A Weird Romance at Filmmaking

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In my last review of a Nollywood film—C.J. Fiery Obasi's *Mami Wata* (2022)—I submitted that to criticise Nollywood, demanding range from our directors, is to build a reputation as a serial complainer. As a principle, I believe in edification than putdown criticism as the former helps us understand the underlying issues of craft better, more so if the work appraised is considered bad or weak. The greatness of true criticism is that it makes us see more clearly.

One of my favourite Nollywood movies has remained Pascal Amanfo and Ruth Kadiri's *Matters Arising* (2014). Simplistic and jejune, some might argue, but it is less pretentious than certain recent kitsch Nollywood movies; and it is in simple places where art isn't trying to be too much that expression is mostly genuine, which is why I have cherished the movie. It is with this in mind that I think *Madam Koi Koi: The Origin Story*—although not a very accomplished movie—is commendable filmmaking. I'd written my reaction on X upon seeing its prequel on Netflix when it was out in November last year. Because it was just part one I withheld writing a full review. But that reaction, now slightly edited, suffices:

> 1. The story builds up well, as do the characters. This is a story that should have been a movie long before now. It's good to have it. I think the writers have tried to maintain an authenticity, not aping Hollywood.
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> 2. It should stay the course.
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> 3. Ireti Doyle is supposed to be cast as a hypocritical, cynically sinister Mother Superior villain. Didn't work. Elegance has always been her charm; this was no role for her.
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> 4. The scripting is seriously missing a religious undertone, given that this is a missionary

and Catholic secondary school. The only time we get a whiff of this is in the classical soundtrack played when Baba speaks to Sister Ruth about the re-emergence of the disturbing Madam Koi Koi spirit. A bell doesn't ring. No Angelus prayer interrupts a scene. Nobody swears by the name of a saint. No choir practice. I doubt one sees a statue of Mary anywhere, even in passing.

5. Lastly, on the anatomy of a scene: On this job, the scriptwriters fumble A LOT; and it is why the episode runs for 1 hour 30 minutes. Too much time is spent in scenes where curt dialogue and subtext could do a better job.

To solve the mystery of the deaths that begin to take place in the small town of Malomo, some history suffices. While the movie is set in 1991, we go back to 1971. It is a late-night scene where two ladies—Rosemary (Omowunmi Dada) and Sister Ruth (Chioma Akpota)—are returning from an unknown outing. When they reach their crossroads, Ruth teases Rosemary about why the latter has refused to stay on the school compound. Rosemary teases back that would Mother Superior (Ireti Doyle) approve of her manner of dressing and makeup on a school compound? They bid each other goodnight and continue on different paths.

Rosemary is attacked by three young men who rape her; they boast that does she think that she, a foreigner in their land, can walk freely at night without them, the natives, despoiling her? They gratify their egos: 'Is this not what you've been hiding from us? Walking around proudly as if God created you specially? What's left?' the assaulter, Bolu, asks. She hits him twice with a brick. Angered Bolu beats her up, almost deforming her face and leaving her to die. We watch a spirit in the nearby forest possess Rosemary in her despondent state. Having missed one of her shoes in struggling with the men earlier on, her possessed body walks with a limp, thus, Madam Koi Koi.

To solve the mystery of Madam Koi Koi, some more history suffices. While Rosemary, who becomes Madam Koi Koi, was attacked and raped in 1971, we are taken back to 1941. A woman in Malomo village had been hung, accused of witchcraft, for the deaths of her children who died before age four. But this was done in error as the villagers had no knowledge of sickle cell disease which was the cause of the children's deaths. But the bigger error was the curse the Babalawo placed on her: that she would know no rest nor peace, even in death, and that her spirit would 'cry and roam the forest forever'. This is the spirit that 30 years later possesses Madam Koi Koi (Rosemary's body).

These flashbacks are timely inserted in the plot as Malomo's detectives, Theophilus Achebe (Deyemi Okanlawan) and Oscar (Baaj Adebule), try to solve the recurring deaths—they're told the 1971 story by the St Augustine's Catholic College gateman, Baba Fawole (Jude Chukwuka), but Detective Theophilus is sceptical of such superstitious tales. Thrown into the miasma is the new student Amanda (Martha Ehinome), who has nightmares and suffers sleep paralysis from the spectre of Madam Koi Koi unleashing a mayhem of death on the school. It turns out that Madam Koi Koi's vengeful spirit, which had been warded off from Malomo by a ritual, has returned because Amanda, a descendant of one of the banished rapists, is not supposed to be in the village.

The movie boasts a storyline that is not as derivative and formulaic to enable predictability, showing tension and complexity. It is compelling how the story doesn't focus on a central character, as all main acts have their conflict to deal with: Amanda who unconsciously bears a curse; Baba Falowe with the guilt of not inheriting his father's duty as the priest of Malomo, burdened with a history of violence and trauma he must now decisively resolve; Mother Superior's silent courage with duty, albeit with too much character flaws; Detective Theophilus's conundrum with superstition and no head start with resolving the deaths; and the village itself yoked by its history of violence.

The film is also noteworthy for an enviable attention given to Yoruba spirituality; we do not witness this as a mere performance in the manner in which African indigenous religions are treated in some movies with an absence of consciousness by a director's lack of knowledge or creativity. In *MKK*, the dignity accorded to it is palpable, which is why given the religious undertones of the film, I wonder why good/godliness versus evil was not explored to entrench a solid theological argument and raise the movie to that of ideas and philosophy, an aspect bereft in Nollywood filmmaking.

Already mentioned above is the case of Ireti Doyle's flat acting as Mother Superior: we don't hear her swear in the name of Mary or a saint. We could learn more if this character was given more interiority (a good example being Zinwe in C.J. Obasi's *Mami Wata*): how does Mother Superior's faith intersect with her error in managing the school with such earthly pursuit? How does her figure as a representation of Mary, of holiness and immaculacy, counteract the overarching mess of desecrated femininity which appears to be the spine of the story?

This cardboard-ness of character is what makes Mother Superior dismiss, 20 years back, Sister Ruth's testimony of having seen a possessed Rosemary (Madam Koi Koi); it is a scenario incongruous to the reality of persons who live their daily lives preoccupied with such religious spirituality which is essentially at war with evil, so-to-speak. This cardboard-ness of character removes and distances Mother Superior from the reality of the ritual practices that have happened in the village and the supernatural forces at play, which we assume she'd naturally show concern for. The dramatic irony she's cast in doesn't sell very well. She could be all this, plus her role as the ambitious Mother Superior who tries to keep her school, making her an even more well-rounded character.

Madam Koi Koi intends to pursue female agency but does so rather subversively. In conforming to the horror elements of the movie, it is easy for viewers to mischaracterise the vengeful nature of Madam Koi Koi—in attacking sexual offenders—into a stereotype of the angry woman or feminist raging mad, without soul. More worrisome is the graphic abuse in addressing femininity and women's bodies. In some scenes, we pause to think or cringe: what did we just watch?—Ibukun being gang-raped; Officer Oscar's predatory behaviour towards a female student.

Certainly, the nature of sexual violence is in the *violence,* but we imagine that on-screen filmmakers owe viewers some visual fidelity. Kumashe C. Yaakugh, author of *While She Slept* (2023), whom I spoke to, agrees these scenes are unsettling for female audiences. To her, 'the sexual violence was a bit too much to digest more than anything else; it felt very weird. I feel there are ways to portray these issues on-screen, especially in a movie, that shouldn't be so atavistically graphical. It was at best triggering to watch and I couldn't stand the sexual objectification altogether'.

The writer Saratu Abiola found many of the narrative choices odd. 'It is weird', she said, 'that the victim of gang-rape by the town's young men did not emerge as an issue when the Babalawo was trying to figure out how to pacify the vengeful spirit of Madam Koi Koi, because all focus was on the murder of the men, and not what they did to incur the spirit's wrath.' She thinks, too, that if sexual violence is jettisoned the story would still work better, as the writers 'lent so much time to girls or women being raped, only for it to mean nothing in the end'. And concludes rather harshly: 'I don't understand why sexual violence was used in this way, as mere—I don't even know—I won't call it entertainment, because it was terrible to watch'.

Both writers, the director Jay Franklyn Jituboh, and Boladale Falola (credits: *The Housewife, Made In Heaven*; *She,* and *Dead of Night*, respectively) are male. Did this go over their heads or is it bad editing? The storyteller often intends to do no wrong, but can he escape his shortcomings when they show? The depiction of sex in art is never settled—whether of its abuse or in glamourising its positivity—because it's in its nature to be problematic; when it is not such a kryptonite, the storyteller must exercise some faithfulness.

Saratu Abiola above says if we remove the sexual violence in *Madam Koi Koi*, the story would work better. I think, on the other hand, that it is the case of an aspect of the story being squandered or handled poorly, as is the case with the character of Mother Superior. If not, the already established history of violence against women's bodies, like the mother accused of witchcraft in 1941 hung and displayed (this scene was more professional), and the rape of Rosemary, shows a fine thread in the progression of structure: the vengeful spirit of a falsely accused mother possesses a rape victim 30 years later. This is that cry for help; of the female voice in search of justice, wherefore we get a clear indictment on men to be more accountable.

When *MKK* works, it is good to see; then it fails again. The director's cameras lead us to everything else but the legend of Madam Koi Koi for which many viewers come to the movie: the mysterious night spectre that walks, a stiletto on one leg, barefoot on the other, making the koi-koi sound, terrorising boarding school students. Is their retelling a stretch too much? In the last scene of its epilogue, we observe that a senior female student is now the sexual predator of a younger male student. In exeunt, the screen shows us: 'Madam Koi Koi has returned'.

What we feel at the end of *Madam Koi Koi* is a weird romance at making a film; perhaps, a foreplay of possibilities that were never reached. Its Part One slouches in places but climaxes to a good ending. Part Two picks up but segues gradually—but not unsurprisingly—into a weak last quarter, making the story firmer only in the middle. Goes to say that a good story should have a worthy beginning and end. At its end, many viewers will find *MKK* anticlimactic. Once in a while, our directors try to create good storytelling matched by good filmmaking; Kayode Kasum's *Soole* (2019) and Kunle Afolayan's *Ijogbon* (2023) are good recent examples. *MKK* tried to touch the hem of the garment, but only up to a point. Its possibilities were bigger, as a somewhat historical movie exploring something very Nigerian and original, as opposed to directors aping Hollywood tropes in making gung-ho action films that feel artificial. We need more of *MKK,* but made perfectly. This is possible.

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