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UNIT 2

“NOLLYWOOD: THE REALITIES AND ILLUSIONS OF A FILM INDUSTRY IN TRANSITION

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Abstract
For about twenty years now, the video film industry in Nigeria, christened “Nollywood”, has been a phenomenon which has attracted so much attention of scholars, practitioners, investors and other industry stakeholders across continents. However, in spite of the volume of work already done in this world acclaimed, “Nigerian film industry”, the sector leaves a lot to be desired in terms of authenticity, strength, direction, quality and what is globally obtainable in the practice of the cinema business. This paper discusses the realities of the concept of Nollywood. It surveys its activities and operations, it examines the current situation of the industry vis-a-vis, the mode of production and consumption of the films produced and the attendant challenges, including critical issues such as professional training, infrastructure, ethics, regulation, censorship, classification and so on. The paper also examines the prospects of the industry by taking a view into its future.

Keywords: Cinema, Industry, “Nollywood”, Video, Production, exhibition

Introduction
Because of the interest of this paper, it is pertinent to distinguish between the terms “Film”, “Video”, “Cinema”, “Movie” and “Motion Picture”. This is because though the words could sometimes be used interchangeably, they could also mean slightly different things.

Movie: A film made to be shown at the cinema or on television
Film: A story that is told using sound and moving pictures, shown at a cinema or on television or a light sensitive emulsion on a flexible support on which image focused by a lens may be recorded.

Motion Picture: A series of still photographs on film, projected in rapid succession onto a screen by means of light, that because of an optical phenomenon known as persistence of vision, gives the illusion of actual, smooth and continuous movement. Motion pictures are usually filmed with a motion picture camera, which makes rapid exposures of people or objects in motion, and shown with a motion picture projector, which is usually capable of reproducing sound in synchronism with the visual image. The
motion picture is both a form of mass entertainment and one of the newest of the fine arts.

Cinema: A film-making process in which a motion picture is projected on a screen, with the width of the image two and a half times its height. The French physicist Henri Chrétien (1979-1956) invented the techniques in the late 1920s by which a camera with the addition of a special lens, can ‘squeeze’ a wide picture on to standard 35 millimeter film. Then, by the use of special projection lens, the image is restored to clarity and expanded onto a wide screen without distorting the proportions.

Video: An electromechanical devise that records and reproduces an electronic signal containing audio and video information on to magnetic tape. It is commonly used for recording television productions that are intended for broadcasting to mass audience.

From the foregoing definitions, we come to understand that even though, virtually all the terms talk about capturing a sequence of events and images on a devise and then shown or projected on a screen, the formats, processes and applications reveal certain fundamental differences. For instance, we agree that film is made to be shown both at cinema and on television, but the Cinema is the process in which a series of action is filmed with a motion picture camera, projected on a screen with a motion picture projector, while video is an electromechanical devise that records and reproduces electronic signals containing audio and video information on a magnetic tape commonly used for television productions intended for broadcasting to mass audiences. To this extent, we would like to distinguish clearly between cinematic film and video film in this essay.

**Historical Overview of Film in Nigeria**

Contrary to the widely held motion that “film” in Nigeria is only a recent development because of the current popularity of “Nollywood”, the very first trace of film in Nigeria dates back to 1903, during the British Colonial government with the screening of a documentary at Glover Memorial Hall in Lagos (Opubo, Nwuneli and Oreh (1979); Onookome and Haynes, (1995). Reports have it that this new socio-cultural life was embraced and savoured with euphoria. The colonial government quickly established the Colonial Film Unit (CFU) which covered the World War II and produced some political films which were sent to the colonies to gain loyalty and support. Most of the films shown at this time were basically those from Europe and the United States and the CFU critically censored all films, including those made by Christian missions before they can be screened.

In addition, the colonial government moved to establish total control over entertainment content and outlet with the “Theatre and Public Performance Regulation Ordinance” which states inter-alia, that “it is unlawful to show film in unlicensed premises.” Onookome and
Haynes (1997) see this as a censorship machinery to guide the imperial interests of the colonialists. Ekwuazi (1991) also believes that this was a ploy to feed the people with content that will condition them to western civilization. And since film is basically a cultural phenomenon, this restricting regulation probably accounted for the slow pace of the development of indigenous cinema in Nigeria.

However the activities of the World- acclaimed Yoruba travelling theatres which sustained popular entertainment in Nigeria from the mid 1940s through to the early 1970s were eventually instrumental to the evolution of an indigenous cinema in Nigeria. These travelling theatres led by Hubert Ogunde, according to Clark (1974), Jeyifo (1980), Adedeji and Ekwuazi (1998), toured different towns and cities by taking their productions to the people in the communities. With the advent of television in Nigeria in the late 50s

...many of them took advantage of this medium and engaged in TV Drama which was apparently more convenient, relatively closer to the people (who had TV Sets) and perhaps more lucrative (Fosudo, 1999, p.78)

Corroborating this fact, Abiodun Olayiwola (2011) writes that when the WNTV was established in 1959, “there was a dire need for local content in television programming. Thus, the Yoruba travelling theatre filled the vacuum by creating local material by adapting most of their successful plays on stage to the new medium” (p 187). It was gathered that even though there was a mass movement towards television drama programmes, some of the troupes initially still remained faithful to their touring activities. Jide Kosoko, one of the protégées of the old travelling theatre and a popular contemporary film actor notes in an interview with this writer that:

Television helped the stage initially especially in urban cities because the audience wanted to see live on stage, the actors and actresses they’ve watched on television. (Fosudo, 78).

The overwhelming reception and success of television screen entertainment probably inspired the evolution of the big screen entertainment through the importation of Indian, American and Chinese films into the country in the late 60s and early 70s. This development must have also given the pioneer film makers in Nigeria the impetus to prospect this emerging industry. And so, the first ever Nigerian fictional film, Kongi’s Harvest was produced in 1970 by Francis Oladele (a US trained cinematographer). Haynes (1995, p.6) informs us that Kongi’s Harvest which was an adaptation of a play by Wole Soyinka was directed by Ossie Davies, an African American. Haynes observed however, that this kind of cinema which was an allegory on African despotism was too esoteric and intellectual for the emerging film audience at that time. Thus:-

There were attempts to create a less intellectual cinema which would appeal to a mass audience (p. 7)
Another pioneer film maker in Nigeria, Eddie Ugbohah, then came up with a new approach of making movies influenced by American action, dealing with crime, violence and social issues. In 1976, he produced The Rise and Fall of Dr Oyenusi, followed by The Mask (1979), Oil Doom (1981), Bolus's 80, (1982), The Boy is good, (1982), and The Death of the Black President, (1983). In spite of Eddie Ugbohah’s approach and efforts, these films in the English Language medium did not quite succeed in making the desired impact and creating a mass audience for the locally made films in the same way the Indian, Chinese and American films, filled the cinema houses with enthusiastic audience in the early 70s.

However, one major factor in the eventual development of indigenous popular cinema is the activities of Ola Balogun, another pioneer Nigerian film maker who moved in the direction of working with artists from the Yoruba travelling theatre. Jonathan Haynes (1995, p.8) confirms this when he says “The Yoruba films grew straight out of the Yoruba travelling theatre,” most of whom were gradually abandoning their touring activities for the lure of television screens. Ola Balogun’s first film Ajani Ogun (1977), produced with Duro Ladipo and his troupe was a box office hit. This, according to Adesanya (1997)

Opened the flood gates to local film production and led to a new career for travelling theatre troupes (p.14).

Ola Balogun also worked with Hubert Ogunde and Moses Olaiya with such hit films as, Ogunde’s Aiye (1979), Jasesini (1980), Aropin ‘N” Tenia (1982) and Ayanmo (1988), while those of Moses Olaiya (aka, Baba Sala) include Orun Mooru (1982), Are Agbaye (1984), and Mosebolatan (1986). A host of other Yoruba travelling theatre cum actor-managers also joined the race, such as Ade Afolayan’s Kadara (1981) and Taxi Driver (1983); Ishola Ogunsola’s Efusetan Aniwura (1982), to mention a few.

Other notable figures and film producers apart from the travelling theatre troupes at that time include Ladi Ladebo, Brendan Shehu, Afolabi Adesanya, Saddiq Balewa, etc. It should be noted however, that the Yoruba travelling theatre films continued to dominate the commercial cinema market partly because of the followership they had built over the years through their travelling theatre productions. This was also strengthened by their appearance and popularity on television screens, and the fact that the content of their films are folkloric and culturally oriented, with varied themes such as love, witchcraft, inter tribal and community clashes, etc. In addition, these troupes adopted the method of travelling with their films with projectors, the same way they travelled with their indigenous live travelling theatre productions. In an interview with Ukadike, quoted from Afolabi Adesanya (1997), Eddie Ugbohah affirmed that he himself had to change and adopt the Yoruba film tradition because of its cultural relevance and acceptance, and also because it is largely apolitical. In his words:

The Yoruba theatre/film genre does not satisfy my creative impulse, but I have been making money from it. My last four Yoruba language films have been big box office hits (p.14)
Also drawing his example from the practice of cinema, even in other parts of Africa such as Senegal and Kenya, Shaka (2004, p.28) in his essay “Towards a definition of African Cinema” argues that for a film to qualify as an African film, its primary audience must be African and this must be inscribed in the very conception and textual positioning of the broad range of African subjects, identities and social experiences, and its director must be an African. He therefore submits that though this is arguable:

the historically indisputable core of African cinema is made up of films employing indigenous African languages as media of filmic expression (p.29)

In the same vein, affirming that cinema practice responds to the yearnings of the people, Onookome (1995,p. 65) notes that:

The hope of a truly National cinema lies with indigenous cinema, a form dictated by its audience originating from its cultures and made by those who live the cultural practice of this audience. Yoruba Cinema qualifies in this regard. In the film produced by those Yoruba filmmakers, we are not just led into a created culture; rather, we experience a culture, pure, authentic and perhaps animistic.

The Collapse of Celluloid Film Productions

Celluloid films reigned in Nigeria between late 70s and the 80s, and by 1992, many of the independent cum professional filmmakers including the indigenous travelling theatre producers have crashed out of the business of celluloid film production, partly because of the structural adjustment economic policy of the Babangida’s administration (in the 80s) which banned importation of foreign goods and items in favour of local productions, and also due to lack of corresponding distribution and exhibition infrastructure to support the growing industry. Adesanya (1997. P.14) informs us that prior to the establishment of the Nigerian film corporation lab and sound dubbing studio facilities in Jos at about 1992, the production and post-production overheads had become prohibitively high because they had to be paid for in British pounds Sterling or US Dollars. This burden was further increased by the unsympathetic entertainment tax collected on indigenous films and the lack of native or resident distributors to purchase the rights of the feature films. As a result, most filmmakers were unable to recoup enough money to cover production cost and pay back investors.

However, in order to beat the escalating cost of production and lack of profitable returns on investment, the travelling theatre practitioners – cum film producers adapted the reversal film stock for mainstream feature film making, in spite of its disastrous consequences. Adesanya (1997) reports that

...when they emptied Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) of its reversal film stock and chemicals, they settled for Video tapes! (15)
The Emergence and Popularity of the Video Film

The origin of the Video Film revolution in Nigeria is commonly traced to the release of Living in Bondage produced by Kenneth Nnebue in 1992, but with the foregoing historical antecedents, it is very clear that this claim is contentious. Some scholars such as Onuzulike (2009) and Ebewo (2007) in their respective essays “The Birth of Nollywood: The Nigerian Film industry” and “The Emerging Video Film Industry in Nigeria,” posit that it was an Igbo language production, Living in Bondage (1992) that ushered in the birth of “Nollywood”, whereas Adesanya (1997), Jonathan Haynes and Onookome Okome (1997) and later Ajetunmobi (2002) and Shaibu (2010) all observe that video productions in Nigeria started in the late 80s, not in the early 1990s as claimed. Haynes and Okome (1997) in their easy “Evolving Popular Media: Nigerian Video Film” write:

Yoruba travelling theatre artistes began making video films in 1988. They conceived of video simply as the cheapest possible way of producing audio visual material for projection. This was the culmination of a process of adopting progressively cheaper media as the economy deteriorated. They had turned from 35mm film to 16mm, then to reversal film stock or shooting on video and blowing it up to 16mm. (pp. 23-24)

In the same vein, Shaibu Hussein (2010) in his book Moviedom: The Nollywood Narratives, where he documented stories, biographies and clips on the pioneers of the industry traced the origin of Video Film in Nigeria to late Muyideen Alade Aromire and described him as the “Father of Nollywood”. Shaibu discloses that it was late Aromire who pioneered the Yoruba video firm, even though his trail-blazing effort witnessed a wave of criticism from his senior colleagues who felt that the arrival of the video might lower the high quality standard of celluloid productions and encourage infiltration of the industry by mediocres. Shaibu notes that Ekuin was Aromire’s debut as video producer, actor and director, shot and packaged with a little over N27,000 and released in 1987.

The actor and content provider made fortune and fame with that effort. After the premiere at Super Cinema in Lagos, a lot of the practitioners then sought for and congratulated Aromire. They were lavish with thanks to him for opening the doors of opportunities for them to at least break even. (2)

Another vital foundation of video film productions and “Nollywood”, according to Shaibu (2010, p.4) is Yekini Oyedele. Referring to him as a foremost marketer as far as distribution and sales of movies are concerned, he notes that Oyedele started off selling foreign films packaged in VHS tapes. Apart from this, he engages in mass dubbing of cassettes used both in recording social events and in packaging and selling television drama series by some theatre artistes and troupes such as Akin Ogungbe, late Ayinla Olumegbon and Jimoh Aliu. He reveals that:

A chance meeting with him (Oyedele) and members of a theatre company in 1990 led him to fund the production of Ilara, which he claimed was the first
home video in Yoruba language that was released to be solid in stalls as against Aromire’s *Ekun*, that was produced to be screened in theatre (pp.4-5).

Oyedele claimed that the first 300 copies that was pushed into the market sold out in less than a week, and that the success of *Ilara* in the market was what spurred other producers including Kenneth Nnebu to invest in video productions. Kenneth Nnebu was reported to have funded a Yoruba video film titled *Aje Ni Iya mi* in 1991, and that several other titles like Aromire’s *Esan* and *Idunnu* (1990), Jagua’s *Bottom Power* (1990), Akin Ogungbe’s *Agbebo Adie* (1991) produced by Oyedele, and even Adebayo Salami led Awada Kerikeri Organisation’s *Asewo to re Mecca* (1991) all predated the production of *Living in Bondage* in 1992. (Shaibu, 2010, p. 2-7).

One major contribution of Kenneth Nnebu to the video film industry which must be acknowledged, is the opening up of the theatrical space and the video film market to the Igbo audience which elicited the eventual expansion of video film production in English Language. This fact, no doubt, deserves acknowledgement, because it transformed the hitherto regional theatrical cum film entertainment activities of the Yoruba, to become a more or less national phenomenon, especially with the release of the first English language video film, *Glamour Girls*, in 1994.

One of the major factors responsible for the huge success and popularity of *Living in Bondage* (1992) and later *Glamour Girls* (1994) was the engagement of popular Nigerian soap opera actors who ruled the TV screens in the 80s and early 90s. During this period, soap operas like Laolu Oguniyi’s *For Better, for Worse*, Peter Igbo’s *Cockrow at Dawn*, Lola Fani Kayode’s *Mirror in the Sun*, John Ndanusa’s *Supple Blues*, Matt Dadzie’s *Riddles and Hopes*, Zeb Ejiro’s *Ripples*, Amaka Igwe’s *Checmate* and Charles Owoyemi’s *Fortunes* to mention a few were the toast of Nigerian television viewers who were weekly glued to their TV sets to watch their favourite stars. These soap operas featured a fresh generation of theatre trained and seasoned actors such as Taiwo Ajayi Lycette, Pete Edochie, Olu Jacobs, Francis Duru, late Sam Loco Efe, Zulu Adigwe, Richard Mofe Damijo, Ego Boyo, Babara Soky, Lanre Balogun, Bob Manuel Udokwu, Sola Fosudo, Kenneth Okonkwo, Clarion Chukwurah, Liz Benson, Justus Esiri, Kanayo O. Kanayo, Joke Silver, Fred Amata, Zack Amata, Keppy Ekpeyong Bassey, Zack Orji and a host of others, who were later responsible for the mass acceptance and popularity of the new video drama entertainment packaged directly for home viewing. Also confirming this view, Shaibu (2010) writes:

It was the bold ambition of using professional actors most of whom had their breaks on television and the use of choice locations, appropriate props and costumes that made most movie goers forget in a hurry that there had been a few earlier efforts on home video, like Nnebu’s funded *Aje ni Iya mi* and *Ekun* by Aromire (30)
The Concept of Nollywood
There is no denying the fact that “Nollywood” has become established as the given name for the Nigerian movie industry because it has been described as irresistible and expressing powerful aspirations by the people in the industry, their fans and the media, as an industry that can take its place on the world scene and appeal to international audiences. (Haynes 2005). It is true that the industry is highly productive, churning out according to reports over 1,000 films every year (Oni 2010). It is also true that the industry is a great source of employment for several Nigerian youths and practitioners across the African continent. In other words, there are huge economic benefits in the industry. There are also social and cultural benefits. However, certain questions must asked and some issues examined in order to determine the authenticity, effectiveness and relevance of this industry on the global scene.

For instance, does Nigeria really have a true film industry? Are there film and cinema infrastructures in Nigeria? Does the drama shot with video cameras, mass produced in VCDs, and DVDs, sold in market stalls and sometimes hawked on the streets, enjoy the same cinema status as the films produced with Cine Cam and shown in cinema theatres? Secondly, is the name “Nollywood” a concept, philosophy, or is there any locational identity for Nollywood, the same way we have Hollywood in California in the United States and Bollywood in Mumbai, India?. Of curious importance is the fact that the name Nollywood was not even a creation of Nigerians. Oni (2010) reports:

Strangely, what the industry is now called was apparently first used in 2003 in New York times by Matt Steinglass who for want of a name for the emerging video film industry simply used “N” to connote Nigeria and called it Nollywood after the American Hollywood and Indian Bollywood.

Some people have argued that there is nothing in a name and that Nollywood is beyond locational considerations, but we maintain that any building that has foundational and structural defects is sure to pose some dangers on those who inhabit it. That is why Nollywood seems to be in perpetual search of definition and direction. Even the linguistic dilemma is a subject of debate to scholars and stakeholders of African cinema. For instance, most of the early celluloid film makers and the indigenous video film producers employ the use of indigenous African languages as media of filmic expression with subtitles in the inherited European languages, though this is most often, poorly done. Those who employ the use of English language directly commit a lot grammatical blunders which still leaves the issue of language in filmic expression as an area of serious concern to scholars and practitioners. In addition, most of the characters currently occupying the centre stage and playing major roles in Nollywood either as actors, directors, scriptwriters, leaders of guilds etc, are people who have not received relevant education either in the performing arts or film studies. And this has had adverse effects on the content and quality of most of the video films produced in recent times, in addition to the general lack of direction for the industry.

A curious survey of most Nollywood video films such as Battle for Pride, Dirty Secret, Money for Love, etc, showcase violence and crass immorality, sex, nudity, fetish practices, dirty and
offensive language an so forth. Many of the stories in Nollywood films are re-cycled; most of the titles are mundane and pedestrian and this is basically because most of the practitioners are industry dabblers.

The Nation newspapers on Sunday 3rd May, 2009, reports that nudity is used in Nollywood video films in a purely sexual way only as marketing tool. Unfortunately, this strategy has been more counterproductive than effective. Apart from giving the country an image not too deserving, the actual marketing and distribution of the video films has been fraught with insincerity on the part of the video marketers. There is also the perennial problem of piracy and several other shortcomings such as ethical standards, mediocrity, tribalism, infrastructure, lack of training and effective regulation in state policy as well as financing, all of which have been the bane of meaningful development in the industry, thereby disallowing it to transit from video to cinema.

Furthermore, there are reports of an unofficial rating of Nigeria as the 3rd largest film producing country in the world, placing America’s Hollywood and India’s Bollywood ahead as first and second respectively. This is another area of contradiction and delusion in view of the fact that the yardstick and criteria for the measurement and rating is questionable. This is so because film and cinema practice in the two countries rated first and second and indeed in other parts of Europe and America is not the same as Nigeria. In fact, in our estimation, if the rating is based on the production of video films, mass dubbed in DVDs and sold in stalls, Nigeria will come first, but if the rating is based on the production of cinematic films, meant for exhibition in cinema theatres, then Nigeria’s position would be abysmal.

**Conclusion**

This essay is intended to clear the air about the contention on the origin of video film in Nigeria by establishing the fact that the Yoruba travelling theatre practitioners were indeed the first to produce video films in the country in the late 80s, when they couldn’t continue with the production of celluloid films which they also pioneered in the 70s, although the production of *Living in Bondage* in 1992 expanded the space, gaining popularity for the industry, and establishing greater commercial activities in subsequent years. A lot has been achieved over the years in terms of output, annual turnover, international recognition, etc, yet, the true Nigerian film industry has not really arrived; it is still in a process of evolution and transition. While some might be persuaded that it is better to come to terms with “video”, the truth of the matter is that the production techniques of video are inferior to those of celluloid and lack the dynamics that has made film making an intimate experience the world over. One then hopes, like several other stakeholders that, in the not-too-distant future, an authentic film industry will return to Nigeria with the introduction of homemade cinema in celluloid format or other digital technology formats meant for exhibitions in cinema theatres.
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