

THE CITY | URBAN STUDIES

The Other Tinseltown

By PAUL BERGER FEB. 20, 2009

THEY come in boldly colored DVD boxes bearing titles like “Hidden Tears” and “Crime of Love.” They are the products of Nollywood, as the Nigerian film industry is affectionately known. And huge numbers of these films can be found in a tiny nondescript storefront on 165th Street near the Grand Concourse in the West Bronx.

There are holes in the ceiling, the linoleum floor sags, and handwritten signs plaster the walls. Yet, this ramshackle space of less than 200 square feet is home to a seven-year-old wholesale and retail business called African Movies Mall, which claims to be the city’s oldest and largest distributor of Nigerian movies.

Hollywood may take the spotlight at Sunday night’s Academy Awards presentation, but a little-known film industry is gaining in popularity. During the past 15 years, Nollywood has become the third-largest movie industry, behind Hollywood and Bollywood.

Rabiu Mohammed, the owner of African Movies Mall, says his inventory runs to 300,000 African DVDs, most of them stored in a sprawling space above his store and at four other places around the city.

And while the city’s Nigerian population numbers only about 16,000, according to

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Among Mr. Mohammed's customers the other day was the owner of an African products store in Rockland County who had driven about 40 minutes to buy about 50 DVDS with just two titles, "Scorned" and "Life and Living It." Mr. Mohammed, who was sold out of the movies, encouraged her to return later in the week.

Another regular, Fauziya Tijani, the owner of One Stop African Caribbean Market in West Brighton, Staten Island, buys 300 to 500 movies a week from Mr. Mohammed.

"You get hooked on a really good story and you want to watch more," said Ms. Tijani, who was born in Togo, in West Africa. "It's like a soap opera."

Shot using digital video rather than film, Nollywood's products look like home movies. But starring in such a movie can catapult a Nigerian actor into instant celebrity.

"People invite the actors to New York for a vacation, and they come to my store for signings," Mr. Mohammed said proudly. "Sometimes I have close to 200 people trying to get in here."

At the end of March, his retail business, squeezed for space, will move into a former tire shop two doors down on 165th Street. The current shop will be devoted solely to his booming wholesale business.

"Nollywood movies don't have a budget for technology," Mr. Mohammed said. "But they do have stories to tell."

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