

The Role of Media in Spreading Paranormal Belief: A Case for Nigeria's Development

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Abstract: This work is to conduct an inquiry into paranormal to discover the effect of the belief to the Nigerian Society. It is to find out the extent the belief can affect developmental stride among Nigerian people and the contribution of the media in sustaining the belief among the people. This work is important because of the observation of the researcher that the belief in paranormal affects Nigerian people in their relationship with others and has also deterred scientific development in the country. The work thus, adopts the method of analysis which is the philosophical method concerned with breaking down concepts to its simplest part for a better understanding and application. Data came from book reviews and media reports. Evidence strongly supports that the belief in the paranormal has impacted negatively on the development of science and technology in Nigeria and that media has contributed tremendously in its spread among the people. Hence the country must dislodge its ideological hold on it by the paranormal belief through value reorientation, proper education and control of the media in spreading paranormal cases, if she must join other scientifically developed nations of the world.

Keywords: Paranormal, Development, media.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Lister et al, "Media is the collective communication outlets or tools that are used to store and deliver information or data". The media play central role in communicating to the public what happens in the world. In a situation where the audience don't have direct knowledge or experience of what is happening, the media becomes the only epistemic authority from where they get all the information that form their idea. In as much as people may not absorb uncritically messages from the media, the media plays a key role in setting agendas and focusing public interest on particular subjects which according to Happer and Philo(2013), "Operate to limit the range of argument and perceptions that inform public debate". The advent of digital media has shown that the world is made up of a mass of circulating, disjointed and often contradictory information. As information is passed, new audiences are made following the availability of some knowledge provided by the media. The statuses of this knowledge are created by the media as an authoritative source of information. Consequently, the truthfulness or falsity of a phenomenon depends on the paintings of the media. As such media has been found to contribute tremendously in spreading the belief in paranormal and this has a serious adverse effect on the Nigeria's development.

Paranormal are those occurrences that are beyond, against or contrary to normal phenomenon. They are those phenomena that exceed the limits of physical possibility. This includes cases like Extra Sensory Perception(ESP), precognition, possession, out of body experience, poltergeist activity, divination, ritual/magic money making, faith healing, miracles and many other activities whose causal mechanisms are *extra physica*.

The belief in paranormal is very predominant in Nigeria, especially miracle, faith healing, ritual/magic money making, divination among others. The instances of paranormal abound in our society even among the elites. Politicians go to shrines to cement their agreements with each other, Ajero(2004:14-16). According to Ivbaze (2017),

Just few years before 1976, Secret societies had become clandestine organizations with high level public officials, judges, lawyers and some business men and women who had registered to become members. It was believed that in order to rise to some position of echelon in public establishments and to achieve high degree of success in business one must belong to

one of the well-known secret societies. Among the secret cults was Ogboni fraternity and it was rumored that the members of this cult and others, were involved in the kidnapping and killing of individuals for security, wealth, and power.

This can be best understood in the words of Oguejiofor when he explains the Nigerian situation with regard to the belief in the paranormal and the media's contribution to its widespread:

When listened to radio or watched television or read newspaper one will be astonished with innumerable stories of unimaginable manifestations of belief in occult powers on the life of the people. Stories such as; people who indulge in human sacrifices in exchange for wealth, people whose businesses collapsed because their master siphoned their money through mysterious medium, woman beaten her child to death because she believes she is possessed by the evil spirit, family members quarreling because a pastor told them that their relations is responsible for their misfortune, women whose wombs were tied up and thus prevented from conceiving through witchcraft. The list of the claim to paranormal may continue unending. (Oguejiofor, 2006)

The focus of this paper is to demonstrate that media as a source of information contributes a lot in the spreading of belief in this phenomenon. It is important especially in a country that faces a lot of development challenges. It will be obvious from this work that an average Nigeria would prefer to spend hours in a prayer house seeking for breakthrough in business rather than attending seminar or workshop on business strategy and development. The paper points out the need to control the nature and quantity of these phenomena presented in the media in order to extol other values such as scientific tradition that would help development.

2. MEANING OF PARANORMAL

The term paranormal as used in this work should be clearly understood. This is because sometimes paranormal and abnormal are used interchangeably. In worse cases people erroneously take paranormal to be abnormal. To understand the concept better, let us consider Agbakoba's(2005:9) position that, "A thing is considered abnormal if it deviates from the normal to a higher or lesser degree and the consequence is not recommendable". Thus paranormal in this work does not mean abnormality but consists of all alleged occurrences of powers, which if actual, cannot be explained by our current understanding of physics. (Kurtz, 1986:8).

In general sense the term paranormal is used to describe any unusual experience that lacks scientific explanation, or an alleged phenomenon that is outside the science's current ability to explain or measure. In other words, it can be said that paranormal is used to describe anything that is beyond or contrary to what is deemed scientifically possible. May be, forces or energies governing the universe which are not necessarily violation of the laws of nature but which given scientific limitation cannot be explained at the moment. This paper focuses on phenomena like miracles, divination, faith healing, ritual money making, and witchcraft. The phenomena mentioned above have been found to occupy the minds of many Nigerians. Consequently, much energy is channeled towards them vis-à-vis production and distribution of resources in the country. For instance, average Nigerian believes that a turnaround in business can be achieved by spending hours in miracle centres than conducting a research on better business strategy. This posits a problem to the developmental stride of the nation. This paper contends that media as a channel of disseminating of knowledge has great role to play in the type of information dished out to the public with regard to this belief.

3. NATURE OF PARANORMAL

The world as it is perceived by human senses has been an object of investigation since the inception of man. This real world is known to man and all its operations are familiar to him. Beside this real world also, there seems to be another world parallel to it. This parallel world is not open to empirical investigation. Thus man cannot know this world using experiential methods. The study of this world falls under the siege of paranormal. Some are skeptical about the real existence of this world while some are certain. Kierman(2006) suggests that this world is "peopled by witches, ghosts, spirits, demons and deities". Binsbergan(2003:213) commenting on the nature of the paranormal emphasized that, "... is therefore a 'universe' of mystical agencies and conduit beyond that which constitutes the social and cognitive domains of classification and normative discourse". Both Kierman and Binsbergan seem to be certain about the reality of this world. On the other hand are those who maintained a skeptical stand on the reality of the phenomenon. Among them are Hume, Alder(1990:452), Randi(1982:118), Singer, Benassil(1986) and Conor(1975) among others. The above scholars maintained at various levels of opposition that paranormal phenomenon is unrealistic and fraudulent and should not be accepted on any ground as authentic source of knowledge.

Looking at it from another dimension one keeps asking whether this universe is real or a concoction of the mind. The reality of paranormal could be possible following the capacity of human imagination to construct reality beyond the compass of immediate experience. This agrees with epistemological stand of Igbo people, *ihe onye ma, mara ya*. That means “what one knows should know him”. This means that the universe of paranormal is sustained by our belief in its existence which implicates its subjective nature. Leach (1982:108-9) rents support to this when he opined that, “There is a strong sense in which we ourselves are the architect of it”. For this reason enough research is needed to be carried out on any alleged paranormal phenomenon among Nigerians before acceptance or rejection. Before then media should be controlled on the way it popularizes the alleged occurrences of paranormal phenomenon. On the surface value, one may not see the danger it portends when greater percentage of the population believes more in miracle than hard work. When also another big percentage believe that failure in business, examination and in fact life are attributable to one machination of one witch or the other.

4. MEDIA AND PARANORMAL

Globalization, which has brought the world under one roof, is made possible through development in Information Technology (IT). Globalization according to Oguejiofor(1996:21) “is a gradual coming together of the world, to eventually coalesce into a global village”. This coming together unfortunately is viewed only from economic and cultural perspectives which are manifested in the movement of goods and capital. But in actual fact, ideas, values and beliefs are also moved from one culture to another. Information technology has made possible the sharing of ideas and values which form the ideology of the society. Areji (2005:62) concludes that, “Today through the Information technology the whole world now operates like a family living together in the same room”.

Be that as it may, it becomes obvious that media through the development in information technology has massively influenced the belief in the paranormal among Nigerians. Thus the period of expansion of occult stories in Nigeria appears to coincide roughly with the era of globalization, especially of the mass media. The worrisome aspect of this is the gullible nature of the public who are ready to accept anything presented to the media without critical scrutiny. This view is supported by Kurtz in Oguejiofor, p.16

The epidemic of paranormal beliefs is due to the rapid emergence of the mass media on a global scale. The media has eventually replaced schools, colleges and universities as the chief conveyors of information... Today new ideas are popularized – whether half-or-fully-baked and they are broadcast far and wide even if they have not been sufficiently tested. Apparently, the chief interests of most media conglomerates are entertainment rather than information, profit rather than truth, selling product rather than contributing to the sum of human knowledge. Accordingly, paranormal ideas are pandered to a gullible public and the line between fiction and reality is blurred.

The era of remarkable media growth in Nigeria began in the 1980s, but it developed sporadically from the early 1990s till date. In Nigeria today, the media is the highest agent in the spread of the belief in the paranormal. This once again agrees with the view of Kurtz that, “On the current world scene, belief in the paranormal is fed and reinforced by a vast media industry that profit from it, and it has been transformed into a folk religion”. P.8

The danger that this portends is the fact that the public is gullible and ready to accept the incredible no matter how half-baked. This corroborates with view of Mehmet Sen and Ezgi Yesilyurt in their article, *The Development of Paranormal Beliefs Scale (PBS) for Science Education in the Content of Turkey*. According to them the harmful effects of paranormal belief persists because of lack of scientific knowledge. “We think that understanding scientific concepts and nature of science is powerful tool to decrease harmful paranormal beliefs such as faith healing, and psychic surgery. So science education should be encouraged such that learning to think critically and act in scientific manner should be part of the goal of science education.” It should be noted that media help tremendously, especially in Nigeria today towards fashioning the public interest in matters of the paranormal. As it stands, the Nigerian public is chronically exposed to films, newspaper reports, documentaries and books on both regular and social media extolling occult, miracles, faith healing, and often with the absence of critical audience as expounded by Sen and Ezgi.

There are excessive presentations of paranormal in various media outlets in Nigeria. Few of such as obtained from newspaper reports shall be presented below to buttress the point that media has been a serious contributory factor in the spread of the belief in paranormal among Nigerians.

In our newspapers for instance, there is deluge of stories of occult, ritual killings and other paranormal manifestations. Mcadioh (2017) reported more than seven ritual killings in one write-up among which is the story of August 20, 2017 about eight-year-old girl, Chikamso Victory, whose body was found in the apartment of one Ifeanyi Chukwu Dike (23) at Messiah street, Eliozu area of Port Harcourt. Helpless and defenseless Victory was not only abducted by Dike, she was raped before she was killed. As at the time her body was recovered, some parts had been removed. In the same report, incidence of March 30, 2017 was reported about a suspected ritualist, Tunde Jimoh, who was arrested by the Police. Tunde on his arrest gave a chilling description of how he and other members of his gang abducted their victim, Akintoye Oyeyemi, took him into a deep forest and murdered him in cold blood. Thereafter, they took the body to a Muslim cleric to prepare concoction for money rituals for him.

On another report, a ritual killer Edet Asuquo, 28 was arrested by Akwa Ibom State Police Command for allegedly murdering a pregnant woman and using her and the unborn child for rituals. In the story as reported by Oguntimehin, 2016 Edet was said to have connived with four others to remove the foetus from the woman's womb at night.

In the report of Patrick, 2017 Force Criminal Investigation Department of the Nigeria Police Force raised alarm on the increasing rate of ritual killing in the country. In the report, the report added that the perpetrators of the satanic act cut across both the low and the rich in the society. This include the poor, who want to get rich with ease and are assured by native or witch-doctors that they could cross over to the other side of life if they can provide listed human parts. On the other side are the stupendously rich and affluent in the society, who want to acquire more riches or political power and are told that there can be no easier way than to sacrifice the lives of fellow human beings.

The story of ritual killing as reported in our dailies may continue unending. The problem with these reports is that it creates awareness among the people who may be ignorant of the incidences. The most pathetic part of it is that after newspaper report of the arrest of the suspects nothing again is said of how the issue is resolved. This researcher is of the view that reportage can be reduced to minimize awareness of the incidence especially among the youths. Then, in case of the reported ones there should be follow up stories on how the cases were handled to serve as deterrent to others who may wish to indulge in such act.

In the same vein, religious people are not left out. In all the churches in Nigeria many pastors and men/women of God have penchant for storytelling. Some of them tell stories of witches and wizards who relentlessly pursue people all their lives; people who develop mysterious sicknesses after being fed some food in their dreams; humans that transmogrify into snakes to enter offices in hyper-urban areas; animals that turn into beautiful women to ruin an unsuspecting brother's faith; those whose glorious destinies turned to ashes after someone from their village visited them either in their dreams or physically. All the tales one sees in films and private channels of many religious bodies that deem illogical are regularly reproduced in books and sermons of many men/women of God.

In the film industry, beliefs about supernatural forces crawl into people's houses, minds, and bodies in different forms through home videos. Filmmakers draw from the repertoire of cultural beliefs because they are spectacular. Filmmakers pick their stories from popular beliefs; their audience watches the films and uses the realistic portrayal to validate their prior beliefs about the supernatural.

For instance, the Nigerians movie industry could be accused arguably as painting the nation as having been completely taken over by evil characters, employing evil forces to acquire and keep wealth and power. Films like "Living in Bondage"; "Blood Money"; "Oracle"; "Okosisi"; "Last Burial"; "My Throne"; "Secret Evil"; "The Oath"; "Original Sin"; "Rituals"; and so on are among the Nigeria movies embedded in rituals and mysteries that are much more concerned with the visualization of otherwise invisible spiritual realms, which as it were, show more transgression into the mysterious nexus of occultism and the paranormal.

For a better exposition into the subject matter, let us briefly turn to "Blood money – The vulture men" (O.J. Production 1997). A wonderful analysis of this incredible popular film was given by bright Meyer in "Power, Guns and Ritual Murder: Power and Occult" in Ghanaian popular Cinema.

The film is about hitherto respectable bank manager called Micheal Muoka (played by a popular Nigerian Artist; Zack Orji), who is in financial trouble because he is unable to return a large sum of money which he illicitly borrowed from his bank.

A police officer, an old school friend, advised him that “society has changed drastically. Today the ends justify the means,” and thus referred him to Chief Collins, one of their old boys, who is stupendously rich. Protected by the police officer, Collins trades in human body parts which he gets both from the mortuary and through blunt murder. He introduces Michael to the powerful cult of the vultures, whose members meet in a big, modern office building in Lagos.

The members of the cult either trade in human parts or have a secret room in which a person killed by ritual murder vomits brand-new naira notes. Despite his disgust, Michael becomes a member and he is sprinkled with human blood and transformed into vulture for a number of days, feeding on human flesh. He becomes rich, but at the cost of being a serial killer, who at a later stage, is even forced to kill his own mother.

In the same way some movies which are pro-Christianity do not eschew hard work and perseverance as a way of addressing human challenges. Most religious channels lay so much emphasis on miracle, faith healing, divination and so on. A well set story which is supposed to educate the audience on how to tackle human challenges can abruptly end in a turnaround while in prayer session with all the challenges raised in the film resolved with just a shout of Amen.

The major effect of these films is that most people who watch them are immediately prepared to accept them as true life stories. Besides, films like this could be said to be accusing the Nigeria upper class of getting splendid money mainly through blood sacrifice and of running the state for their own purposes. They could also serve as soothing balm to some people whose failure could be attributed to mismanagement of opportunities. Apart from misconstruing the mind of the public from the real way of facing human challenges, it promotes laziness and lackadaisical attitude toward developmental efforts. Whereas it is laudable to promote good religious virtues, the media should also stress on the need for hard work, critical thinking, and good planning as among the things that bring development.

Besides, the bad state of Nigeria as shown in these films is not attributed to tradition and backwardness and leadership failure which are major banes of development and modernization in the country. Rather they are attributed to evil global connections. Hence globalization as suggested by such films does not only entail sharing in civilization but also being entangled into worldwide network of oppression and destruction thriving on brutality and primitivism.

The attempt being made here is to stress the point that the development in information Technology and Mass Media which has helped globalization on international level, has also as it were been one of the major source of spreading the doctrine of the paranormal in Nigeria which has resulted in the glaring massive belief. Hence in Nigeria today, the

5. A CASE FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

When the word development comes to mind, you think of growth, change for the better, advancement, significant progress and so on. To achieve these, there is need for set of actions, intended steps that are usually related to the development intended to be brought about. Development is critical and essential to the sustenance and growth of any nation. A country is classified as developed when is able to provide qualitative life for her citizenry. According to the Free Dictionary development is the application of techniques or technology to the production of new goods or services. It can be understood as a process of economic and social advancement in terms of quality of human life which can be measured in terms of culture, wealth, education, healthcare and opportunities available to the citizenry. Nigeria in the last fifty years has been battling with the problems of development in spite of huge human, material and natural resources in her possession. All countries are at different stages of development and what determines the tempo in any nation is the outlook on scientific culture. This is in line with submission of Business Dictionary that development is, “A systematic use of scientific and technical knowledge to meet specific objectives and requirements.” This is in contradiction with the high belief of Nigerians in the paranormal phenomena which has made the people gullible giving the government and other affluent people opportunity to exploit the masses.

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