

The Church as an Ideological Institution and Epicentre of End Time Signs: Reading *End Time 1*

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Abstract

In Nigeria, as in other parts of the world, false prophets are on the rampage since the past two to three decades following the rising economic hardship that has bedevilled the country. Instances abound throughout the country where fake pastors are exposed and either prosecuted or lynched. This has attracted the vibrant Nigerian movie industry popularly referred to as Nollywood, to dramatize such topical subject matters like end time and religion in a genre of religious films. The thrust of this paper is to critically explore how Nigerian video films expose most pastors who exploit religion for self-interest. End Time is found to satirize popular notions of the money centred approach of church administrators who gallivant in untold luxury while the church members wallow in severe penury. The end usually proves catastrophic for such fake pastors and false prophets.

Keywords: Church, End Time, Nigeria, Nollywood, Video film, Religion, Popular Culture, Ideology.

Introductory Remarks on Religion and End Time

Nigerian culture has evolved over the past decades as a result of increase in knowledge as evident in technological advancements and increased religious followership. This strongly follows Western influences and

footsteps as the society becomes more secular than ever before. In the past twenty (20) years, the number of Christians identifiable as pastors, prophets, men of God (MOG), evangelists, canons, et cetera, has remarkably increased, leading to the establishment of churches in almost every distance of ten (10) meters all over Nigeria. This is so pronounced that on worship days like Sundays, sounds of church services clash with each other to the discomfort of living homes. The effect of this can be found in the number of Nigerians becoming non-religious, not believing in God or religion, while several others become too religious to the extent of seeing other Christians, especially those who do not attend their church or share similar doctrines as sinners. Arguably, the prime cause of this lies in the growing number of church leaders (pastors), who do not only try to influence the behavioural lifestyles of followers and members, but go to the extent of re-writing and even misinterpreting the Bible, the official holy book of Christianity. This is evidently a sign of the **end time**.

The end time in its broad connotations denotes a future time-period that world events are believed will come to an end. The end time is also referred to as end times, end of time, end of days, last days, final days, last time, latter days, end of the world, or eschaton. The belief and expectation of the end time is maintained by several world religions (both Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic) like Christianity, Islam, Judaism, etc. In Judaism for instance, the term "end of days" alludes to the Messianic Age which will culminate in the coming of the Messiah, an in-gathering of the exiled Jewish diaspora, the resurrection of the righteous, and the world to come. The Messianic Age is termed "the latter days, the end time" by the Jewish prophets. In Christianity, two predominant schools of thought view the end time either as a time of tribulation that immediately follows the second coming of Christ who will destroy the antichrist and his agents thereafter bringing to reality the kingdom of God; or a period of personal tribulation Christians are to experience prior to their enlightenment with the Word of God. Islam, another Abrahamic faith holds that Isa (Jesus) will descend from above the firmaments to triumph over the false messiah, or the

antichrist, leading to the Day of Judgement –a sequence of events that will end with the rising of the sun from the West and the moment of Qiyamah. No religion specifies the duration of the end time, nor does any imply the end time to last only one generation long. But one thing is certain; the end time is highly anticipated.

The anticipation of the end time is fuelled by the materialization of the written and prophesied signs of the end time. These signs are manifest in the Bible especially in the books of Daniel and Revelation. The warnings of the signs include the King of the North who will plant the tabernacles of his palace in Jerusalem (Daniel 11:45); an increase in knowledge and learning (Daniel 12:4); increase in the frequency and intensity of wars (Matthew 24:6-7); the incessant killing of Christians (Matthew 24:9-10); global famine and starvation (Matthew 24:7); the preaching of true gospel of Christ to the entire world (Matthew 24:14); ecumenical world movements pushing for peace (1 Thessalonians 5:3); increase in natural disasters like earthquakes (Luke 21:25-26, Matthew 24:7); rise in spiritualism (1 Timothy 4:1) and; the appearance of false messiahs and prophets (Matthew 24:4-5, 11) among others.

The last instance is a common case of “inwardly ravaging wolves in sheep’s clothing” leading innocent believers to destruction. Without any intention of deceiving, the world has had a fair share of false prophets. The Bible in Matthew 24:4-5, 11 warns: “and Jesus answered and said unto them, take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many. And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many.” Such warnings are found throughout the New Testament as believers are adjured to be vigilant at all times. A false prophet is one who falsely claims to be called and ordained with the gift of prophecy and divine inspiration, but uses the gift for selfish means and evil deeds. Such persons most often times involve extreme spiritualism and occultism in their dealings. Furthermore, someone who is dubbed true prophet by a sect of believers could be condemned as a false prophet by others, even within same religion.

Whatever the view, the Bible describes false Christs and prophets with the metaphor *ferocious wolves* who can perform great signs and miracles with the ultimate aim of deceiving and diddling from their followers. Jesus himself while on earth predicted their appearance in Matthew 7:15-23 thus: “beware of false prophets; which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves” The warnings of Jesus did not take centuries to materialize as in the Acts of the Apostles, Paul and Barnabas encountered a false prophet named Elymas Bar-Jesus along the island of Cyprus. False prophets bring in false teachings like damnable heresies contrary to God’s ways. The Bible further predicts that many shall follow the ways of such false prophets who will end up being exploited with cooked up stories by these false prophets (2 Peter 2:1-3). An identifiable hallmark of false prophets is arguably the prosperity gospel. False prophets utilize the prosperity theology at the expense of salvation gospel to enrich themselves under the pretence of financially empowering their members. However, the Bible cautions believers to have a true discerning spirit that can recognize the fake from the genuine.

Eschatology in Nigerian Popular Culture

In Nigeria, as in other parts of the world, false prophets are on the rampage since the past two to three decades, following the rising economic hardship that has bedevilled the country. In fact, there have been ample scenarios of such false prophets caught in their barbaric acts vis-à-vis their destructive ends as predicted in the Bible. National tabloids, blogs, television stations, new media and films continue to showcase stories of the immoral activities of fake prophets. For instance, on the 9th of November, 2000, a very popular false prophet known as Edward Okeke who styled himself as Prophet Eddy, “Jesus of Nawgu” was hacked to pieces with the machetes of Bakassi Boys, a community vigilante group in Onitsha, Anambra State. This came after mass protests following scanty proofs of his alleged crime of the ritual murder of over ninety-three adults and the theft of over sixteen babies from a maternity ward for the purpose of acquiring more powers from the occult.

He is said to have performed diverse miracles in his “healing centre.” Harnischfeger (2006) argues that “to Westerners, the accusation that the church owner from Nawgu had enriched himself by means of human sacrifices sounds groundless. In Nigeria, on the other hand, the public is becoming uneasy because ritual murders are in fact taking place” (p. 61). The example of Prophet Eddy is one of numerous cases of the nefarious activities of false prophets in the Nigerian popular imagination. Similarly in 2015, a false prophet who connived with some of his church members to stage fake miracles and healing confessed after he was arrested in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. According to Dachen (2015), the false prophet duped many innocent members and others of several millions of naira.

The self-acclaimed pastor and his collaborators were subsequently arrested, and they confessed to duping unsuspecting members of the public of various sums of money. The suspect also confessed to stage-managing miracles and healing to attract members to their church located at Aluu community near Port Harcourt (Dachen, 2015).

Similar instances abound throughout the country, thereby forcing many believers to become over-critical when supernatural powers are displayed by pastors. This has reached a climax of self-acclaimed true pastors taking to the mass media to lend their thoughts and advice on how to spot fake prophets. One of such is Pastor W. F. Kumuyi, the General Overseer of Deeper Life Bible Church, one of the biggest and most popular Pentecostal churches in Africa. In his article published on an online daily blog, Kumuyi (2017) emphasizes that many preachers and groups that once preached the gospel of salvation from sin have abandoned it for the prosperity gospel because of the influence of the spirit of the antichrist. This has also led believers to discard truth for false doctrine. “Believers need to know that it is not every miracle that comes from God. The spirit of antichrist has power to perform miracles in order to deceive people . . .

believers must be alert and care to know the sources of such miracles” (Kumuyi, 2017). This view hints at the fact that although there are false prophets, it is however important to note that there are fake because there are real.

The presence of false prophets does not obliterate the real prophets who stand tall amid these challenges. The fake prophets exist by bastardizing the true doctrine and activities of genuine prophets. And it is for this same reason that the acts of fake prophets are constantly exposed time after time, leading to the effective use of every means possible to showcase their evil ways. One of such media is the film medium which uses popular elements of religious activities to teach the regulation of human behaviour especially towards religion. That was what inspired Kenneth Nnebue into the making of the popular Nigerian Christian-horror classic *End Time* (1999), which portrays the church as an ideological institution and an epicentre of the manifestations of the signs of end time. In *End Time*, Kenneth Nnebue dramatizes the cruel activities of false prophets and business-minded church committees as well as the eventual calamity that befalls them.

Produced in the very last days of the previous millennium, *End Time I* resonates with the extent of religious desperation inherent at the time. Most gullible Christians, especially Nigerians had concluded that the world was going to end in the year 1999, and so were eager to do anything possible to “make heaven” should rapture take place. Rumours of instances where world renowned preachers prophesied of the immediate rapture rented the public air, and so, many believers thought it was time to clean up their closets in order not to be condemned to eternal damnation. This led to an increase in religious followership which in turn culminated in the bourgeoning of false prophets. These self-acclaimed ministers of God saw the leeway to deceive innocent believers in the quest for quick fame and fortune. Churches were not isolated from this guilt as numerous church committees and boards of trustees were instituted to facilitate the building of gigantic permanent church structures. All these amounted to untold

hardship on the masses who were more interested in miracles, prophecies and visions, while the pastors and prophets lived in ostentation and extravagance. As a result, the religious ideology already inherent in the church became heightened. The church became the final destination in the search for knowledge and the quest to predict the future. The film *End Time* inspired a genre of religious films in Nigeria which all (re)present popular culture to be methodologically linked to religion. Examples of recent films with similar themes include *Fake Prophet* (2015), *Prophet Nebu* (2017), *The Prophet Must Go* (2018), and *The Prophet* (2019).

Critical Reading of *End Time 1* (1999)

End Time I centres on the lead character Pastor Weaver (Clem Ohameze) to dramatize how most churches and false prophets stage miracles, commercialize the church and destroy the lives of unwary believers. The entire film breaks fairly into a total of thirty-five (35) sequences, although a few contain flashbacks to earlier sequences, while some contain fairly lengthy enactments. All can be compressed into nineteen (19) segments including the opening and end credits. The overall plot progresses the story events in a wholly linear way. Below is the organised plot segmentation:

- C. Opening credits
1. Pastor Weaver, Bishop Okoye and his wealth are introduced.
 2. Pastor Weaver is unsatisfied; summons a meeting with the church council.
 3. Pastor Weaver decides to break away and contacts Chief Umeh for sponsorship.
 4. Pastor Isaac tries to convince Pastor Weaver not to leave.
 5. Chief Umeh, Chief Bosah and Pastor Weaver seal the new church agreement deal.
 6. USA: Pastor Weaver reunites with the occult to gather more supernatural powers.
 7. Pastor Weaver's new luxury apartment and cars handed to him.

8. Pastor Weaver recruits and initiates henchmen to execute his dirty deals.
9. Pastor Weaver performs several miracles.
10. New church: live service as many testify, and an assassin is apprehended.
11. Police station: Bishop Okoye is indicted for attempted murder.
12. Chief Umeh, Chief Bosah and Pastor Weaver disagree and agree over money.
13. Bishop Okoye's church leaders appeal for his unconditional release.
14. Government house: Pastor Weaver performs a miracle for the governor.
15. The presidency: Pastor Weaver prophesies to the president.
16. Rumours of financial impropriety of the church leaders spread.
17. Pastor Weaver's prophecy to the president comes to pass.

E. End credits

Segments 1-4 form the exposition, introducing the main characters, the conflict, the theme, and set the pace for suspense and surprise to come. The opening credit features a resounding soundtrack that suggests the essential information that arouses our interest and tension. The sound track is built on the key lines that "it is close the time to reap what we sow, as everyone heads down the easy road." The opening sequence presents the luxury apartment of Bishop Okoye, the main characters, Pastor Weaver (Clem Ohameze) and Bishop Okoye (Olu Jacobs). Camera pans left in a long shot of Bishop Okoye's compound and dissolves to the dining room which shows on a bird-view angle, the first human figures consisting of four (4) kids seated.

Pastor Weaver drives in, enters the house and he is greeted by one of four kids as Her Majesty, the Bishop's wife comes from the inner room to welcome Pastor Weaver, and immediately we are informed that the children who are already in the best school in the country will soon be travelling to school abroad. This stylistic motif of extravagance by the

Bishop has not been discursively exhausted when Bishop Okoye himself drives in on a brand new SUV to announce that he acquired it for his wife. Here, the lavishing wealth of the church leader is highlighted and the title paraded by this family is a metaphor to the religious undertone in Nigeria. What is common to find among Nigerian pastors is their high sounding titles like *General Overseer, His Lordship, Her Majesty, Papa*, etc.

In the next sequence (segment 2), a voice over of Pastor Weaver presents him thinking aloud in his house. He broods over why he should be the one working hard while the Bishop and his family reap the fruits. He summons a meeting with the church council as the camera fades in on the meeting in Bishop Okoye's house. A medium close-up of Pastor Weaver shows him strongly demanding for improved welfare (**Figure 1**) as we learn that over eighty million naira (\$220,000) was realized in the church fund raising event for an ultra-modern cathedral building project. Segment 3 develops on this conflict as Pastor Weaver decides to break away and be his own boss. Chief Umeh (Zack Orji) is his hope of funds as he expresses strong conviction that members of his church will agree to follow him to the new church while meeting with Chief Umeh. These deep feelings are fuelled by his belief that he (Pastor Weaver) works great miracles as according to him "I pray for the blind and they see."



Figure 1: A medium close-up of Pastor Weaver demanding for improved welfare.

In segment 4, Pastor Isaac from Bishop Okoye's church is with Pastor Weaver at the latter's house to convince him not to leave the church. Pastor Isaac's lines drive home the message of the film that "as ministers of God, we should concern ourselves more with making heaven than laying up treasures on earth." However, Pastor Weaver does not agree to this dictum as in segment 5; in Chief Umeh's house, Pastor Weaver, Chief Umeh, Chief Bosah (Jide Kosoko) and their lawyers seal the new church agreement by signing legal documents. Pastor Weaver then announces the need for him to fly to the United States of America to enable him prepare heavily for the first new church crusade scheduled to hold in a month's time. The story (segment 6) fast-forwards to a long shot of men and women in black suits to suggest that Pastor Weaver is now in the US to reunite with the occult and replenish his necromantic powers. The power is compressed into a ring which is inserted into his right index finger by the supreme leader of the cult.

The remainder of the narration returns to Nigeria as in segments 7 and 8, Pastor Weaver is shown his new apartment and a new Lincoln Navigator SUV upon returning from America. Inside the new house is a large TV screen displaying the popular music video Channel O. The significance of this is that Pastor Weaver is too excited to notice this because he has completely submitted to walking in the flesh as against his ideal status. This is further proven as he is seen in the inner room initiating some fierce looking men who are to serve as his henchmen to execute his dirty deeds. The men swear never to expose any of Pastor Weaver's secrets. By this stylistic motif, Kenneth Nnebue the filmmaker lets us know what to expect in the sequences to come by limiting the expected surprise and heightening the suspense.

The following sequence is an enactment of the various staged miracles Pastor Weaver concocts and performs (segment 9). First is Mr Uwatse a business magnate who comes to Pastor Weaver's office with his family to receive blessings. An extreme close-up highlights the ring finger of Pastor Weaver diabolically tapped three times on Mr Uwatse's little son's

head (**Figure 2**). The effect of this becomes clear as a fade-in on Mr Uwatse's house shows his little son fainting, and immediately they return from whence they came. Expectedly, Pastor Weaver restores the boy back to life and warns Mr Uwatse not to step out of his house in the coming week as assassins are waiting to take his life.



Figure 2: Pastor Weaver taps his diabolic ring on Uwatse's son causing him to collapse in few hours.

In the next week of story time, Mr Uwatse sends his driver on the journey he was to take, and his driver is shot dead by the same faces we identify as Pastor Weaver's henchmen. In a similar scenario, Pastor Weaver performs another miracle in the house of Chief Douglas Obiora whose daughter is possessed of demons. In a dramatic horror sequence, the girl regains her consciousness as three strange birds flee from her body after Pastor Weaver uses his magic ring on her.

Religious worship is an essential form of popular culture as popular songs and dance steps are always displayed in services. The next sequence (10), a very lengthy take stretches the film up to 13 minutes by utilizing elements of popular culture in the live service of Pastor Weaver's new church full to capacity, amid singing and dancing led by Pastor Simon (the

first time we see him after Pastor Weaver informed that he agreed to be part of the breakaway church). Shortly, Pastor Weaver mounts the podium to preach the popular prosperity message followed by catalogues of testimonies from Mr Jonah Uwatse, Chief Douglas, and several others. In a dramatic twist that is only a surprise to screen characters excluding Pastor Weaver, an assassin is apprehended with life ammunition in the church after a vision by Pastor Weaver. The assassin implicates and confesses to the crime of being paid by Bishop Okoye to assassinate Pastor Weaver. One thing quite remarkable in this narration is how Kenneth Nnebue devotes particular film techniques to create the effects of suspense and surprise. He manipulates our range of knowledge mostly from Pastor Weaver's POV by letting us know more than other onscreen characters thereby building up suspense.



Figure 3: A close-up of brutalised Bishop Okoye.

A close-up of Bishop Okoye (segment 11) shows him brutally wounded as a result of police investigation on his alleged assassination attempt (**Figure 3**). Things become compounded as the supposed assassin insists that Bishop Okoye paid him to kill Pastor Weaver. Stylistic elements like make-up emphasize the level of torture the hired assassin and Bishop

Okoye have received from the cruel uniform men. This is symbolic of the brutality of the Nigeria Police Force that is known to physically and emotionally maltreat crime suspects even before they are proved guilty by a competent court of law. The point is further emphasized as senior officer rages at his junior officers for violently handling the case.

Segment 12 climaxes the plot as Chief Umeh, Pastor Weaver and Chief Bosah disagree on what to do with the sixty-five million naira (\$180,000) raised thus far in the new church. Kenneth Nnebue uses non-diegetic sound and close-up shots on Pastor Weaver and Chief Bosah's faces as techniques to heighten the building tension and suggest the plot developments to come. The church chiefs insist on sharing all the money as agreed on the formal document, whereas Pastor Weaver objects by correcting the impression that the church is not a business centre.

This unexpected moral stand infuriates the chiefs as they walk out on Pastor Weaver in a fast-motion sound track technique which continues as the chiefs are seen in Chief Umeh's house. They open a bottle of brandy (alcoholic liquor), empty its content into their stomach and voice out their dissatisfactions. In Chief Umeh's words; "I did not contribute my money to any church; I invested my money into the church. The church is my church, the pastor is my pastor and all the money that comes to the church is my money." The church financiers vow to share everything or show Pastor Weaver how they "can stink even in Christ." However, their desires are achieved in the end as the money is shared by percentage among all parties.

In segment 16, we are informed that the news of the embezzlement of church funds by these leaders has been spread round the entire church by Elder Martins' son Patrick. Rather than investigate this allegation, Elder Martins himself is afraid that his son is backsliding from true worship. Kenneth Nnebue through the character of Elder Martins re-echoes the argument that the church is an ideological institution as postulated by Louis Althusser. According to Elder Martins, believers should keep out of church affairs. They should only go to church, give offerings and return back home immediately without thinking of how the church funds are

spent. This is ideological in that it permanently positions “true believers” as subjects by ensuring that they *only* think and behave in ways fashioned by the institution. As long as believers submit to the rules of the established order, the church continues to exist thereby making the dominant ideology the ‘common sense’ of all classes of members within the church (see Althusser, 2006).

The tension drops in the following sequence (13) as emissaries from Bishop Okoye’s church pay Pastor Weaver a visit to his house, while appealing for the unconditional release of the Bishop as a sign of Pastor Weaver’s maturity as a great man of God. Their exit suggests that Pastor Weaver has agreed to give it a positive thought as subsequent sequences reveal that Bishop Okoye has been released. The Bishop however insists that the truth will be exposed sooner than expected.

In segments 14, 15, 17; Pastor Weaver attains new heights of fame and fortune as political office holders ranging from the governor to the president invite him to perform miracles for them. First is the governor, whose second wife is responsible for the calamities upon the family. Pastor Weaver uses his powers to liberate the family after burning the charms and live scorpion the governor’s wife uses to bewitch her family. Next, Pastor Weaver is invited to the presidential villa for a private dinner with the president. Pastor Weaver by prophecy informs the president that his prospective daughter-in-law is a witch who is out to destroy the family and take the president’s life.



Figure 4: The President's son Isa issues strong warning to Pastor Weaver after prophecy about his fiancée.

In spite of counter threats issued to Pastor Weaver by Isa the president's son himself (**Figure 4**), the witch (Isa's fiancée) transforms to a bird at night to trouble the president in his bed room. She changes back to her real self in the eyes of the president and his son Isa hurries to the telephone and dials Pastor Weaver. With the use of formal construction and stylistic crosscutting, an alternating shot interweaves the action of Isa and Pastor Weaver in his house moving towards the phone, smiles and goes back inside as the film ends with the closing quotation title "The Saga Continues."

Conclusion

Conclusively, the movie *End Time* is a cultural representation of popular religious configurations of most modern Nigerian Christian communities. Produced in the very last days of the previous millennium (1999), *End Time* resonates with the extent of greed and religious desperation inherent at the time. It satirizes popular notions of the money centred approach of church administrators who gallivant in untold luxury while the church members wallow in severe penury. It is an encapsulation of the rot in the church

system as most “Men of God” now turn churches to business centres and avenues of acquiring illicit wealth and affluence. It exposes the gullibility of ignorant church goers vis-a-vis the hypocritical leadership and misdemeanour of the diabolical “Holy Fathers,” as exemplified in the character of Pastor Weaver (Clem Ohameze). The story reflects topical popular narratives from Onitsha market literature. The film utilizes popular songs and dance of 1999, and its form and style mediate popular culture notions laden with religious ideologies as postulated by Althusser (2006).

Religion is arguably the most ideological institution that stimulates behavioural and cultural changes in the society. Take for instance the Arab nations, Islam plays a major role in the way and manner the societies are socially constructed. Kenneth Nnebue in the Nigerian context has scripted and directed *End Time* as an eye-opener to religious fanatics who idolize pastors to the extent of relegating God to the background. He cautions such unsuspecting church followers to beware of “wolfs in sheep’s clothing.” The filmmaker Kenneth Nnebue achieves this through the use of formal techniques to create suspense and progress the narration. He emphasizes major points of interest in close-up shots and special audio-visual effects. The overall plot progresses the story events in a wholly linear way of 19 segments, featuring a flashback, resounding soundtrack and costumes.

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