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Ghosts, Witches and the Magical World in the Nigerian Film *Billionaire's Club*

ABSTRACT

This article explores the carnality and corruption at the heart of the human soul as depicted in the Nigerian film *Billionaire's Club*. Obsession with material possessions drives a group of billionaires to sacrifice their loved ones, carry out bloodthirsty rituals and sacrifice pieces of their flesh to the gods of money and material wealth. The sacrificed human beings come back as ghosts to avenge their deaths. This article will discuss the levels on which *Billionaire's Club* satirises the carnality of the human soul and its obsession with material wealth. First, the film will be analysed as a critique of primitive capitalism, with its belief that accumulation of material wealth can only be achieved at the behest of magic, witchcraft and sorcery. Second, *Billionaire's Club* will be analysed as an allegory of rabid modern capitalism, so corrupt and stripped of its humanity that it knows no scruples or moral boundaries.

KEYWORDS

Nigerian Movies; *Billionaire's Club*; Magic; Capitalism; Witches; Ghosts.

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Introduction: The cosmological origins of magic through the evil spirit

A belief in the existence of magic, witchcraft, avenging spirits, ghosts and spiritualism is part of African life, and in fact constitutes the core of many African traditional belief systems. In Africa, both animate and inanimate objects are seen as having a spirit. The origins of spiritualism reside in the common belief that when a person dies his or her spirit joins the world of the ancestors (Abbink, 2003). The ancestors are the guardian angels of the living. The spirit is a floating figure; it loses its physical control the moment it moves out of the physical present-ness of the body. Because of its lack of physicality and lack of belonging, the living can tame the spirit and use it for good or for evil purposes. But even when the spirit of the dead can be controlled by the living, its potency cannot be equal to the physical powers of a human being because the spirit is supernatural; it has crossed the boundary of the living to enter into a metaphysical world.

The supernatural nature of the spirit means that it is also capable of punishing a manipulator who breaks the covenant that has been entered into between the two—the manipulator and the spirit. When the spirit is used to accumulate wealth, inflict pain, or curse and kill others, the practice becomes



witchcraft. Within the supernatural or magical thought mode, witches and wizards are seen as the *other* and defined as evil because they threaten the living with their otherworldly activities (Jackson, 1981). The dynamism of the evil spirit, however, is such that it can be used by both the rich and poor to affirm power and consolidate their position in society and culture. Through magical practices, an evil spirit is turned into a god that can be consulted by a witch or wizard for its evil powers and expertise in magic. To the witch, the evil spirit is the hero-god who, in the words of Soyinka (1992), is inscrutable, the explorer into territories which man fears to comprehend. Witches and wizards cement their relationship with the evil spirit by occasionally sacrificing human blood and pieces of human flesh through sorcery and incantations.

The magical realism of witchcraft is embodied in representations of power and its physical manifestation. Slemon (1995) contends that the term *magical realism* is an oxymoron, one that suggests a binary opposition between the representational code of realism and that which is reflected through fantasy. A battle between reality and fantasy takes place, each borrowing from the other towards the creation of a fictional world. The fictional world in *Billionaire's Club* is based on the reality of witchcraft. In Africa, the magic of witchcraft is explained through spiritual power being invested in a lifeless object or the spirit of a live or dead animal. If a witch invites an evil spirit to enter into a physical object, the object can fly through the air by invisible means, inflict pain, talk, cry, disappear, bring wealth – or even kill. The same is true of the spirit of an animal or goblins that are used as weapons to destroy human life. However, the intriguing part of witchcraft is that once one is addicted to it, it is difficult to renounce the magical practice without paying dearly with one's life.

The plot of the film *Billionaires Club*

The Nigerian film *Billionaire's Club* is the tragic story of a petty pharmacist, Zedikai, whose ambition to become a billionaire brings disaster to his family. The *narrative of diabolism* (Jackson, 1981: 55) in the plot is depicted through Zedikai's becoming an accomplice to the killing and sacrifice of his wife and his only child to the gods of materialism and consumerism. Zedikai's ambition to become a billionaire is however, foiled by the avenging spirit of his dead wife. In the end, Zedikai dies horribly, with pieces of flesh falling off his rotting body. He too, comes back as a ghost to haunt the members of the Billionaire's Club who influenced him to destroy his family.

On one level, *Billionaire's Club* poses the problem of *power*, where spiritual victimisation blocks the establishment of a self-supporting system out of the ruins of primitive capitalism. Primitive capitalism, in *Billionaire's Club*, has failed to sustain itself in the face of complex capital accumulation engineered by post-modern capitalism. The group of billionaires is therefore forced to resort to witchcraft to counter possible extinction. What is clear in the film is that desire for material acquisition and consumerism have caused the *narratives of diabolism* (Jackson, 1981: 55) to resurface from the grey areas of African traditional culture as a weapon to counter competition from post-modern capitalism.



Tracing the ambition to become rich

Billionaire's Club begins by presenting the idyllic life of Victoria, her mother and brother. Victoria annoys her mother, who occasionally scolds her because she is not married even though she has reached a marriageable age. Some girls in the community gossip about her inability to find a suitor. In some African communities, if an adult woman fails to attract a prospective husband, the act is blamed on witches for having put a curse on that particular woman. (Nothing in Africa can just happen, without a possible supernatural explanation.) Victoria is aware of the presence of this cultural belief. Thus, in one scene she is depicted as sorrowfully praying to be delivered by God from the bondage of a possible curse. As if God has answered her prayers, Victoria is proposed to by Zedikai, who is a petty trader in pharmaceutical products. The two get married and quickly move to a new apartment. In addition, the couple is blessed with a baby girl. On the business side, there are visible signs that the pharmaceutical shop is expanding, especially under the creative management of Victoria.

But something is wrong. Zedikai is particularly concerned about the state of his battered Peugeot 504 car – a car which separates him from the flashy life of upper-class citizens with their Mercedes cars, Jeeps, Prados and Pajeros. Zedikai has great ambitions of becoming a rich man by creating a fiefdom within the business world. This obsession consumes him, and he is always complaining to his wife about his failure to transform his middle-class background to an upper-class lifestyle. The *leit-motif* of obsession, most of it deriving from traditional folklore (Kahari, 2009) has its legitimacy in teaching the moral lesson that

tragic consequences are likely to follow. However, while Zedikai is dangerously obsessive, Victoria has no illusions about being rich – for, she emphasises, hard work through creative management is the key to success. Yet Zedikai is convinced that there must be an easy way to become rich without working like a slave. Such a mentality becomes the source of his undoing, as he seeks to force himself into the obstructive world of the upper class. This is achieved through his meeting with a former university friend, Don whose advice to join the Billionaire's Club is to prove Zedikai's undoing.

Don drives a jeep and he is a symbol of success. He is a special recruiting agent whose job is to entice and select targeted persons to join the Billionaires' Club. When Don meets Zedikai, who is busy sorting out his broken car, his elegance and way of speaking to Zedikai gives the impression that he has made it in life. Zedikai is immediately attracted to the Don's success story, and the two promise to meet each other at the Billionaires Club. But Victoria worries about Zedikai's acquaintance with Don and suspects that something sinister is about to happen. Victoria has every reason to be suspicious because in Nigeria, as in many other African countries, rich people are the centre of controversy. They are often accused of amassing wealth through witchcraft or through unscrupulous means like duping others. The avaricious tendency of some rich people prompts society to construct cultural stereotypes based on *Us* (the poor) and *Them* (The rich people). It is this conception of the rich people that informs Victoria's disapproval of the relationship between Don and Zedikai when she says, "Darling, just that my mind disapproves of those favours. Well, if you insist, please be very careful."

Zedikai replies, "Darling, you know I need to be connected. I promise you, I will be very careful."



To be connected is to know people that have made it in the business world. But to be connected means making hard decisions, as well as dancing to the tune of those who are on the driving seat, making things happen in the business world. In a situation of shrinking economies in Africa marked by rabid competition for the few resources, “to be connected” (also a symbol of corruption and nepotism) becomes a privilege of the few.

Problematising the spirit of materialism, consumerism and witchcraft

The *Billionaire's Club* is a haven of rich people; a place of opulence and big cars, and its ritualistic aura is captured through high-life music, beer, feasting and concubines. The orgy of feasting and womanising that goes on at the Billionaires Club symbolises the spirit of consumerism of the upper-class society in Nigeria. By extension, consumerism in Billionaire's Club is reflective of a pernicious form of capitalism that can only sustain itself through lavish spending without transforming itself into being a producer. Armah (1970) defines the condition of consumerism to Africans as an incurable dependency syndrome that will consume Africans to death. In the context of the story, the irony is that Zedikai wants to become a member of the consumer society, but before that he must be thoroughly vetted to find out whether he qualifies or not. For example, part of the vetting comes in the form of harsh treatment by the car guard, who says to Zedikai, “Can you park this scrap of a car outside there and let real cars pass on. There is no place for your type of car here.” Only the timely intervention of Don saves Zedikai from further humiliation. However, the humiliation works as a subplot in the story, in that it whets Zedikai's appetite to become a rich man so that he can

rise above this kind of humiliation. Don actually tells Zedikai, “Your destiny lies in your hands,” when he accompanies Zedikai to the office of the Director of the Billionaire's Club.

The Director introduces himself to Zedikai as Dibi for short, or Killion Billion. Zedikai is told to wash his hands in a clay pot, symbolising the washing away of poverty. If the ritual had ended there, Zedikai would not have much to worry about. However, the ritual of washing hands in a clay pot was to mark the beginning of his dangerous ordeal. Dibi now asks Zedikai, “Do you have a baby?” When Zedikai assents, Dibi goes on to say, “That makes your case easy. Defy your wife and bring your baby here, alone.” Zedikai is startled and draws back, but Don tells him that nothing comes easy. In fact, Zedikai is further shocked to be told by the Director, “That baby you are anxious to protect is ill to the point of death.” By washing his hands in a clay pot, Zedikai has actually initiated himself into witchcraft. In African culture, it is believed that if one is initiated into witchcraft the first test given is that one is tasked with eating or killing his child to prove his bravery and commitment. The underlying proposition is that if one is capable of killing one's child then one is prepared to carry out whatever difficult task one is told to do. After all, how could a wizard fail to kill other people's children if he can kill his own child?

When Zedikai gets home he finds out that his only child is seriously ill, and he immediately remembers Dibi's speech about the illness. He succeeds in convincing his anxious wife that they should take the child to the Billionaire's Club for treatment. At the Club, Zedikai is told to bring the child alone to the upper chamber of the house. The upper chamber is a ritualistic room decorated in red, and the members



wear red gowns. In some African societies, the colour red has demonic connotations; it signifies danger as it symbolises the spilling of blood. This sinister air is confirmed by the sombre mood of the members and their threatening stance, the magical aura surrounding the room, and Dibi's spiritual incantations. When the baby is handed to a scrawny woman who immediately forces the child into a mortar, Zedikai already knows the fate of his baby. As a magical song is chanted, the woman gnashes her teeth and laboriously grinds the child to pieces using a pestle.

Song, as in folklore, is used to summon the magical spirit of witchcraft as well as celebrate the ritual of spilling blood. Song works as a panegyric or praise poetry that lures the evil spirit to unleash its vicious attack towards a targeted individual. After the ordeal, the woman utters an animalistic shrill to pronounce the end of the ritual of sacrificing the baby to the gods of money. Zedikai is silent with shock, but he cannot do anything because he is now an accomplice to the killing. He is congratulated by the members for showing his bravery. When the members descend from the upper chamber, they are confronted by Victoria, who demands to know where her baby is. Zedikai lies to his wife, telling her that there was nothing he could do to stop them from killing the child. The furious Victoria struggles vainly as she is manhandled and dragged to another room. She too is sacrificed to the gods of money and materialism.

Return from the dead: ghosts and avenging spirits in *Billionaire's Club*

After the death of Victoria and her child, Zedikai begins to see signs of material improvement. In fact, Zedikai actually buys an upmarket mansion and can also afford to drive a jeep. His only anxiety is how he is going to tell his in-laws about the death of Victoria and the child. Don comes to his rescue by advising Zedikai to manufacture the lie that the deaths of his wife and baby were due to an accident. But Victoria's mother is not satisfied. Her constant mourning is all that is needed to raise Victoria's avenging spirit. In African traditional culture, it is a common belief that if a person dies in mysterious circumstances, the mourning of the parents will be strong enough to raise the spirit of the dead to avenge the death. Some people would go as far as plant a magical young seedling at the grave of the deceased so that when its leaves begin to fall down, the murderers die one by one as a way of appeasing the spirit of the one who was killed.

Zedikai's case is different. When the avenging spirit of Victoria comes, it appears in the form of a ghost. Myths of ghosts, giants and cannibals are common in African folklore. They represent the magic in African traditional culture; the make-believe world which is a deconstruction of the real world. In the film, Victoria's ghost "is inherently oppositional because it represents an assault on the scientific and materialist assumptions of Western modernity: that reality is knowable, predictable and controllable" (Zamora, 1995: 498). In other words, Victoria's ghost is a manifestation of the return of the repressed, the externalisation of the internalised terror that defies principles of scientific empiricism. In post-modern discourses, ghosts embody the fundamental magical realist proposition that



reality exceeds the human capacity to describe and understand social phenomena. As a reflection of the free-floating figure, that which is liberated from physical bondage, a ghost asks us to look beyond the knowable.

The terror that erupts inside Zedikai's house, in which objects fly and weird sounds and shrills echo through the corridors, depicts the alternative reality of the departed. A young sister to Zedikai's new wife-to-be is confronted by Victoria's ghost. Blood drenched and weeping, Victoria's ghost tells her that Zedikai conspired in her murder. To Zedikai, his temporary success begins to crumble. He is haunted in his sleep by the mourning ghost of Victoria, who constantly plagues him with the question: "Why did you do it?"

However, the haunting does not deter him from going ahead with his plans to wed his new bride. At the wedding, members of the Billionaire's Club splash out money and carry out a ritualistic dance. The magical connotations of the lavish spending rest on the cultural belief that the more one spends money in public, the more money one is bound to make. But Victoria's ghost is becoming more determined than before, despite Dibi's futile attempt to contain the ghost in a bottle as a way of stifling the power of the revenge. Zedikai complains to the club about the ghost's visitations, but instead of sympathising, Dibi and other members trivialise the issue by telling Zed that there is no member of Club who is not paying the price of wanting to be rich. One member rolls up his trousers to show a rooting part of his leg that he is sacrificing to the gods of money. Similarly, another member rolls up his sleeve to show a rooting part of hand he is offering as a sacrifice. Not to be outclassed, Dibi removes his hat to reveal a pool of wriggling maggots eating into the white stuff of his brains. The three members break into paroxysms of laughter to belittle and disarm Zedikai's

concern. But Zedikai knows that Victoria's haunting ghost is no laughing matter.

This is confirmed when Zedikai develops large and painful boils all over his body. At the hospital, the doctor fails to diagnose the cause of the boils, which burst and fester. The doctors suggest to Zedikai's parents that he should be taken to their home. At home, Zedikai confesses that he was involved in the death of his child and wife, and that Victoria's ghost is haunting him. After this, he dies painfully, asking for forgiveness from his parents and from Victoria's ghost.

The internationalisation of witchcraft

The wrath of Victoria's ghost continues to play havoc at the Billionaire's Club. Dibi is particularly worried by a development in which he fails to transform back into human form the recruits that he had turned into vultures. Furthermore, rumours are circulating about the tragic fate of the young men that have been turned into vultures at the club. This forces Dibi to invite their International Director to come to Nigeria so that he can rectify the problem. The internationalisation of witchcraft in the film symbolises the ability of global corporate capital to extend its tentacles to countries around the world, and its ability to squeeze weaker competitors out of business. The hierarchical nature of witchcraft in the film, with local leaders and International directors, points to the intricacies of the system of exploitation in modern capitalism. When the Director, who appears to be Indian by origin, arrives, he reprimands Dibi's inability to solve the problem and threatens to close the Nigerian branch. The Director points out that instead of killing Victoria, Dibi could have resorted to alternative means such as driving Victoria mad. But



now the International Director demands that each member should kill 12 people and draw blood from their bodies for a cleansing process.

But before long, Zedikai's ghost unleashes violence on members of the Billionaire's Club. As a counter measure, the International Director suggests to Dibi that he should carry out a ritual at Zedikai's grave to pacify the anger of the ghost. But Dibi advises the director that in African traditional culture, a stranger is not allowed to visit a grave of someone to whom he is not related. The director does not agree with this advice. However, when the director carries out his rituals at the grave, Zedikai's furious ghost appears. The two engage in a battle. Ultimately, the director is defeated and whipped thoroughly while Dibi stands agghast watching. At the Billionaire's Club, the director dies in the arms of Dibi. The wrathful anger of Zedikai's ghost is unleashed to all members of the club, who die one by one in tragic circumstances. The only survivor is Don, who becomes a madman destined to scrounge a living from dustbins. The death of the members of Billionaire's Club is a form of poetic justice whose message is that the wages of sin is death. Zedikai and Victoria's ghost are vindicated for having carried out revenge on all the members of the Billionaire's Club.

Conclusion

The film *Billionaire's Club* depicts the excesses of greed and spiritual corruption emerging from the desire to become rich. Zedikai's tragic ordeal is a metaphor for primitive capitalism, which fails to sustain itself as it faces competition from post-modern capitalism. *Billionaire's Club* is also a meta-criticism of rabid post-modern capitalism, so stripped of its humanity that it does not respect intelligent ways of making money or carrying out business. Moreover, the film deplors those grey areas of African traditional culture such as witchcraft that refuse to die a natural death at a time when people feel that they are part of the modern world. With typical Christian and folkloric moralism, the film is saying to would-be killers, "Beware, for the wages of sin is death." This master genre of tragedy evoked by the film *Billionaire's Club* suggests that we can be entangled in a tragic web that can drown our ambitions and our ability to make rational judgments in particular situations. As viewers, our fear on behalf of the protagonist, or our pity for the fate that befalls him is a sign of our participation in a broader and virtuous moral community (Knight, 2009).



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