



NOLLYWOOD

THE BIRTH OF NOLLYWOOD: THE NIGERIAN MOVIE INDUSTRY

UCHENNA ONUZULIKE

Nigeria's film industry, which has evolved into video form, is a fecund subject for research and scholarship; hence, it is something to write home about. "Nollywood" is the name given to Nigerian movie industry. The word is of uncertain origin, but is imitative of Hollywood in the same way that "Bollywood" was derived from joining Bali and Hollywood to describe the film industry of India. The Nigerian home video industry has been linked to or compared with that of the more developed Bollywood spin-off in India. For example, at the heart of both industries is the experience of nationality in the diaspora, which is accentuated for Indians and, now, for Nigerians as well.

As Haynes asserts, the term "video" implies something between television and cinema.¹ He argues that, "The study of Nigerian video films does not fit easily into the structures of African film criticism in still another way. Studies of African film have tended to be pan-African, for marketing as well as ideological reasons."² Pearson notes that Nigeria is one of only three countries, along with India and the U.S., where domestically produced movies dominate local viewing.

THE HISTORY OF NIGERIAN FILM INDUSTRY

Nigeria's film history can be partitioned into four eras: the Colonial period: 1903-1960; the Independence period: 1960-1972; the Indigenization Decree period: 1972-1992; and the Nollywood period, 1992-Present. The Colonial era begins with the first exhibition of film in Nigeria in August 1903 at the Glover Memorial Hall in Lagos. These films were largely documentaries. The motive for introducing the cinema to Nigeria by the British was largely political and, to a lesser extent, social.

In the Independence period, the Nigerian Federal and States Film Unit replaced the colonial unit, but similarly concentrated on the production of mostly documentary and newsreel films. During the Indigenization Decree period, Nigerian filmmakers tried in vain to make successful films, as the Nigerian film industry attempted to promote the national in counterpoint to the influence of Lebanese and Indians who dominated the distribution and exhibition film sector in Nigeria.



The Nollywood era emerged as a result of several factors, one being economics. As noted earlier, no one can claim how the name "Nollywood" was conceptualized nor whether it was first used to describe the Nigerian movie industry. According to Haynes, the term was invented by a foreigner and first appeared in a 2002 article by Matt Steinglass in *The New York Times*.⁴

An Ibo-language production called *Living in Bondage*, produced by Ken Nnebue in 1992, ushered in the birth of Nollywood. The film tells the story of a man who signs a pact with the devil to get rich and portrays the practices of witchdoctors and the desperation of their clients. It was a big hit and a genre called "juju" emerged

as a result of the success of *Living in Bondage*. Kwabena-Esem defines juju as a cult that is consulted for one reason or another when needed. It is largely psycho-medical buttressed with the power of the supernatural.⁵ *Living in Bondage* suggests that a lot of the wealth of Nigeria's new rich came from diabolical practices that resonated in a society of pervasive inequality. Most Nigerian movies deal with social and moral issues, and the themes addressed include betrayal, infidelity, love, and revenge. The most popular genres include love, romance, history, folklore, witchcraft, juju, and drama.

NOLLYWOOD

Nigerians first began making movies on their own during the oil-boom of the '70s. Paradoxically, however, it took an economic collapse in the country for the film industry to take off. By 1990, the once vibrant film theatre scene declined, pummeled by years of military dictatorship. Moreover, shooting on celluloid had become unaffordable, and the nascent film industry made its last commercial feature in 1991.⁶ And with cities plagued by violent crime, few people wanted to risk a nighttime outing to see a movie.

Tucker observed that the birth of Nollywood in Lagos during the early '90s introduced films by and about Africans marketed to a local audience.⁷ Given their raw energy and the speed in which they are shot, filmed, and sold, these films, Tucker suggests, constitute a grass-roots creative revolution on a continent where stories have rarely been committed to film.

Because the cost of celluloid is prohibitive, Nigerian producers resorted to video. Indeed, video created an open door



for mass production. However, the quality of their productions were inferior, albeit cost effective, and according to Adesanya lack the inherent human touch that has made filmmaking an intimate experience for the filmmaker.⁸

As video technology has become more reliable and less expensive, videotape has increasingly become important to news and documentary production, in corporate communications, and in consumer products.⁹ Videotape's picture quality has also improved greatly in recent years to the point where low-budget feature films like *The Blair Witch Project* are shot on video and transferred to film for theatrical distribution.

According to Owens-Ibici, although the National Film Corporation (NFC) was subsequently able to establish a laboratory in Jos, Nigeria, it did not reduce its external dependence.¹⁰ This means that the cost advantage of producing and processing film locally may, only have been reduced marginally, if at all. Even then, the NFC only successfully produced its first feature film *Kulba Na Barna* in June 1993. The boom, however, of video films had caused a general drop in quality and fuelled intense competition to promote their commercial appeal in Nigeria. Nonetheless, despite the powers conferred on it by statute, the censors appeared unable to stem the tide of commercialism in such a way that might effectively promote the country's rich cultural heritage.

Finally, the Nigerian film industry addresses social conscience and contributes to world culture. It is my firm conviction that the film industry of any country should promote the well being of humanity, which is an issue that is increasingly critical given the way in which movies play an ever-greater and more important role in society. Films in Nigeria are produced on comparatively low budgets but are extremely popular and have a huge influence and impact on popular opinion and culture there. Furthermore,

they are shot in English and in three of the major indigenous languages of Nigeria: Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa. In this way, films are a tool that Nigerians employ to promote their cultural values and widen their influ-

"The Nigerian film industry addresses social conscience and contributes to world culture. It is my firm conviction that the film industry of any country should promote the well being of humanity, which is an issue that is increasingly critical given the way in which movies play an ever-greater and more important role in society. Films in Nigeria are produced on comparatively low budgets but are extremely popular and have a huge influence and impact on popular opinion and culture there."

ence to other Africans. The birth of Nollywood, which was a result of necessity and video accessibility over celluloid and other economic considerations, has opened an avenue for Nigerian filmmakers to express not only their own cultural heritage but also that of Africa as a whole.

References

Adesanya, A. (2000). Nigeria video films. In Jonathan Hayes (Ed.), *From film to video* (pp. 37-50). Ohio: Ohio University Center for International Studies.

Haynes, J. (Ed.). (2000). *Nigeria video films*. Ohio: Ohio University Center for International Studies.

Kwabena-Esslem, N. A. (2006). A new look at juju. *Djembe Magazine*. Retrieved July 7, 2006 from <http://www.afgen.com/juju.html>

Owens-Ibici, N. (2005) How video films developed in Nigeria. Retrieved October, 15 2006 from http://www.wacc.org.uk/wacc/publications/media_development/archive/1998_1/how_video_films_developed_in_nigeria

Person, B. (July 9, 2001). Rebounding biz goes straight to video. Retrieved 24, January 2006, from <http://find.galegroup.com/itx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T002&prodId=GRGM&docId=A76654593&s>

Thomas, O. A. (2006). *Digital non-linear editing*. Boston: Focal Press. Retrieved on October 7, 2006 from <http://cinemasupplies.stores.yahoo.net/dignoned.html>

Tucker, N. (2005, February). Nollywood, in a starring role: Nigeria's thriving film industry gets a showcase at AFI Silver. *The Washington Post Online*. Retrieved 22, December 22, 2006 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A66-2005Feb4.html>

Uchenna Omzulike is a graduate student in Communication at Clark University

