



Selective Presence, Symbolic Absence, and Urban Public Space: Catholic Televangelism in Ibadan, Nigeria

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Abstract

The Catholic Church in Ibadan, Nigeria maintained limited and highly selective participation in local television during the early 2000s despite a universal mandate to use electronic media for evangelisation. This pattern is interpreted as a culturally significant symbolic act within Ibadan's urban public communication space. Ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2009 drew on interviews and focus group discussions with Catholic and non-Catholic stakeholders in church and media institutions. Geertz's symbolic anthropology and Habermas's public sphere framework guided the analysis. Findings show that selective presence and broader absence from regular broadcasting were shaped by economic

constraints, perceptions of televangelism as *ojoro*, institutional identity resistant to advertising logic, and conservative leadership. The absence functions as symbolic action expressing institutional distinctiveness and selective sacredness. Access to religious broadcasting in Ibadan was structured by economic power, gendered authority, and the spatial organisation of media institutions. The study concludes that institutional absence from television is a meaningful form of symbolic communication within a structured urban public sphere. It recommends greater attention to structural access and media inequality in religious broadcasting policy and planning.

Keywords: Televangelism; Ojoro; Catholic Church; Ibadan; Public sphere; Symbolic anthropology.

Introduction

Media expansion has reshaped religious communication globally. Religious groups now rely on broadcast systems to spread beliefs through speech, symbols, and music (Arthur, 1993). Television became the dominant platform for religious messaging and global televangelism, first rising in the United States in the 1950s through figures such as Bishop Fulton Sheen and Rex Humbard, then spreading across Christian traditions (Hadden & Swann, 1981; Weiner, 1992). In Nigeria, electronic media is widely viewed as essential for evangelisation. Pentecostal churches adopted broadcasting as a core strategy for gospel outreach (Taiwo, 2007). The Catholic Church also endorses media use for evangelisation at universal level (John Paul II, 2005; Paul VI, 1963). Yet the Catholic Church in Ibadan showed limited participation in local television during the study period. This raises questions about how institutional identity and local media structures shape religious visibility in urban space.

Television in urban Nigeria operates through infrastructure, licensing, and institutional control that determine access to public communication. Visibility on screen reflects access to this system. This study examines Catholic non-participation in Ibadan television as symbolic action within an urban public communication space. It addresses a gap in research on how Catholic institutional identity interacts with urban media structures in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Televangelism as a scholarly subject has attracted considerable attention, particularly in the context of American religious broadcasting. Hadden and Swann (1981)

provided an early foundational analysis, documenting the rapid rise of Pentecostal televangelism and its social, financial, and political dimensions. Horsfield (1984) extended this analysis to examine the theological and institutional implications of religious television, arguing that the medium inevitably shapes the message. In Nigeria, Ihejirika (2005, 2006) documented how media became a site of religious competition and conversion, showing that media presence directly affects denominational membership and identity. Taiwo (2007) further revealed how Pentecostal media in South Western Nigeria communicates values, miracles, and prosperity theology to mass audiences. Research specifically on Catholic media engagement in Nigeria is less developed but growing. Umoh (2024), writing from within the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, argues that conservatism, secrecy, and fear have constrained the Church's adoption of digital media for evangelisation, a pattern that echoes the television-era dynamics documented in the present study. Ihejirika's broader work on media and religion in Nigeria consistently highlights the Catholic Church as a reluctant participant in mediatised religious competition, preferring institutional restraint over public spectacle.

Theoretically, the study of religious media absence is less common than the study of media presence, yet scholarly work on symbolic communication provides conceptual tools for this analysis. Geertz's (1973) interpretive anthropology offers the most productive framework, treating cultural behaviour, including institutional non-participation, as symbolic action that carries and communicates meaning within shared systems of significance. Fraser's (1990) critique of Habermas demonstrates that the public sphere is not uniformly open but is shaped by exclusions of gender and class, a dynamic visible in Ibadan's religious broadcasting landscape. Together, these frameworks position institutional absence not as a passive failure but as an active cultural statement requiring interpretation within its specific social, religious, and urban context.

Problem Statement and Objectives: Symbolic Absence in Urban Public Space

Despite the Catholic Church's universal teaching that television serves evangelisation, the Catholic Church in Ibadan showed limited participation in local television during the study period. This creates a paradox between universal mandate and local practice, where television functions not only as a communication tool but as part of Ibadan's urban public space shaped by institutional competition, visibility, and access to broadcasting infrastructure such as NTA Ibadan, Galaxy TV, and BCOS. Access to this media space reflects broader control over symbolic visibility within the

city's religious public sphere. Using Geertz's interpretive anthropology, this study treats the Church's selective participation and absence as symbolic action requiring interpretation in terms of institutional identity and media perception.

Field observations also include youth accounts of perceived Catholic invisibility on television, with some linking this absence to declining retention among young members in favour of more visible Pentecostal ministries. The study therefore examines Catholic perspectives on televangelism in Ibadan, explains the reasons for limited television engagement despite official doctrine, interprets this absence as symbolic action within an urban media environment, and analyses how access to religious broadcasting reflects broader patterns of inclusion and exclusion in Ibadan's public communication space.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks. The first is Geertz's (1973) symbolic and interpretive anthropology. Geertz defines culture as essentially semiotic, arguing that human beings are animals suspended in webs of significance they themselves have spun and that culture consists of those webs. Symbols are vehicles of culture that should be studied for what they reveal about how social actors see, feel, and think about their world (Ortner, 1984). Institutional non-participation, rather than being a simple absence, becomes legible as a culturally meaningful act within this framework.

The second framework is Habermas's concept of the public sphere, which encompasses all realms of social life in which public opinion can be formed, with access theoretically guaranteed to all citizens (Habermas et al., 1974). Television serves as a contemporary medium of the public sphere. In Ibadan, the physical placement of broadcast stations, the licensing arrangements governing their operation, and the commercial structures determining access to airtime meant that the public sphere was not an abstract space of free exchange but a materially organised urban environment whose structure determined the conditions of symbolic visibility.

Fraser's (1990) critique of Habermas demonstrates that the bourgeois public sphere was historically constituted by significant exclusions of women and lower social strata. This critical extension is essential for analysing how Ibadan's religious television landscape operated not as an open democratic forum but as a contested space structured by economic power, gender, and denominational competition. The spatial and institutional organisation of urban broadcasting in Ibadan reproduced these exclusions in material form, making the public sphere's openness more theoretical than practical for communities without sufficient economic or institutional capital.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative ethnographic design informed by Geertz's (1973) approach to thick description. Participants were selected purposively and comprised 50 Catholics, including priests, religious sisters, seminarians, and lay members, and 20 non-Catholics, including Pentecostal clergy, media workers, and members of other denominations. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions conducted between January and October 2009 in Catholic parishes, archdiocesan offices, and the television stations NTA Ibadan, Galaxy TV, and BCOS. Data were analysed thematically around economic constraints, institutional identity, symbolic interpretation, and public sphere dynamics. The fieldwork was conducted during a period of rapid Pentecostal television expansion in Ibadan, providing a context for examining tensions between institutional tradition and media modernity that remain relevant to contemporary studies of religion and media in Nigeria (Ihejirika, 2006; Umoh, 2024).

Results and Discussion

Finding 1: Catholic Presence on Ibadan Television: Seasonal Participation, Strategic Absence

All persons interviewed generally agreed that television is a public space. One respondent stated that it is a public space where everybody can come and shop for ideas, either buy or sell (JDPC Official, personal communication, January 16, 2009). This agrees with the argument that television is as much a public space as any civic forum (Lehner et al., 2007). There was general agreement that the Catholic Church did not occupy that space, except during festive seasons. According to Fr. Toyin Pinheiro, Director of Communications of the Archdiocese of Ibadan:

The Archbishop encouraged the use of TV during Lenten season. We use TV to enlighten people about societal values through Lenten talks and call for transformation. Then, we celebrate Stations of the Cross which essence is to make people to appreciate the life, the death and passion of Christ. At Christmas, the same thing is done using advent talks and Christmas Carols. (Personal communication, 2009)

Rev. Sister Gorreti of Iroyin Ayo Communications corroborated this (personal communication, 2009). This pattern establishes that the Church was not absent entirely

from television but strategically chose when to appear. Geertz's framework helps make sense of this pattern: the selective presence is itself symbolic, communicating that the Church does not treat television as an ordinary commercial space but as a medium reserved for moments of liturgical weight and communal significance.

Finding 2: Explaining the Absence: Clergy and Laity Perspectives

Economic Constraints

The most recurring reason given by Catholics for the Church's television absence was lack of finances, combined with the view that the Church does not need to advertise itself. Fr. Pinheiro summarised the economic dimension directly:

We have not used the TV enough compared to the Pentecostals because of economic reasons... Going to TV is waste of money as it will never yield desired effect. Rather, we prefer using the print media, person to person evangelization, the use of other audio visuals that can be replayed unlike the TV. (Personal communication, 2009)

The economic constraint is real, but it is also culturally mediated. Fr. Pinheiro did not frame the cost of television merely as a budget problem but as a poor investment, revealing an institutional calculus in which the Church's understanding of evangelisation was already incompatible with broadcast television.

Television as Ojoro: Fraud and Manipulation

Several priests offered a deeper cultural explanation rooted in the concept of ojoro, a Yoruba term denoting fraudulent performance, staged deception, and manipulative hype. One priest described television as stage-managed, used for hyping up messages and advertising unfounded miracles (In-depth Interview, 2009). Fr. Pinheiro elaborated on what he regarded as the deceptive and manipulative character of televangelism, describing it as employing what he termed a marketing approach that was aggressive and coercive:

Most of the times, if it will affect the powers that be, they will not say what you said, but twist it... TV is deceptive and manipulative. Even the televangelists bring in deception on people's lives by adopting 'rape strategy'... all over the world; the Catholic Church uses less of TV for evangelism. (Personal communication, 2009).

The respondent's language reflects the intensity of clerical resistance to commercial religious broadcasting. Within Geertz's framework, the *ojoro* critique is a cultural symbol carrying dense moral meaning: it condenses judgements that Pentecostal television is dishonest, preys on the poor, and would contaminate the Catholic Church's institutional identity.

Institutional Identity: The Church Does Not Need to Advertise

Several respondents framed the absence in terms of institutional dignity. Rev. Fr. Ezekiel Ade Owoeye of Our Lady Seat of Wisdom Catholic Church, University of Ibadan, stated simply that evangelisation is not advertisement (personal communication, 2009). Rev. Fr. Anthony Omolade described other broadcasters as one-man affairs that present *ojoro* to extort people's poverty through sweet words and things that are not real (personal communication, 2009). This phrase positions Pentecostal broadcasting as individual entrepreneurship driven by personal gain, against which the Catholic Church defines itself as too ancient and communal to be reduced to personal brand management.

Institutional Conservatism and Gatekeeping

Fr. Pinheiro noted that leadership conservatism played a role, with the Church unwilling to go on TV to compete with or attack other churches' doctrines. He also noted that they were sometimes fenced out of TV by non-Catholics who headed media houses, even when they were ready to pay (personal communication, 2009). This reveals that absence was not always chosen but was sometimes imposed. The interplay between chosen restraint and structural exclusion makes the symbolic interpretation more layered: the Church both refused and was refused, and in public discourse, the first posture eclipsed the second.

Finding 3: Symbolic Interpretation of Absence

Applying Geertz's framework reveals that the Catholic Church's absence from television functions as symbolic action. The varying understandings shared by the Catholic congregation in Ibadan form a coherent shared cultural system of meaning, consistent with Des Chene's (1996) observation that the central goal of symbolic anthropology is studying how people understand and interpret their surroundings through shared cultural logics. Turner's (1967) argument that symbols instigate social action is directly applicable: the church's refusal to appear on television symbolically positioned it as an institution that does not compete for airtime with what it regarded as lesser enterprises. Their occasional presence during festive seasons also carried symbolic

meaning. Appearing only during Lent and Christmas communicated not weakness but a deliberate refusal to compete in the scramble for everyday visibility. This logic shaped not only how clergy explained their selective participation but how lay Catholics internalised and reproduced the same reasoning, suggesting the meaning was genuinely shared within the community.

Finding 4: The Public Sphere in Practice: Urban Access, Exclusion, and Power

In contrast to Habermas's theoretical conception of the public sphere as open to all citizens, the religious television landscape in Ibadan demonstrated systematic exclusions shaped not only by ideology but by the material organisation of the city's communication infrastructure. The broadcast stations, NTA at Agodi, Galaxy TV at Oke-Aare, and BCOS at Basorun, were located at specific urban nodes, operated under commercial licensing arrangements, and were accessible only to those with the financial and institutional resources to pay for airtime. Religious broadcasting was therefore not simply a media phenomenon but an urban one, shaped by the same forces of location, access, and institutional power that organise other dimensions of city life.

Access to Ibadan's religious broadcasting space was further shaped by gender. Field observations indicated that the overwhelming majority of regular televangelists and radio preachers in Ibadan were male, reflecting the long-standing tradition of excluding women from formal teaching and priestly offices (Weinreich, 1997). This gender exclusion operated through denominational norms that determined who was authorised to preach publicly in the first place. Economically, the airtime market operated on explicit commercial terms. Toyin Oladele, chief marketing officer of BCOS, stated plainly that they give airtime to whoever can pay for it (personal communication, 2009). Regular television presence signified financial success, which attracted more followers, which generated more income, reinforcing what Weber (1958) identified as the spirit of capitalism applied to religious enterprise. The Catholic Church's absence was therefore not only a theological choice but the outcome of a field structured by capitalist logic and urban spatial inequality, confirming that symbolic absence is not enacted in a vacuum but within a materially organised urban public sphere.

Evaluation

The findings demonstrate the value of treating institutional non-participation as a culturally meaningful act rather than a silence requiring no explanation. Geertz's interpretive framework reveals a coherent symbolic system in which restraint functions as a marker of institutional authority. The study's key theoretical contribution is the

concept of symbolic absence, understood as deliberate or structurally reinforced withdrawal from a public communication space that communicates identity and values. Extending Habermas through Fraser's critique further shows that access to symbolic visibility in Ibadan's religious broadcasting landscape was shaped by commercialisation, gendered religious authority, and the spatial organisation of broadcasting infrastructure. These factors reveal broader structural conditions influencing religious participation in urban public communication. Although based on 2009 fieldwork, the study provides a useful framework for understanding how religious communities negotiate visibility, identity, and access within contemporary urban media environments.

Conclusion

This study examined Catholic perspectives on televangelism in Ibadan in 2009, showing how economic constraints, the *ojoro* critique, institutional dignity norms, conservative leadership, and media gatekeeping produced a strategic absence from television that was both chosen and imposed. Drawing on Geertz's symbolic anthropology, the absence functioned as symbolic action, reflecting the Church's self-understanding as institutionally distinct and resistant to competition with what priests described as one-man affairs. Public sphere analysis in an urban context revealed exclusions shaped by gender, economic power, and the spatial organisation of Ibadan's broadcasting infrastructure. Television in Ibadan functioned as a commercially structured urban public space where access depended on capital and institutional authority rather than universal participation. The study contributes to scholarship on religion, media, and urban communication by showing how institutional absence from media platforms operates as meaningful symbolic practice within a structured urban public sphere. Absence serves as empirical evidence. Symbolic action proves useful because it treats non-participation as a culturally meaningful act rather than silence requiring explanation.

Recommendations

The findings highlight practical issues relating to religious media engagement, access to public communication, and institutional visibility. Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed. First, the Catholic Church in Nigeria should adopt a context-sensitive media strategy that balances institutional dignity with evangelisation needs. Priority should go to educational and value-based programming rather than miracle-centred broadcasting.

Second, greater youth participation in Catholic media work may strengthen visibility in religious broadcasting. The study also records male dominance in Ibadan religious broadcasting, shaped by denominational norms around public preaching that require review alongside media strategy.

Third, media policymakers and urban planners in Nigeria should examine how commercial airtime structures access to public communication space. Subsidised access, community broadcasting, and non-commercial airtime allocations for religious and civic groups would improve access to the urban public sphere.

Temporal Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations that require acknowledgement. The sample of 70 respondents does not represent the entire Catholic community in Ibadan. The study does not compare Catholic views across other Nigerian cities, limiting generalisability. Fieldwork was conducted in 2009, and the religious media landscape has since shifted through digital media, social networking, YouTube evangelisation, and streaming services. Despite this temporal distance, the study makes three contributions: theoretically, it demonstrates the value of Geertzian interpretive methods for analysing institutional media decisions; empirically, it provides baseline documentation for future comparative research; and substantively, it highlights tensions between universal mandates and local resistance rooted in theological identity and symbolic self-understanding. Future research should examine whether the *ojoro* critique extends to digital platforms, how Catholic media engagement has changed since 2009, and how urban spatial organisation shapes access to religious public life.

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