

Reimagining “Old-Nollywood” and the Predilection for Morality through Popular Culture: A Close Reading of *Last Burial 1*

By

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Abstract

In the new millennium of 2000, Nollywood had already gone agog with experimentations in the nascent and burgeoning video technology. Many home-videos were churned out with the primary motives of high returns on investment and a proclivity for morality through popular culture. This paper critically evaluates the notions of good, bad and religious lifestyles in *Last Burial 1* (2000) as embodiment of Old-Nollywood’s thematic drive for morality. The methodology is to analyse the selected film on the theories of popular culture and ideology by relating them to the overriding subject matter of uprightness. By so doing, the text is read as portraying the quest for illicit wealth, greed and insatiable desire for affluence as recipe for disaster in life and society. As the plot unfolds, it is found that the choice between abject poverty with integrity and illicit luxury with its attendant cataclysmic effects is juxtaposed and presented to the audience. Several stylistic techniques like the use of resounding soundtrack, lighting and masquerade display among others are theorised as preponderant aspects of its mise-en-scene.

Keywords: *Last burial, Old-Nollywood. video film, religion, popular Culture, ideology.*

Introduction

At a time when ultimate human worth is measured by amount of money and material possessions; good name and uprightness become the least of human values. This view can be argued to have become significantly pronounced in the new millennium of year 2000. Following the insatiable quest for illicit wealth, many Nigerians became impatient with orthodox religious practices, thus, they worshipped by combining different beliefs with the ultimate aim of getting rich quick. It is against this background that *Last Burial 1* (2000) is set to display the adverse effects of living a life of depravity, pretence and venality. The ideas of righteousness and contentment, central to the form and style of *Last Burial 1*, create an ideological framework within which the film gains its explicit meaning and referential

impact. Its popularity months after release arguably inspired the trend of ritual and occult genres that characterized Nollywood and attracted academic and non-scholarly criticisms up until date.

A Critical Analysis of *Last Burial 1*

When compressed, we can find nine segments in this film. Below is the plot segmentation:

- C. Opening credits
 1. Ogbuefi the lead character becomes a Knight in the Catholic Church.
 2. Ogbuefi receives a startling death notice from the cult he belongs.
 3. Ogbuefi becomes overly generous, making donations to the church and community.
 4. First cult meeting: Ogbuefi appeals for more life.
 5. Ogbuefi collapses and later dies in the hospital.
 6. Cult members invade Ogbuefi's bedroom; Nnado and Susan plan the burial.
 7. Second cult meeting: Nnado gets death notice.
 8. Formal notification of Ogbuefi's death and burial.
 9. The burial day of Ogbuefi.
- E. End credits

The narration opens with a full-frame of the statue of Virgin Mary as a motif that the sequence is set in the Roman Catholic Church. A dolly shot moves in on Ogbuefi (Clem Ohameze) who stands in front of the statue praying as two other fully kitted Knights walk towards him congratulating him on his Knighthood (**Plate 1**). He invites them over to his residence for a dinner party. In this opening sequence, the director Lancelot Imasuen hints at the ideology of the film when Ogbuefi replies the Knights that his family members are inside the car waiting for him. In the film's ideology, peaceful co-existence is more valuable than individualistic greed.



Plate 1: Ogbuefi (Clem Ohameze) photographed in his Knight's outfit.

In segment 2, this ideology gains more referential impact as Ogbuefi prays with his family before bed time. The family can be described as one with much peace and love. However, a montage sequence of the dark and windy night crosscuts with the prayer to evoke suspense. As others go in to sleep, Ogbuefi is left alone in the sitting room. Immediately, two messengers of Shankiki occult group appear physically to Ogbuefi, announcing his death. Frightened, Ogbuefi begs for more time, but the messengers repeat the message and vanish. Ogbuefi's wife Susan (Eucharika Anonobi) comes back to check what voices she heard, but Ogbuefi informs her that he was only concluding his prayers and that he will urgently need to travel to Lagos first thing in the morning to get more money to clear some dues in the church. A zoom-in on Ogbuefi fades out the scene.

Ebenebe (Larry Koldsweat) a poor farmer is pushed out of the road by an over-speeding vehicle. This infuriates him as he laments on why poor people like him should not be allowed to share same road with the rich whose dishonest sources of wealth, he believes will one day be exposed. He with another female farmer who meets him lamenting are greeted by Ogbuefi who has returned from Lagos. Ogbuefi in his seeming philanthropic nature gifts them money. The significance of this scene lies in the stylistic use of two motifs; Ebenebe's lines that "one day, the wind will blow and all that the fowl has been hiding underneath will be exposed;" and Ogbuefi's extreme kindness. These contrasting motifs are the plot's parallelism for the development of suspense and surprise.

As a way of further emphasizing his generosity, Ogbuefi donates four-hundred thousand naira to the church and an additional five-hundred thousand naira to the Reverend Father who salutes him with his full traditional title Ogbuefi Ozo Nnamani. His only justification for this generosity is that he has been too busy to come back and clear all outstanding debt he owes God. Knowing that death hovers around him, Ogbuefi indirectly tenders an appeal that no matter what happens in the future, the Rev. Fr. should continue the good job he has been doing in the village parish. The Catholic Priest accepts the cash gift and prays for him.

A cut opens the next scene as the camera pans left, revealing Ogbuefi's car driving into the compound of the community's paramount ruler (Igwe). Ogbuefi has come to donate the sum of half a million naira to the community water project. While making the cash presentation (**Plate 2**), Ogbuefi once again unconsciously mentions time as the reason for his hasty visit to the paramount ruler. Quite shocked, the paramount ruler quizzes him on why he is short of time and he replies with a riddle which he says will unravel with time.



Plate 2: Ogbuefi at the palace of the Igwe of his community.

A non-diegetic insert of an extreme long shot suggests that the narrative has now returned to Lagos as a reframe zooms out on Ogbuefi dressed in black with a red muffer. He is in a meeting with other members of the Shankiki occult group. He appeals to the Supreme Commander to consider his long service to the "brotherhood" and extend his lifespan a little more. This proves abortive as Ogbuefi is asked to replace himself with anybody from his family if the wealth from Shankiki must remain with the family, but his response that

members of his family have their life to live and have chosen to be Christians; attracts the wrath of the Supreme Commander who magically strikes him, leaving him with a broken arm. In the end, Ogbuefi accepts to die as Shankiki demands.

The significance of this sequence lies in the dialogue between Ogbuefi and the Supreme Commander (Chika Anyanwu) as the latter informs us that their vow is never to refuse when their great master Shankiki comes for their life. This is because they all made the choice of a “good life, unimaginable wealth and awesome power in exchange for their souls.” In the cult room sequence (**Plate 3**), Imasuen heightens suspense through the use of formal stylistic soundtrack, framing distance and a low-key illumination as overriding aspects of mise-en-scene.



Plate 3: The cult room: Note the use of apparent and hidden light sources.

A zoom out on an exotic building cuts to an interior revealing Ogbuefi’s son Junior jumping across the centre table as Ogbuefi walks in and orders him to go call his mother. A pan follows Ogbuefi as he seats to open a handheld briefcase while Susan his wife comes in gorgeously dressed. Ogbuefi hands over his bank documents to her and instructs her to go empty all his accounts and send the monies to the church. This surprises the wife who appears perplexed and demands for more reasons why she should obey his instructions. Ogbuefi attempts to exert influence by raising his voice, but he goes down in severe heart attack. He is quickly rushed to the hospital where he recuperates shortly before the

messengers of Shankiki brotherhood appear to kill him by separating his body from the soul.

A cut to a long shot exposes the frame of Ogbuefi's brother Nnado (Sam Dede), Susan and her relative Odigbo (Chiwetalu Agu) as well as her children seated. Nnado rises to condemn the claim by Susan that her late husband's funds have mysteriously disappeared therefore he should be buried like a pauper. Immediately, the occult members file straight into the bedroom of late Ogbuefi as Nnado prevents Susan from stopping them. Screen characters are surprised to see Nnado put on his red muffler to join them, but he informs Susan that her late husband was also part of them (Shankiki cult). In a short screen time, the cult members walk out with a native pot of medicine and Nnado drops the motif that there are certain things he and Susan must sort out concerning Ogbuefi's burial. This further heightens the suspense that the burial ceremony will be the climax of the plot.



Plate 4: The use of non-diegetic inserts (a metaphoric or symbolic shot that is not part of the space and time of the narrative) is a recurrent stylistic element used to separate scenes in Nollywood.

The scene cuts from a non-diegetic insert of a metropolitan busy flyover bridge (**Plate 4**) to a close-up shot of Susan explaining to Nnado that her husband whom she thought was a genuine Christian never told her he was in the cult. Nnado counters her that Shankiki is not a cult but a brotherhood in which the members are not demons. This he emphasizes after he replied that *“there are two recipes for success in life; one, never you divulge whatever you do to your wife; two, never confide in a concubine.”* These words ideologically affirm the value

of good family life and uprightness, as the consequence of secrecy is displayed as catastrophic not just to Ogbuefi, but also to his family, the church and society at large.

As we shall see, the message Imasuen tries to pass across is that these recipes do not bring success in life; rather, they fetch shame and reproach. For this ideology, Imasuen took as his model one of the major Marxist artistes of our time, the playwright Ola Rotimi who asserts that "a man is not successful until he dies successful." In the narrative technique, Ogbuefi has not only died unsuccessful, but his internment will even more become unsuccessful. Susan re-echoes this belief thus: "it is more profitable to die a pauper for Christ than a billionaire for the devil."

The sequence cuts on Susan who has just been warned by Nnado that the consequence of not giving the brotherhood the space to perform the last burial rite on Ogbuefi before his remains are committed to mother earth will be "unimaginable." From this point, the remainder of the plot seems quite unimaginable, as Ogbuefi's soul is invoked to physically drink from the cup that will set his spirit free. The soul appears and informs all members of the cult that Nnado is next to die. The lens zooms in to an extreme close-up of Nnado who is visibly terrified at this news.

A non-diegetic church organ opens the next frame which displays a church building followed by a pan on the Rev. Fr. (Andy Chukwu) with his assistant walking towards Susan and her children who are seated beside the altar. Susan has come to officially notify the Catholic Church where Late Ogbuefi was a Knight that he is dead and the burial plans are underway. The priest assures her of the church's support and involvement in the obsequies of their Knight. In the next scene, we see the level of this involvement as the Rev. Fr. leads the family members to the palace of the Igwe where Late Ogbuefi had recently donated some money before his demise. The King however insists that as a titled holder, Late "Ogbuefi Ozo Nnamani" should be buried in his house to enable the traditional institution participate in the rites.

The importance of this motif to the plot is that we are now fully informed of the scrimmage over which of the three religious institutions will take charge of the burial ceremony. As the following scene in the sequence reveals, some chiefs are meeting with Susan and the rest of the family to query why Ogbuefi cannot be buried traditionally in his house. Susan's response remains the same; Ogbuefi's wealth has vanished and the only money left is that in the children's school fees account. The chiefs and Odili (Ogbuefi's brother) express their dismay at this story, but Odigbo manages to calm them down.

The ninth sequence which is the burial day ceremony is the climax of the narrative action and the longest of the story time. It opens with Ebenebe and his friend Eketek walking to the burial ceremony as they reiterate the earlier motif that a day will come when the secrets of evil men will be exposed. To the duo, Ogbuefi is shockingly one of such men and his secrets have been exposed. The formal technique used in this scene is a close-up of each of the men while speaking. This places detailed emphasis on their facial expressions and acting styles (**Plate 5**).



Plate 5: A long shot of Ebenebe and Eketek bewildered that Ogbuefi Ozo Nnamani was also a member of the cult.

The next frame reveals the convoy of the cult members who pull over by the shoulder of the road. They all alight out of their vehicles in a choreographed fashion as the Supreme Commander sends one of the messengers to go ahead of them and prevent the corpse of Ogbuefi from being taken into the church. As they continue the journey to Ogbuefi's country home, a crosscut reveals the motorcade of the corpse intercepted by Nnado. According to Nnado, Susan is looking for trouble by not taking the corpse to Ogbuefi's house. The level of this trouble is revealed in the following frame as the cult messenger appears at the church entrance, performs some nonverbal enchantment on the road, and succeeds in making the coffin immobile at that exact point. The Rev. Fr. tries to wade in but a sudden thunderstorm throws him to the ground as the rest of the onlookers scamper for safety. The Fr. mandates Susan to take the corpse home and hurries back into the church. Nnado comes to the rescue, magically clears the ground and orders the undertakers to turn back and follow him to Ogbuefi's residence.

At Ogbuefi's home, the burial ceremony begins with displays of cultural dances, songs and costumes. It is important to note that in Nigeria, burial ceremony is a site where popular culture finds material expression. It is always a common place for the conglomeration of heterogeneous classes of the society. Imasuen makes full use of popular elements of the Igbo culture of South-Eastern Nigeria as we see images of masked dancers, especially **mmanwu (Plate 6)**, a masquerade spirit that is believed to be the dead among the living, used to honour the dead. "The living-dead are what these masquerade/spirits embody. Igbo people believe that the dead never actually die; rather, they remain in a personal immortal state. They reside somewhere between the earthly world and the spiritual world" (Chiene, 1990, p. 10). The mmanwu ranges from the beautiful and elegant to the distinctly ugly and unprepossessing. Many appear only at night or day, and dance in entertainments via the use of mimes.



Plate 6: A mobile long shot of mmanwu leading the dancers with the coffin.

By wearing a mask, the masquerader is thought to wield spiritual powers that are conducted through the spirits behind the mask. And the Igbo masquerade is a purveyor of the mythologies of the living-dead. The masquerade's appearance is to "teach, judge, offer prayers, enact familiar plays or entertain through seemingly complex dances; with music supplied by humans, in a symbiotic relationship designed to harmonise the two worlds" (Njoku, 2005, p.142). This can be seen as the masquerader leads the undertakers round the compound of the ceremony amid songs, chants and dances to the tone of the **ogene** (gong) drummers. These often enigmatic and esoteric chants, songs and words are

poetry of the purest form as we see in the confrontation between the masquerade dancers and the cult leader resulting in the cult leader transforming the lead masquerade dancer to a dwarf. Again, this is another case of popular culture display as most masquerade groups in Igbo culture that perform at funerals or village squares move with mystical powers and constantly contest powers with other groups.

In the last scene, the remains of Ogbuefi lies in state as Susan laments. Nnado enters to inform her that he is next to die and promises to take care of the children before his death. What follows is the open confrontation between the Shankiki brotherhood, the traditional institution and the Rev. Fr. In the end, the burial process is disrupted by this clash and Ogbuefi is left hanging erect with his right arm outstretched on the coffin (**Plate 7**). The Rev. Fr. walks home fatally injured while the Supreme Commander of the Shankiki brotherhood with some of his members lie-down still on the floor. Odigbo runs to ask what happens to the risen corpse but Rev. Fr. replies; “let the dead bury their dead.”



Plate 7: The final confrontation between the occult men and the Rev. Fr. (backing the screen). Ogbuefi’s corpse sits erect with the right arm outstretched after an invocation by the Supreme Commander who is seen here raising his hand to strike the Rev. Fr.

This is a strongly meaningful line of the film which explicitly describes the film’s ideological stance. This is so because the lines function as the last words uttered in the most privileged moment of the film, and it refers back to the exact opposite of Ogbuefi’s ultimate desires. The film ends with the title: **this is just the beginning**, followed by the music at

the closing credit which goes “. . . *what does it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and loses his precious soul. How can you give your soul to the devil, for the things of this world that one day shall pass away, and the Lord remains victorious*”

Imasuen employs the use of formal techniques of filmmaking in *Last Burial 1*. Many of these techniques remarkably differ from Western conceptualization of filmmaking, but seem quite conventional in the Nigerian domain seven years after the commercial revolutionary experimentations with the video camera. The diverse use of stylistic elements like soundtrack to depict the setting of each segment; continuity editing like in the last sequence when crosscutting is used to alternate between the departure and arrival of the occult group, the priest and the duo of Ebenebe and his friend Ekeke to Ogbuefi's residence; non-diegetic inserts prior to each sequence to suggest locale; audio-visual effects and computer-generated graphics function as motifs in the plot's linear development. There is also a dominant use of long shots of exteriors as establishing shots for every sequence. For instance, the first cult meeting opens with the establishing shot of a metropolitan city-view while the scene where Susan goes to formally notify the church of her husband's death opens with a long shot of the church building.

Many stylistic elements build up the film's ideology. The cars and costumes of Ogbuefi, his family and the cult members contribute greatly to the lushness of the mise-en-scene. Another aspect of mise-en-scene is the use of lighting in *Last Burial 1*. In the cult meeting scenes, low-key lighting is fused with onscreen candle lights to create the atmosphere of the occult. Music (diegetic and non-diegetic) plays a large part in the plot development. From the first scene to the last, sounds introduce the locale and set the mood for each scene. The village scenes where Ebenebe appear have the same soundtrack that depicts a local community, whereas the Lagos scenes have a more contemporary soundtrack. Furthermore, the cult scenes have a deep humming soundtrack which became the hallmark of the film soon after its release. The burial ceremony features a diegetic sound from the masquerade dancers who are symbolic of the traditional religion practised by Ogbuefi Ozo Nnamani before his demise. *Last Burial 1* can be seen as a symptom of an insatiable quest for illicit wealth and proposes morality and social uprightness as ideals of human values.

Conclusion

In *Last Burial 1*, the get-rich-quick syndrome that has permeated the fabrics of the 21st century Nigerian society is brought to the fore. The filmmaker Lancelot Imasuen portrays the quest for illicit wealth, greed and insatiable desire for affluence as recipe for disaster in life and society. As the plot unfolds, the ideological stance of the audience is called to

question. The choice between abject poverty with integrity and illicit luxury with its attendant cataclysmic effects is juxtaposed and presented to the audience. The film however did not suggest that wealth and prominence cannot be developed in a legitimate way.

The character of Ogbuefi (Clem Ohameze) embodies the inclination towards ill-gotten wealth. As they say, nothing is really as it seems and all that glitters is not gold. Ogbuefi is portrayed as a knight in the Catholic Church who makes generous donations from time to time. Imasuen uncovers the putrefaction beneath the pious life of Ogbuefi. Ebenebe (Larry Koldsweat) the poor farmer is deployed as a major voice of the filmmaker. Through him, the imminent exposure of the occult is suggested in different verbal motifs. Religion plays an ideological role in shaping most Nigerians. A good number of Nigerian Christians proclaim public faith in God because it is more honourable. Many secretly fall back to idol worship and ritualistic (Shankiki) endeavours as seen in *Last Burial 1*.

Although the Nigerian constitution makes provision for freedom of worship and religious affiliations, if one's religion causes harm to a fellow Nigerian, it is said to be operating within unconstitutional boundaries. The film ends in a lethal confrontation between the Christian God and the Shankiki occult through their respective priests, with ultimate victory to the Christian God. Lancelot Imasuen heightens suspense through the use of formal stylistic soundtrack, crosscutting, framing distance, non-diegetic inserts common in Nollywood films, and low-key illumination as overriding aspects of mise-en-scene.

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Filmography

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