

“The message is reaching a lot of people:” Proselytizing and Video Films of Helen Ukpabio¹

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OO: Describe for me your foray into the video industry. When did you get into video film making?

HU: That was last year. Precisely June 1998.

OO: What propelled you into the video industry?

HU: Well, I see it as one of the means of spreading the gospel.

OO: Could you discuss the area of the video industry that interests you the most? What is the video film to your ministry?

HU: As a minister of the gospel, we preach the gospel by different means. Okay. We have always recognized that the drama we do in the church touches people most directly. And we also discovered that this home video thing is a new thing in Nigeria and a lot of people are watching and paying attention. But some of the message that the home video films convey is

¹ This interview was conducted in 2001. At that time, Evangelist Helen Ukpabio was still living in the old residence behind Desam House in Calabar. She has since moved into a palatial home not far away from the old home in Calabar. This interview took place in that old residence.

not good. Sometimes they end up glorifying Satan and I said to myself, “I can preach a good message better than they are doing with this medium.” So I got into the industry and began writing my own scripts. I did not leave the script writing to anyone in the industry because I had a vision, which I wanted to realize through the video film medium. So, I wrote my scripts and produced the video movies and preached through them. Before I got into this business, I had written three books between 1992 and 1996. But the ultimate result from this endeavour has not been as tremendous as what came out of my business with the video film. In fact, this is so interesting that people just walk in on their own into our church because they want to identify with what we are doing with the video film. If I show you letters from Lagos, you will be surprised. A lot of people have been looking for this church,² but they don’t know that it is not in Lagos. In fact, the video film has been helping us a lot in a bid to evangelise people. The messages we convey in these video films are specific. It is all to the glory of God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

OO: So, you began writing books before you discovered the home video films?

HU: Yes. Well, let’s say I started writing books before I discovered the video film. However, I should say that our constitution recognized the place of drama in the business of evangelising. We had a very big drama wing. By the time we wrote the constitution, there was nothing like the home video film. But I had started writing before then. I wrote the first book in 1992, the second in 1994 and the third in 1996.

OO: In other words, you agree completely that the visual image of the home video movie carries more . . .

HU: (interrupting) Yes, more impact. And it is faster, and it reaches so many people at different places. You need to see letters from Zambia, South Africa. We get letters from different parts of the world. In fact, right now, I have sent my director to South Africa. Somebody there wants to market my films . . . they have been writing and writing and my director says people have been bothering him about helping to market my video films there. You see, some people pirate the film there and this agent from South Africa told them that that is not the correct thing. So he wrote to us and I have now sent my director to South Africa to go and get in contact with this person so that he alone will be selling our video films in South Africa. The same thing happened in Ghana and finally one person came down—Alex Bot is his name—and he is now selling our movies out there.

² This reference is the Liberty Gospel Church, which Helen Ukpabio runs in Calabar, Nigeria. There is evidence that this church has grown from strength to strength since she introduced video film production as part of the strategy for preaching the gospel of the Lord.

In Gambia, the same thing has happened. In fact, people write to us from all over the world. At times, they write and I cannot even read the language. Some of them write in Italian and others in German, etc. When they write, they think we understand and so they just write and mail the letters to us.

OO: In other words, you are interested in producing video films as well.

HU: Well, I write the scripts actually and I see to it that the script I write is properly done because if you allow someone else to do what you have envisioned, the result may not be the same. As you well know, two people can edit a film and come up with two different things. So I don't always allow my script to go into the hands of producers. I have a producer per se, but I am always there because I can always say what I want a particular scene to be like. I can always say "Ah, I don't want this or this is the way I want it." My work is not finished after writing the script. I follow the shooting process throughout. In fact, I help produce it equally.

OO: What can you tell us about the video industry? What is the video industry?

HU: The video industry today or of Nigeria is primarily supposed to be an entertainment thing. It relieves the stress in our tense society. After much work, people come back to relax with it. If possible, you may laugh. You may also pick up one or two lessons from any video film you choose to see. Incidentally, I weep for the industry because most of the people in the industry are not educated. There is a lack of professionalism in terms of areas of specialization. Stark illiterates have taken over the industry. Most of them have the money power. They don't produce but they write their names as producers—there is a lot of hypocrisy, a lot of liars, a lot of cover-ups. They don't tell the stories; they buy the scripts from people. They pay the script writers say ten thousand Naira. Some pay five thousand, even five hundred in some cases. It is appalling for me to see the way they treat script owners. It is simply appalling. It is amazing. Once they pay this pittance, they take the scripts and use their names as if they are the story tellers. So, the industry is now run and manned by illiterates. The educated ones don't have the money power. There is also the ethnic side to this problem. In Nigeria today, the home video industry is about ethnicity . . . if you are Ibo, you will have to find yourself trying to gather your Ibo people around you. Even amongst the Ibo people, there is also internal discrimination. There are factions amongst themselves. This is also the case even amongst the Delta people in the industry. There are those who come from Zeb Ejiro's place. This group is called the "Urhobo mafia". There are also factions within this mafia. There is the Isoko faction. You will surely find this kind of discrimination in the industry, and because of that, there is often no room for openness. People

are not gingered to do their best, which is why you will find one story being duplicated and duplicated and duplicated until nothing is left to tell about that subject. Yes, yes, the same thing being repeated over and over again. For example, you have so many home videos dealing with urban violence and women. Pick this video film or that video film, the main stories remains the same—just the same. It is the same message that you get at the end. Until these people who come into the industry only to take over the scripts of others are put in their places, things will remain difficult in and for the industry. These intruders must be stopped. Why can't we stop this act in the industry? There are some of the problems in the industry that are not noticed by the outsiders. We only see the glamorous aspect of the industry and those who work in it. We fail to see these problems. We need to solve these problems to make headway in the industry.

OO: Do you think money is very important for the industry to grow? Or is it simply the problem of ethnicity as you have hinted at here?

HU: There is the problem of money. Do you understand! But there is also the problem of ethnicity. They are linked. For example, some people in the industry would accuse others of not asking them to work in their video film productions, and may even raise the point of ethnicity. Some might say, "You know I come from your place and you are neglecting me for another person. Why?" So, it is still about money power, which does not make for excellence and does not allow people in different areas of specialization to handle what they can actually do well. There is just no room for merit in the industry at this time. You even find wrong casting because somebody wants to put this person there who may be a girlfriend or a boyfriend or something else. Just to put the person there for the sake of doing that person a favour. It is not a problem for these people even when the person so drafted cannot carry the role adequately, cannot deliver. The director may be forced to accept a less qualified person in his or her production because of that person's ethnic affiliation.

OO: What do you really think are the real and obvious consequences of this activity in the industry?

HU: I can see the prognosis being very fatal in future because as I have said, an illiterate man does not have any vision of tomorrow. He does not have any vision for this industry beyond the gains of today. What he does is for today. As long as it brings money in the short term, that is all that matters. So in the future, the video consumers would be tired of seeing a certain kind of attitude in the industry and this will play back on us, the producers. This will simply translate into some of kind of glut in the industry. The producer puts in so many millions to produce a video film but he or she is unable to make it. You simply cannot make any money in

a situation like this. For now it might still be well with producers in the industry. They may still be making all the money. They can go on shooting four or five films at a stretch, which will cost about twenty something million Naira and they don't care what happens in the future. They do these video films all at the same time—they release one video film after the other from one month to the other. Whether the first one fails or not is not their business. These producers are also called marketers. They are importers. They import empty cassettes from Korea cheaply. They import everything cheaply. They buy the video cassette cheaply, the stories with a pittance and even the audience. So, if they can still sell twenty thousand or thirty thousand cassettes, they are fine. They sell within the first week of the release of these video films and cover their production cost. Whatever comes after becomes the profit. They still make more profit than some of us that produce a different kind of video film. And what is more, we must still give them our video films to market for us. They control the market. They have the market. We have no choice. They run the market. They control the distribution of video film nationwide.

So, I feel that this arrangement is going to be very fatal in the future because people will soon be fed up seeing the same faces everyday on these video films. This business of over-flogging issues and themes in the video films because of this problem of ethnicity favouritism and so on will eventually boil over. It is going to be quite fatal anyway. Although I know that there are some bodies that are coming up to take care of that, there is a lot of junk in the industry at present.

OO: What precisely do you consider the “junk” of these films and in the industry? You are not alone in saying that these films promote a junk culture.

HU: The first obvious one is the technical aspects of these video films. Nigerians like going for cheap things. So producers employ cheap directors who charge very little and who come to the production to learn and make mistakes. Instead of going to the person who knows the work of creating visual stories; someone who has learned the trade, producers often call the “quick and cheap” guy to do the work. These projects become the point of learning for the so-called director. In the industry, you find many people bringing in inferior cameras that cannot withstand the power of mass dubbing. You also find many amateur hands claiming to be directors even when they have not directed before. They simply affix their names as directors and that is that. Actually, there are junks. Certainly, there are some very good ones. We can not classify all of them as junk. There are some companies that are producing good video movies consistently and over time they have never fallen short of that. As you yourself know, junkies don't last. As they come in—they make the first, second and probably third video film and that is all. In the industry, you

still see so many people jumping in and out at random. This attitude is common to the English video films. It is worse with the Yoruba video film. The junk in Yoruba video film is just too much.

OO: Now that you have mentioned it, could you please tell the difference between the Yoruba and the Ibo films beyond the obvious linguistic difference.

HU: The first and most obvious difference is that Yoruba video filmmakers³ deal with and act out their own culture in their video films. They bring attention to and exhibit typical Yoruba mannerisms in all their video films. Yoruba filmmakers have their own ways. They often employ their fellow Yoruba actors and actresses and no one else. Ibo video film makers and video marketers are also guilty of this act. But they tilt the stories of their video films towards their own existence in the city and in the villages. Ibo films are mostly bought by the Ibo and the Yoruba by the Yoruba audience. There was a time when we stocked some Yoruba films in my video shop. They stayed and stayed and stayed. Nobody came to ask for them. They were not bought. It was almost going to six or seven months when one Yoruba man came and remedied us. He cleared all four Yoruba video films and since then we have not attempted to stock them again. This is also the case with the Ibo films. People just don't buy these kinds of films because they are not based on the stories of their community.⁴ But Ibo video films look more mature, very reasonable. They convey very good messages, more than anything you will find in the Yoruba films. On the other hand, Yoruba video films are mostly comedies. They are quite unrealistic in my view. Most of the films leave you confused at the end. You don't know what their aims are or how you can interpret the end. The Ibo films are quite clear in this regard.

OO: How do you define the primary audience of your video films?

³ Yoruba video films are still very popular in the industry. Its cinematic codes are linguistically restricted though and its origins strictly tied to a long-standing theatre tradition that goes back to the Alarinjo Performance of the 16th century. The reference, which the interviewee makes here, is to the linguistic and theatrical origins. This is the one aspect of Nollywood that has a history that is so inextricably tied to a brief spell of true cinematic tradition. For the Yoruba video film, the transition was from theatre into cinema in the late 1980s and then into popular video film in the 1990s. See Onookome Okome and Jonathan Haynes, *Cinema and social Change in West Africa* (Jos: Nigerian Film Corporation, 1997).

⁴ Helen Ukpabio's video shop is located on Marian Road Extension, Calabar, which is the capital city of Cross Rivers State in south eastern Nigeria. Its local inhabitants are the Efiks, which is minority ethnic group in this part of the country. Although this city has a high density of Ibo traders, the culture is predominantly Efik. The reference here is that the Efik may not buy Ibo films because they do not speak to their peculiar cultural experiences.

HU: Well, since I am not the marketer, I would not know that in a general sense. I simply feel that my films are acceptable everywhere. A lot of people buy my films in Lagos. You know, Lagos is the no man's land of a sort. If they buy my video films, that says a lot about the popularity of the video films. I know that they buy our video films there. That says something about my films. The same thing goes for my films in Iboland. I cannot just go into Aba⁵ casually. People immediately recognize me from the films. Even when I go to the airports all over the country, people come to me, telling me that they have just watched one or more of my video films. Yes. Gleefully they will be telling me "we watched this one yesterday and the other one last week. Or we watched you in this film and in this one and so on and so forth."⁶ My video films are widely watched, widely appreciated. A lot of people just go out to get my video film as soon as they know there is a new one out. We have well over twenty thousand people buying any video film we produce within the first week of the release. So, I cannot say precisely who my audience is. It is diverse. It is a mixed bag of those who like what I do with video movies.

And we have not done any marketing of our video movies in say, Abeokuta, to see whether or not it will be acceptable. We have not tried doing this in other Yoruba States either. We have not tried that. Yet, we still have letters of appreciation from fans of my video movies coming in from these places. So, we believe that many of the fans in small Yoruba towns go to video shops in Lagos to buy our video films. What we know for sure is that they are selling in those parts of the country, which is why we get letters of appreciation from fans living in those parts. We have letters from all over.

OO: Do these letters speak directly to the religious background of your video film? Are the fans you refer to interested in the video films because of the religious message they construct?

HU: Yes, some of the letters begin by commending us. They often address the fact that the story-lines of our video movies are quite good and educative. But some of the fans don't even see God in them; they just like the video films. In some cases, the fans are happy that God finally gave them victory or something through the ministry of our films. Different people interpret our films in different ways. Some of the fans don't even know that we are a religious organisation. They simply respond to the video films as if they are writing to Godly people, but they also tell us

⁵ Aba is located north of the city of Port Harcourt. It is an Ibo city and it is strategically located as a convenient trading post. It is the most important trading post after Onitsha, which is on the bend of the River Niger.

⁶ This is probably because Helen Ukpabio acts in most of her films. She stars as the redemptive figure in all of her films. She is the pastor that brings life to the depressed and the oppressed. She is the pastor that defeats witchcraft and all other forms of demon powers in her evangelical films.

how good the video films are and so on and so forth. A lot of the fans watch our films over and over again. They like the prayer sessions in some of the films.⁷ Some people also write to correct us in one way or the other. Others do so to comment on certain things they don't like in the video films.

OO: Do you take these corrections seriously?

HU: Well, to be candid, sometimes I felt that they try to correct what they do not know or understand. If they are to understand what and how video movie are made, some of these comments won't be there. These comments are not all correct all the time because these fans are novices in the art of video film making. They do not know what goes on in the video movies. However, when they offer their genuine corrections and suggestions, we do pay attention to them.

OO: And do you then include these corrections and suggestions in your next film?

HU: Of course. We do take the corrections seriously.

OO: Let us turn yet again to issues of the industry. Are there any efforts towards the sanitization of the chaos in the industry?

HU: You know this is Nigeria. Nigerians are always difficult people to control. Bringing people to agree on any thing is very difficult here. Bringing people to form a particular professional body is very difficult here. There are always breakaways. People who are together in one group this moment can break out and form another own body. So, I think we are still waiting for our government to do something about it. Maybe . . . I don't know. But there are some bodies existing which are trying to do something in this direction but each time they spring up, they quickly end up in some ethnic mix-up. Before long, I think people will come to realize that there is a selfish motive behind this entire hullabaloo. I know that Amaka Igwe is trying to organize some groups. There is also one organised by Zeb. They are just coming up like that all the time, and of course these bodies will soon become too many. And when they become too many, I will also organize my own (laughter). It looks like all of us will become lords of some of the groups and there will be no floor members of any of the groups anymore. So, I am waiting for them. But I know that if I organise my own, it won't be good because I will organise it only for religious video movies and I will be the head of the organization.

⁷ This is one of the reasons why I have referred to this category of the video film in Nigeria as the "hallelujah video." See my essay, "Women, Religion and the Video Film in Nigeria," *Film International* 7(2004): 1-13.

I do believe that a very good and organised body will come out of the lot. There is the urgent need to sanitize the industry.

OO: What do you think the government should do to achieve this aim you have so defined?

HU: We think the government can help us get all the bodies fully registered and properly organized. It should be able to control the release of movies. For example, it could regulate the number of video films that a company releases in a year or so. Perhaps, no video filmmaker should release more than two video movies a year. That will also help us come up with better films, and curb the influx of films and therefore control the glut that video filmmakers talk about all the time. This way, we do not need to rush to do anything. Government should also help us check piracy. All along, we have been struggling on our own and this is not easy. You may even find out that even people from the Government are renting our films without paying video producers and video filmmakers. So the Government should help us in this direction. I am not saying they should finance video productions, because they have a lot of ministries they have not been able to finance. But they should help us in other ways. They should regulate the industry in a way that makes it profitable and enjoyable to work in it. After all, many people find jobs in the industry. The government should really help us in the area of piracy. And the government should ensure that the video movies we produce are released in a timely manner and not strangled by some agencies. The Censorship Board should live above board and must stay within its prescribed duties of assigning screening tags rather than meddling in the creative affairs of the producers and the filmmakers. The Censorship Board should be able to say quite clearly that a particular video film is for a mature audience only, which is its primary duty. It should not be the case that when a video filmmaker produces a movie the board bans its release because there is a kissing scene in the story. It cannot say video filmmakers are not living right because of this act. We know that even a child of today knows that thing very well. One of my children is only three years but when she watches a movie, she tells me, "Ah mummy, they have started doing bad things. They are kissing themselves." I can't tell her not to watch. Some people stop their children from watching such video films. I do not but I teach my children why such things are not good things. I teach them in my own quiet time. When praying, I tell them about actions and things that are not good. I talk to them about what the Bible calls fornication so that they will grow up to know what is good and what is bad.

There are a lot of threats for the video filmmaker from the Censorship Board. As a video film producer or video filmmakers, if you make your video movie in a particular way, the Board won't allow its release. If the Board does not allow the video filmmaker to release his or her video movie, what does it want the producer to do? But there are many African

countries that want our video movies. If the Government of our country does not allow us to release our films, how would these African countries allow us to release these video films in their countries? They love our films but they have to be sure that we are doing the right things. I don't think we promote immorality in our projections. The government must come into the industry and assist us to bring about orderliness and checks, so that we may make profit from what we sow.

OO: In your opinion, what has the National Film and Video Censorship Board done in this regard? What has it been able to do in the way of promoting its mandate of regulating the activities of the industry and in the classification of video films? Do you think that this particular agency has failed?

HU: I think that is what I am trying to say. At times the Board gets so confused. For example, when I produced my video film, *End of the Wicked*, it was approved by the Board but just before we released the film for public consumption, someone from the Board sent us another letter saying that the Board has withdrawn its approval—and that we should not release the video film. People in the Board create a lot of problems. While the film was released in the East,⁸ it was not released in Lagos for one month. The Board brought in the Police, and personally threatened me. It wanted the scene that has the woman with the male organ to be cut out of this film. The Board does not have the right to do this because it is a message. What I am saying with the depiction of this woman in this way is that women do develop male organs to abuse other women spiritually. And that was what I was trying to say with this image. I was not preaching immorality or something else. I am a preacher and I am strongly against immorality. So I cannot even imagine myself promoting immorality. What I expected the Board to do is to classify this video movie as fit for a mature audience only. They did so initially but still came against us after this classification. I think people from the Board came back because they wanted to collect bribes, and they can only do so if they insist that we should not release this video movie. I told them to get out. I released it. They chased my director from one place to another after that. The boy went into hiding. I was adamant. I wanted them to come over and arrest me. In the final analysis, what they succeeded in doing was that they made this video movie very expensive. Some people bought copies in Calabar and sold them in Lagos exorbitantly. During the time of this crisis, this video film sold in Lagos for as much as a N1000 per copy. People were even begging to buy the poster for this video film for as much as N150 when this poster was for free. What I am saying is that I don't think people in the Board are aware of their duties. Perhaps they are not well

⁸ Reference to the "East" means the area of the country which includes Calabar and the eastern states of Nigeria-Anambra, Imo, Enugu and other Eastern States of the Nigerian Federation.

defined to them. If they are, then they should stay within the bounds of their duties and obligations. They are not supposed to stop any movie from being released. They were not supposed to stop my video movie from being released. They can ask me to cut out parts of a movie, which they find unacceptable but not to ban my video film. They can also classify the video film and tell me what audience the video film is suitable for. This is also part of their duties. There is nothing wrong with this video film. It is absolutely wrong for them to say that adults should first watch the film before their children. They are simply failing in their duties. Some of them just watch half the video film and then declare, “approved.” There is no intellectual rigor to the business at all. Not at all. They have people they are afraid of. Some video movies people are actually making images of naked women and violent scenes in their video films and you wonder whether the Board actually went through these films carefully. The Board only tries to prove tough on those who would not pay bribes or bulge to their whims and caprices. Members of this Board allow those who give them money to do whatever they want but will try to prove tough to those who do not want to be part of this deal. So, I think they don’t know their duties. Maybe with time, it will be spelt out to them. But essentially, members of this Board are corrupt—very corrupt.

OO: Is it that they don’t know what they are doing or that they are influenced by what you said—money, big names and so on?

HU: You see, in Nigeria today, it is a pity that there is a lot of corruption. I am a minister and I have to speak out about these things also. Other producers will pretend to be quiet so that their films can be positively censored at all times. In Nigeria today, you find very few people that are straight. In the home movie business, you pretend to like what you do not like. You praise what you know is wrong. I don’t have that spirit. I don’t praise what I know is wrong. The Bible says “Woe is the man that calleth evil good and good evil.” So, as a child of God, I can never see something that is evil and begin to take sides with it. The censorship board is not living up to expectation. There are people that give them money and immediately they go, they allow them to release their video films whether they are bad or not. The only have to say “let it go,” and that is that. These video films are then forced on the consumers. When you watch some of the video films, which the Board have passed for consumption, you will know that they are not worthy to have been classified “G,” i.e. general viewing. So you see, Nigeria is a corrupt society and we hope that God will help us to put the society right. The Censors Board is part and parcel of this corruption.

OO: Do you know the composition of the Censorship Board? How are members selected, where they come from?

HU: Well, I don't know. They say they have their headquarters in Abuja and now they have a sub-station in Onitsha, which was newly opened. It was some few months ago. I know they have an office in Lagos, somewhere in the Ikoyi area. I have been going to do business with the Board there. Since they opened an office in Onitsha, my films have been censored there. After all, my producer lives there—I mean in Onitsha—so it is very convenient. My films don't have problems with the Board. They are good, and there are generally well made. The problem comes when I refuse to be part of the corruption of the Board.

OO: The film industry is said to be full of gatecrashers and you have mentioned this before. What do you think the Censors Board or any Government institutional for that matter can do to help check this massive inflow of gatecrashers in order to keep quality up?

HU: Ah! They cannot do anything because there is no organized body that is handling this problem. They cannot do anything because it is matter money in the industry. If you have five million Naira and you want to produce a film, so be it. You can go ahead and do so. Nobody is going to stop you. You produce by putting together a haphazard body of actors and actresses. You just come up with a name for a story that has been floating around and that is that. If you have been watching the industry carefully, you will see that once you have seen one movie, you never see that video movie again. It quickly goes out of circulation. A lot more of the same kind of video movie would be made in quick succession. Some of these gatecrashers believe that there is so much money to be made in the business. That is all they think of. That is their primary motivation. So as they gatecrash, they also crash because sooner or later they discover that this is not the case and they don't ever come back again. So, the government cannot do anything about this influx. The government does not employ people in the industry, and it gives no financial assistance to those who work in the industry. It does absolutely nothing for these people. So, it cannot truly intervene in the industry. It has no moral authority to do so. But even if the Government chooses to do something, nobody will listen. You see, when you get closely affiliated to the movie industry, you begin to learn a lot of things. What I am trying to say is that most of those new hands are not even professionals. Aside from the fact that they are not professionals, they are stark illiterates. Most of them are still apprenticed to their masters as traders. They cannot read no matter how big the "A" is on the reading board. Those names you see on the credit lines of these video films—produced by this, directed by this, story by this—these are all fabricated. It is all a lie. They don't produce, and they don't write the stories. But they have the money, and they are accepted for that reason.

We are actually looking forward to a future when creative people in the industry will not sell off their rights because of money. The connection

between the producers and the creative people in the industry is very bad at the moment. The producers or marketers are known to treat the script writers and directors the way they like. Producers call the shots because they have the money and are willing to invest it in the making of these films, and because they employ the others in the industry, they can say to the screen writer for example, "I give you your daily bread, so I can tell you what to do" and they frequently do tell the directors what to do. They decide whose names appear on the credits of these video films. So they can tell the director "I don't want your name there. My wife is the producer, na my wife be assistant this, na my daughter be assistant that" and so on and so forth.⁹ They put the names of family member on the credit line in that Nigerian selfish way of doing things. Not being professional does not necessary mean they don't know what the industry stands for. Okay? Take my position for example. I am not a professional, but I am already a producer and if I continue to be one, I will get to know so much of what goes on in the industry. But a time will come when because of pride I won't be willing to learn new things. I will simply take things for granted.

So there is no openness here. There is fear, tension, you know. You are not free to pick who you want to pick to work with. But most professionals that come to work with these gatecrashers are often very proud and arrogant and this is because they are actually ignorant. We know these people in the industry. We do.

OO: (Interrupting) Such as?

HU: (evading question). Some of them even boast and say, "I read directing" in school. Okay, you tell them, come over and direct this video film and they cannot do anything worthwhile. They cannot even position the camera properly. They cannot even mount proper lighting. In the industry, experience is the best teacher, you know.

OO: Would you want to give examples of professionals who do not know how to direct in the industry?

HU: I have so many examples of professionals who just jump into directing and fail. I can show you these video films if I take you to my video shop. I will show you their films. They read Theatre Arts in the University but they often come up with nonsense in the name of directing and they are just disappointing. Yes, they are so many, so many of them like that. And if you ask people, they will tell you behind the backs of these so-called professionals that "so and so think he is a professional but he is an idiot. Look at his awful directing. It is bad, simply bad. His movie

⁹ This is Pidgin English expression which means, "My wife is the producer, and my wife is the director."

will not sell up to five hundred copies nationwide. It will die a natural death and whoever sponsored it will lose his money.” We hardly see these real facts to the people involved. We do not in the industry.

OO: Do you have any social problem in the industry because you are a woman?

HU: No, I am not a professional producer. I am not an actress. I do not go looking for roles so I am not one of those women who are harassed or something. I don't really have any such problem.

OO: Do you have problems with your marketers?

HU: No, I do not. If I give the marketers twenty thousand jackets of my video film, I record that against the name of the marketer and if I give these out at the cost of say a hundred Naira, I know how much should come back to me. This is what we do. That is how I deal with the marketers. Once they finish selling copies of the video film, I get my money back. In fact, I don't wait till they finish selling. My marketers pay me upfront.

OO: (interrupting) Upfront?

HU: No. I do this as I want. If I am doing a movie now, and I don't have enough money of my own now, I go to a marketer. I just phone and say to him “I need money to pay the artist, so give me a cheque of one million there.” Usually, I don't like to collect the entire money for the production of any film from the marketer, so I am not tempted to misuse it because I won't be able to replace it when the time comes. When I collect money from the marketer for a particular purpose in the production process, I make sure I use it for that purpose. This way, I don't have problems with my marketers for now.

OO: One of the *real* problems of the industry is that of piracy. We have touched on this briefly, but I want you to elaborate on this problem.

HU: As you know, my films are quite popular here in Cross River State. Yet in here, many video rental shops rent my video films but they do so in secret and when they know I am after them, they hide. Sometimes I send my people to these places but the operators simply hide. They vanish. They make sure that they dispose of the video films quickly. You know, these operators know members of my church and so it is easy for them to hide from them. But there is another dimension to this problem of illegally screening our video films. Some of these operators simply do not know it is wrong to screen these video films without permission from the producers. They simply do not know. We once harassed a lady who was

doing this, and we realized that she didn't know it was wrong. She was even happy to tell us that she had rented ten copies already and she was coming to us to get more copies to rent out. So she didn't know it was wrong and in fact against the laws of the country to do this. We have simply not educated them enough, but we assume they should know. Even when they watch the films; they don't read those words that say renting these video films is against the law. They are only watching the action of the video film, not the inscription telling the viewers that it is wrong to rent or pirate any film for that matter. They don't know. Benue State is another example. In cities such Makurdi and Gboko, video consumers hardly buy films. They rent. They simply pay twenty Naira to see these video films in what you call "video parlour . . . eh?" They pay to watch somebody's movie without the owners of the screening venues giving anything to the producer. Those who rent the video films pay N50. So, people in these cities hardly buy video movies. The highest number of video films we have sold in these parts of the country at any time is about two hundred copies because of piracy. This is also the case with Kaduna and Jos. In fact, Abuja is the worst. In the Eastern States, the rates of illegal screening and piracy are not as high. In the Northern and the Midwestern States, the piracy rate is very high and because of this, marketers find it very difficult to penetrate those areas. Even when they spend so much money to establish a video outlet, nobody comes to buy because they have places where they can rent these video films. These are all some of the problems we are facing and we have not been able to put them out. Every effort or attempt is now considered personal. Even if one takes offenders to court, there is no organized body to help with the litigation. Some of these operators of video screening venues say they want to ask producers to permit them to be renting out their films and that they will then pay a certain amount of money to the producers. I do not think this would work. I told them there is no producer that will put five million Naira into the making of a video film only to collect one thousand Naira from a video parlour operator. It is all nonsense. This is all because these operators do not know what is involved in the production of movies.

OO: This point you have made is very important and I would like us to go on little further on this. So, people pay as little as twenty Naira to watch these video films in make-shift cinema halls and . . .

HU: (interrupting) They call it club, and you call it "video parlour."

OO: Do these clubs have any seating arrangement as you may find in a regular cinema hall?

HU: Yes. They have chairs like this (demonstration with the sitting room). The operators advertise their screening by word of mouth. They would say to the potential viewers for instance, "What time will you be free—3pm?"

They would tell this to about twenty or thirty people, and ask them to pay twenty Naira each for the screening time. They will also tell the potential viewers when to come—3pm—to the venue where they will watch the advertised video film or films as the case may be. But this is not the only way these operators make money off our sweat. Video shop owners may ask patrons to register with a certain amount of money for the year—say one thousand five hundred Naira—with the promise that any time there is a new movie, they would pay just thirty naira and take the video film home, watch and then return it. If you keep it for an additional day, they pay ten Naira extra. That is how they keep renting and re-renting our films.

OO: And the consequences are that the producers and the film maker sometimes don't . . .

HU: Yes. They get nothing from these screenings because nobody is buying the films. They have a place to rent them cheaply anyway! Why would they buy them?

OO: Do you know why this is more rampant in the north?

HU: Yes. They like cheap things. They like taking things that do not belong to them. That is why they themselves don't produce movies. That is why this attitude is rampant there. But we also find some Ibo people trying to make fast money by pirating the video movies of many producers. Some of these pirates print the jackets of these video films while the production process is still going on. For example they may print your jackets and as soon as your movie is out, they buy one, mass-dub it into empty cassettes and begin to sell it. My movies are all over the world, but I did not take them there. I get nothing from them. These movies of mine that circulate all over are all fakes. They are merely copies of the original.

My brother who lives in Sierra Leone once told me that he saw the jacket of my movies in Freetown. He wept because he knew immediately that this is an act of piracy. When he told those found with them that he has seen this movie in Nigeria, and that the producer is a sister, they just shrug their shoulders and went on with business as usual. He couldn't do anything about that. This is the case of my brother. We have the same mother and father. He was in the Nigerian army and was posted to Sierra Leone at that time. These pirates just go about doing their jobs pirating our video films and sending copies all over the world just as they did with pirating English films from Hollywood and Europe. They are standing by to do that as soon as new video movies are released. It will really take us more time to check this problem because piracy is a complex business. But this one is very difficult.

OO: In the last discussion we had, you made mention of some people trying to print your jackets even before you launched one of your films. Can you talk about this?

HU: No. It was not my films. These pirates were caught with *Jaja of Opobo* and *Moving Light*. They were caught and taken to some Police Station in Lagos. They were actually caught.

OO: What do you personally do to ensure that printers don't duplicate the jackets of your video films and sell them to pirates?

HU: Simple. What I do is that I carefully select where I print my jackets. I make an agreement with the man in charge, and after that anywhere I see the jackets of my video films, I hold him responsible. I do not mind the people with whom I see the jackets. I hold the printer responsible. So, there is such an agreement and I pay him everything he requires for the job. So that there will be no issue of you did not pay me for the job. And I also allow him keep the photo-films that we use in producing the jackets because without the original photo-films, pirates may find it difficult to do a good job of pirating the video film covers. That is how we try to make up for this problem. And because of these tactics, it has been somewhat difficult for people to print my jackets. The man I use for this job is sensitive to the problem—very sensitive to this fact. In fact, on one occasion, I was told that they say a man was seen with a jacket that this printer printed for me. The man had to close his shop for seven days to get to the bottom of the problem. He pursued the case. Finally, he laid ambush for the boy but that day he failed to catch the culprit. These printers are very strict people as far as this business is concerned. In fact, there has not been any trace of piracy traced to the company I use. This printer is very professional about his business. He charges us high because of the security of our video film jackets but he does a fine job of the jacket also. Some people do their video-jackets for as low as N7 or N8, which is why there is a lot of bad packaging in the industry. My printer does a better job and gives me the security that I need. He charges more though and I am happy to pay.

OO: Is it true that some video producers make printers of jackets to take an oath of secrecy not to give their jackets to pirates? How does this work?

HU: This may not be very unlikely but I don't do it. I don't take oaths or make them. I am a Christian. That may not be unlikely because many people make others take oaths before they do business with them. This is a common practice with some people.

OO: How much does it cost you to make a film from scripting to the finished product?

HU: It depends. For example, I write my scripts so I don't buy for that part of the production of the video film. My director writes the screenplay so I don't pay for that either. I do not pay for a whole lot of things. But you see, you cannot precisely say what a video film costs to make. You cannot say this video film is going to cost three million Naira to produce or not. One film may cost three million Naira to produce and the other three and half million. Yet, another may cost the producer about N4.2 million. It depends on the story line and the ambition of the producer. For example, if you want to recreate a war scene in the video movie, you will have to make uniforms and maybe you need up to three hundred people to be soldiers to make the film create the necessary impact. By the time you buy all that you need to do this—helmets, shields, flags and so on, the cost would certainly go up. And some people do epic video films. It costs a lot to make it look epic.

If it is a straightforward movie, it won't cost much. In a straightforward video movie, the producer only needs to take care of the costumiers. In this case, we may be looking at the cost of say N3.2m or N3.5m. The producer also has to deal with the issue of locations. In the production of the *End of the Wicked*, it cost me about N4.3m to produce. The same thing goes for *Holy Crime*. In *Holy Crime*, we used one helicopter and this raised the cost of production as we have to pay for each minute we used the craft. It cost us so much. So it is not usually easy to say precisely how much one spends on any give film at the beginning of production. The cheapest film I ever made was *Power to Bind*. I spent N1.8m.

OO: In other words, the cost of production of any particular video film will normally come to about one million Naira, which is the equivalent of say a little over US\$10,000. Is that the case?

HU: No. It is no longer possible to produce a video film for one million Naira even if the producer does not want to pay anybody. When I was producing my film, *End of the Wicked*, I told my producer that we should try doing just that. He agreed. He said to me, "Yes, we should try this one first." So I didn't pay him but it did not work. If you want to pay a director, a good director, to get out a good job for you, you must think of paying between N350, 000 and N400, 000. Some directors will not collect that amount. They will demand more. With that amount for the payment of the director gone, what is left to play with if we are basing the budget on 1million Naira. Nobody can produce with one million Naira today—not even if you are shooting with the ordinary vhs technology. Of course, there are other problems that come with shooting the story too! Surely, there is no film that you can produce with 1 million Naira, not even 1.8

million Naira. Even when we used Church members who come with their own costumes and when the use of the camera was the only thing we had to pay for, it was still not possible. With *Magic Money*, our first real professionally-made video film, I sat down with the director and made a proper budget. When the budget came to about N3 million, I said to him that I was not going to do it anymore. After a little persuasion, I agreed to go along with him but guess what, the final cost of making this video film eventually came to about N3.4m or so.

OO: Do you know of any Nigerian home video film that has come up to the N10m production budget mark?

HU: Yah, there is one that I know of. The production crew exhausted that ten million Naira mark and it was still not completed. The video film is called *The Return*. The crew and director came to Calabar, and stayed three weeks. The hotel bills were staggering. They came from Lagos with seventy something people, all of them artists. They wanted to film at the Old Calabar area. In fact, their hotel bills alone almost drove them out of business. In one of the two hotels they stayed, they were asked to pay up to one million Naira. Yet, they couldn't finish the shooting of the film. They actually have not finished till today. They told me that they still need about N7 million to conclude the production. In the meantime, they have spent over ten million.

OO: But is this film shot on video or celluloid?

HU: It is on celluloid. They want to be the first producers of English film on celluloid.

OO: How do you fund your films? How do you find money to do your films?

HU: What I do is that I just ask the marketers to get me some money when I am short of money and they often give to me. When these marketers give you money be sure that they must take some interest on the money they advance to the producer. You know, they are businessmen. When the movie is out, I return the money taken from the marketer. If I owe say a million Naira, and I am supposed to give the marketer twenty thousand copies of the jacket as his part of the deal to offset the money I got from him/her, I give ten thousand more of the jackets so he or she can sell and take out the extra money that I got from him or her. This is how I deal with my marketer.

OO: Are you satisfied with the work you have done in the industry so far?

HU: Yah, well, I wouldn't say I am satisfied because I have done only five movies¹⁰ and I need to do more. Maybe I need to do a better job than what I have done. The only satisfaction I derive at the moment is that the message of my video films is reaching a lot of people and there are a lot of responses, especially directed to the Church. That encourages me to continue. I think, however, that the climax of my satisfaction will be when we penetrate other countries and when we see the positive responses from these countries, which our movies are making. So far, it has been quite encouraging.

OO: Thank you very much.

¹⁰ At the time of the interview, Helen Ukpabio had done five video films: *Power to Bind*, *Magic Money*, *End of the Wicked*, *Holy Crime* and *Highway to the Grave*.