and the natural aspect is under control of the supernatural. Thus, in the religious experience of the universe, the supernatural is supreme.6

Themes that centre on mysticism – the spiritual and the transcendental – abound in Nollywood home videos, especially in classical Nollywood home videos. Nollywood home videos such as Izaga, Agbako, Exile, Mark of the Beast and Zeb Ejio’s costume film, Amadioha, are in this repertoire. They depict themes of superhuman powers. Izaga and Agbako, are rooted in melodramatic art, where good prevails over evil. These films, including Mark of the Beast, are narratives on contests between supernatural forces. By classical or traditional Nollywood home videos, we mean home videos that are produced on a shoestring budget. These home videos have characteristics that range from: low budget production, themes that are recurrent and not universal but have a wide appeal to the local audience, actors that are stereotyped, and little or no emphasis given to lighting and cinematic quality. These films are not made for the cinema and less time is devoted to production. Classical Nollywood home video is the binary of Neo-Nollywood cinema, or what Jonathan Haynes termed “New Nollywood”. Conversely, Neo-Nollywood films are made for exhibition in the cinema, there is an interplay between local and international actors, high budget production, good plot construction, experimental filmmaking, professional cinematography, and so on. Films such as Kunle Afolayan’s The Figurine and October 1, Biyi Bandele’s Half of a Yellow Sun, Anyaeze’s Ije: The Journey, Ayo Makun’s 30 Days in Atlanta and Trip to Jamaica and Lancelot Imasuen’s Invasion 1897, are films in this category. The majority of Nigerian home videos are still rooted in the classical Nollywood film tradition.

Furthermore, films with a high tendency to mysticism are mostly indigenous Nigerian films. In fact, Onookome Okome explains that:

The primary feature of popular indigenous film is found in its recourse to the metaphysical. Actions and narrative reversals are mostly predicated on the whims and caprices of inscrutable forces. The audience for these films apparently desires to see

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a great deal of a metaworld of its culture, especially the metaphysics of witchcraft, the ancestors, gods and goddesses, ghosts, spirits, the mid-world of the unborn—all forms of magic and the supernatural.7

In addition, “filmmaking within this indigenous tradition are easily discernible, the metaphysical film, which hegemonizes the ethereal world, deals mostly with the supernatural and fantastic, myth, history, legend and ritual.”8 Mystical contests in Nigerian home videos usually involve the church pastor, who indulges in spiritual warfare with a shaman, a soothsayer or a magician, people who are in a tussle over a possession, especially a piece of land, or kingship, characters who seek divine aid to defeat their enemy, and the jealous housewife who adds a love potion to her husband’s food. In Kenneth Nnebue’s Living in Bondage 2, the pastor casts the spirit of insanity out of Andy. In Anointed, Junior survives the devilish plans of his stepmother because of the prayers he offers to God before eating his meal. In fact, his stepmother adds poison to his food. However, after praying, the poison relocates into his stepsisters’ food and he survives while the stepsisters die.

The popular Nigerian home video film, Shina Rambo is fully rooted in mysticism and mystical contests. The film, which is a paradigm of unprofessionalism in Nollywood (due to its weak plot construction, amateurish acting, poor special effects, lack of plausibility), mirrors the eponymous character who is a rogue, armed robber and assassin, ousts the king of the Umunoba kingdom and builds an empire governed by him and his ruthless gang. He is able to overthrow the king with spiritual powers. He is capable of resurrecting with the help of a witch doctor whenever he dies. The ousted king seeks divine help to fight Shina Rambo and reclaim his throne. Lancelot Imasuen’s Issakaba 1-5 is another film that has the mystical as its dominant theme. Issakaba boys, led by Ebube (Sam Dede) embark on a killing spree of armed robbers, kidnappers, ritualists. They also go after witch doctors who help the criminals get away with their crimes with a diabolical medium. In fact, they kill Igbudu, a witch doctor in a duel of mysticism.

Synopsis of Andy Amenechi’s Oduduwa

A 2008 Infinity Films production, Oduduwa, centres on the invasion of Ile-Ife by rafia warriors. Ogun, the god of war and his soldiers have tried to avert this menace, all to no avail. Agboniregun consults the oracle and he says that a savior will be

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8 Ibidem, p. 100.
sent by Olodumare (God) to rescue the people of Ile-Ife. After many months, Adua, a prince from Mecca arrives in Ile-Ife from the sky. He is accepted and made king when he defeats the raffia warriors. Adua, whose name had been bastardized from Oduduwa, marries Olokun, a native of Ife but she does not bear him a child after three years. Olokun gives Oduduwa a new wife, named Osara who bears him a son, named Okanbi. After many years, Olokun leaves since she could not bear Osara’s insults. Oduduwa leaves for Mecca to rescue his brothers, whom he says are in trouble. When he leaves, Obatala and Laaroye (Esu) lay claim to the throne to the detriment of Oduduwa’s son. There is a tussle of power between them. Esu Laaroye eventually loses and Obatala lays claim to the throne. The people of Ile-Ife are divided, as some people are in support of Obatala while others are ready to wait for Oduduwa’s return. Oduduwa eventually returns after many years. Out of defeat and anger, Obatala goes back to Olodumare who had sent him down to Ile-Ife. Oduduwa also decides to leave the world for Olodumare. Thus, he crowns his grandson, Oranmiyan, King in Ile-Ife before he vanishes. A narrator states that Oduduwa’s other sons became rulers in other kingdoms in Yoruba land.

The mystical contest in Andy Amenechi’s Oduduwa

The film Oduduwa is an exploration of the cosmology, the cosmogony and the progeny of the Yoruba race. It does not only portray gods as men, it also examines the role the gods played in the genesis of the Yoruba race, or even the human race. The home video depicts that Ile-Ife is the centre of the human race. It further projects Ogun, Obatala, Esu Laaroye Agboniregun as being humans who possess some supernatural powers. The Yoruba race, which spreads from Ile-Ife, is without a king. What they have are various persons who pilot the affairs of the community. Although Obatala plays the role of a leader at some point, he is not officially crowned king of Ile-Ife. The film is replete with mysticism. In fact, it begins with incantations. It is an exploration of the battle for supremacy between various gods. Obatala, the leader of Ile-Ife, and god of creation, Ogun, the god of war and security, Sango, the god of lightning and thunder, Esu Laaroye, who takes charge of the affairs of men, and the trickster god and Adua, who later becomes Oduduwa, who fight for the kingship of Ile-Ife, the cradle and center of the Yoruba race. However, this battle for supremacy transcends the physical plane, into the spiritual.

The raffia warriors wreck havoc on the people of Ife. Their maidens and young men are not only taken captive by the warriors, but their food and crops are also looted. It is therefore certain that whoever help defeat the Igbo warriors would be-
come leader in Ife. Hence Obatala, who assumes the role of leader, seeks ways to put an end to the threat and menace of the invaders. However, he looks helpless in defeating them.

Mystical exploration also comes to play in Adua’s home town-Mecca. Some indigenes in Mecca are critical of the power and wealth of the king, Nimrod. Thus, they decide to invade the palace and remove the king from power. In the process of the raid, the soothsayer and the king are killed. However, Adua, the heir to the throne escapes with his servants and siblings. Prior to the death of the soothsayer, he tells Adua that he is destined to rule as king in another kingdom. Thus destiny plays a vital role in Adua’s life. Though his servant tells him to flee with them and rule over them, he refuses:

Servant: *Then where will you go?*
Adua: *Anywhere that the gods take me to.*

Adua’s belief in destiny, takes him to another land. He is transported into the sky by the gods. Adua’s means of transportation is of supernatural significance. His transportation is not by aeroplane. He holds a mystical chain, while the gods leads him through the sky. “These mystical forces of the universe are neither evil nor good in themselves, they are just like other natural things at man’s disposal”⁹. It is no surprise then that Adua refuses to go with his people. He speaks these lines:

Adua: *I cannot rule over a people that shed blood.*
Servant: *Then where will you go?*
Adua: *Anywhere that the gods take me to.*

In the same vein, this relates to the theory of determinism. Perhaps Adua is conscious of the will of the gods as foretold by the soothsayer in Mecca, hence, taking the crown along, he tells the gods to take him to a land where there is peace and prosperity. He eventually lands in Ile-Ife. His mysterious entry into Ile-Ife is coupled with the chain he uses in climbing down from heaven with the crown in his hand. This mysterious event assures the people that he was really sent by Olodumare’s. He is there to rescue Ile-Ife from the shackles of oppression since the likes of Ogun, the god of war, is unable to defeat the raffia warriors.

The element of the mystical also comes into play when Adua gets to Ile-Ife. He is unable to speak the language of the Yoruba people. Hence, there is a challenge in communication. They speak with signs. Symbols are a language that can help us understand our past. This is exemplified in the written symbols with which A-

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boniregun communicates with Oduduwa before he mystically teaches Oduduwa to speak the Yoruba language. Agboniregun touches Adua's mouth and he instantly speaks it. The people are not surprised at this because it is one of the numerous feats Agboniregun had pulled off. He is used to achieving victory in transcendental contexts. His role as a soothsayer also enables him see beyond the physical into the metaphysical. Agboniregun was sent by Olodumare to Earth to rule over men. But he is diplomatic. He knows Adua is the chosen one. The gods had destined him to rule over Ile-Ife. However, he has to wait till Adua proves it. This Adua does by defeating the raffia soldiers, and he is made king.

Like the biblical King David and the Roman Julius Caesar, Oduduwa's name becomes a household name. He is portrayed as a liberator of the Ile-Ife community and the Yoruba race in general. No wonder he is seen as the progenitor of the Yoruba race. In this film, cultural dominance comes into play as the crown Adua brings from Mecca becomes the symbol of power and authority in Ile-Ife. This posits the dominance, preeminence and supremacy of Mecca over the Yoruba race. Thus, the children produced by Oduduwa and the second wife are a mixture of Yoruba and Meccan blood. The crown through the semiotic of dominance by Mecca

In Africa, wars are fought and scores settled with the help of metaphysical beings. Thus, Obatala decides to seek the help of Esu Laaroye. Obatala, who is jealous of Adua's emergence as king in Ile-Ife – when Adua is a stranger – casts a spell on Adua, who had traveled to Mecca to rescue his cousins and uncles from trouble. He had seen their travail in the dream, thus his decision to rescue them. In his absence, Obatala cast a spell on him in the dead of the night. However, Esu Laaroye, who is privy to the plot, outdoes Obatala by wooing the people (mystically) of Ile-Ife to his side to make him king. The film portrays Esu Laaroye as a trickster character.

Esu is the Yoruba trickster god. Esu also called Elegba and Elegbara is the embodiment of uncertainty in Yoruba culture. He is a mischief maker... He has no regard for authority, and he will cause mischief among the gods and among men (Balistreri, 10-11).

Oduduwa also brings development to Ile-Ife. Oduduwa is the first person to be seen in full regalia. Prior to his arrival in Ile-Ife, the clothes the people wore had been made from leaves. His arrival changes the material. He introduces the production of textile, clothes made from cotton. With Oduduwa's return from Mecca, he discovers that Obatala had made himself king, so they resort to resolving the dispute coercively – in a mystical contest. Obatala is no match for Oduduwa, who not only defeats him, but he also makes Obatala prostrate himself before him.

With his defeat and humiliation, Obatala returns to Olodumare (God). He feels he had completed the mission for which he came to this world. Another reason
for his early return is to avert more rivalry between him and Oduduwa, hence he vanishes after admonishing his servants to keep his memory alive. Below is his conversation with his acolytes:

Obatala: I thank you for coming this far with me. I appreciate it. I charge you to put all that happened behind you. Rally round your ruler and be proud of your race. I, Obatala, I am home bound
Servant 1: Obatala, You can’t leave…
Obatala: My continued stay will generate further controversy. Keep my memory alive always. I leave you in peace.

Obatala admonishes his acolytes to keep his memory alive. In present day Yoruba society, festivals are held in remembrance and honour of Obatala. These festivals serve as a nexus between his servants, the Yoruba world, and Obatala, the Yoruba god of creation. In the same vein the last scene of the film portrays Odudua going back to Olodumare in his old age. Like Obatala, he vanishes after giving the crown to his son, Oranmiyan. Perhaps the greatest display of the mystical is Odudua’s journey back home. The crown which Odudua brings from Mecca is a reference to history. Various theories on the Ile-Ife phenomena have come to the fore. The literary corpus, especially drama has been used to construct, deconstruct and appropriate various versions of the kingship in Ile-Ife. However, one similarity between the Bini and the version on Mecca, is that Odudua was a God sent and also, the name Odudua is a misappropriation of an original name, Adua. Furthermore, Areo (54) states that “the history and origin of the Yoruba of south western Nigeria is obscure and multifarious due to lack of written records. This fact however, does not negate the truth of a well preserved history, as the people’s history is rich in both tangible and intangible materials”.

Conversely, Akinola (3) in response to this version of the Odudua history, states that “a story about an exotic origin in a place like Mecca, as in one of the Yoruba stories of origin, is no more than a hankering after prestige by some of the earliest Yoruba converts to Islam who invented or accepted the story”. However, the above assertion is not the focus of this study.

An appraisal of filmic aesthetics in Odudua

Various performance and filmic aesthetics are utilised in the home video, Odudua. These performance aesthetics or filmic indices include dances, songs and music, proverbial communication and the narration or the storytelling technique. All of these are
used to advance the spectacle of the mystical in the film. Dances serve various functions in this film. While most of the dances in the films are secular, there are a few ritual dances. Dances serve ritualistic and ceremonial purposes in the film. Oduduwa comes to Ile-Ife as a visitor and Agboniregun requests all and sundry to get ready for a welcoming ceremony. Dances of different kinds are used to welcome him. In his coronation as king and his marriage to Olokun, well-costumed dancers dance to entertain the spectators and the demi-gods (Obatala, Esu Laaroye, Ogun and Agboniregun).

The people of Ile-Ife sing songs to welcome Oduduwa into their fold. Songs are sung to praise him as a drum is drummed to accompany the song as well as to unveil the aesthetic of the song. The narrative style in which a narrator unveils preceding and present events is used in Oduduwa. At the point where there is a transition from the Yoruba setting to the locale in Mecca, the narrator is used to effect the transition and also to unveil the action of the usurping and consequent killing of the king. In African societies, the heroic deeds of kings and notable figures are sung by praise singers. This has been duly utilized in modern African plays. The use of this traditional element in a number of African plays has led to its transition into Nollywood home videos. In other words, Nollywood films have from their inception, properly utilized this subject of African aesthetics. In fact, in Oduduwa, Obatala, the self-acclaimed king has an entourage of praise singers who sing his praise thus.

**Praise singers: Obatala, Obata san, Obatakuntakun**

Singing his praise makes him swell from pride. It makes him conscious of his strength and valour. Beyond Obatala, Esu Laaroye’s supporters also sing the latter’s praise. In other words, praise singing is a part of Yoruba performance art as it is done in a sing-song manner and embellished with rhythm. Praise singing is characterized with the feat of heroes. When Oduduwa defeats the Igbo soldiers and his subsequent development of Yoruba land, he is king and a praise singer is assigned to echo his heroic deeds as well.

Beyond the social content of the film, it also historicizes the artifacts of traditional Yoruba society. Ile-Ife is portrayed as a land in which houses are built with mud and roofed with thatch. The costumes the progenitors of Ile-Ife wear in the film are made from leaves and tied around their waist. Perhaps one factor that led to Oduduwa’s fascinating the Ile-Ife populace is the difference between his clothes and theirs. Oduduwa’s clothes are made from cotton. Unlike his hosts, his clothes are not made from leaves.
The film *Oduduwa* straddles two subgenres – the legendary and the historical film genres. Oduduwa is depicted as a legend and the events that revolve around Oduduwa and the other gods portray the history. Furthermore, *light* is an element used by the filmmaker to convey his message to the audience. The light used to portray Adua’s escapade in Mecca and the portrayal of Ile-Ife are different. In other words, there is a play on the camera composition by the director of photography and the film editor. This also portrays the difference between the atmospheric conditions of the two geographies (Mecca and Ile-Ife). Another reason is to make the audience conscious of the historical tendency of the film.

**Conclusion**

The popular notion of the transcendental lends credence to its artistic exploration in the Nigerian home video film enterprise, popularly known as Nollywood. In fact, the genesis of the Nigerian film industry attests to this as first generation filmmakers incorporated themes of mystical contentions. Thus, belief in mysticism and the spiritual have influenced the content of Nigerian home video films. I conclude that mysticism hold sway in cinemas across all cultures and that Andy Amenechi’s *Oduduwa* could be located in this category. Furthermore, I recommend that Nigerian filmmakers and cineastes across the world, should fully explore the themes of mysticism in their films, to facilitate a documentation and propagation of this cultural component.

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*What is Mysticism?*, www.bodysoulandspirit.net [23.08.2017].