

## Introduction to Nollywood Gary Kafer

One of the largest filmmaking industries in the world started out as a mistake. In 1992 when Kenneth Nnebue, an Igbo electronics dealer based in Lagos, found himself with an overstock of blank cassettes imported from Taiwan, he decided to sell them with an added bonus – a movie. Having already invested himself in the Yoruba travelling theater video productions several years prior, Nnebue was no stranger to filmmaking, and decided to use this knowledge to make a quick buck. With a shoestring budget and a slew of non-professional actors (starring the now famous Kanayo O. Kanayo), he produced with director Chris Obi Rapu *Living In Bondage*, an Igbo-language and English subtitled film about a greedy man who kills his wife in a ritual sacrifice in order to earn great wealth, only to be haunted by her ghost. Distributed on VHS, the film was wildly successful, selling over 950,000 copies, and effectively announcing the emergence of a brand new film industry: Nollywood.

Thus goes the mythic origin of Nigeria's video revolution. Yet, the "mistake" of Nollywood should not be overstated. Resulting from a confluence of economic, political, technological, and cultural forces, the scene was staged for a massive video explosion long before Nnebue's stroke of genius. Following the 1970 oil boom, Nigeria accumulated considerable foreign debts to fund its large-scale infrastructural projects. Unable to keep up with the falling price of oil, the country proved unable to pay off its loans and spiraled into a failing economy. In 1986, Nigeria engaged in a structural adjustment program (SAP) implemented by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to focus on domestic productions and curtail dependence on exported oil revenues. While the intent was to liquidate the country's external debts and introduce the 'developing nation' into the global market economy, the SAP's neoliberal strategies brought about a new era of neocolonialism. With such conditions that devalued the Naira and privatized state-owned enterprises, the SAP in fact negatively impacted vulnerable social groups in the nation and intensified a serious decline in the economy.

While feature filmmaking in Nigeria can be traced to the 1970s, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, Nigerian cinema was largely invalidated by the worsening fiscal circumstances imposed by the SAP. At the same time that the cost of celluloid prohibited production companies from creating content, many filmmakers fled the country for London and New York because of the concurrent military dictatorship. Due to the combination of a weakened economy and government corruption, crime rates soared, making many urban centers incredibly unsafe, thus preventing movie theaters from diving traffic through their box offices. It is in this climate that Nnebue capitalized on the emerging video technology to establish the national market for commercially packaged video films.

Over the course of two decades, the video revolution in Nigeria was met with similar movement across West Africa, increasing the demand for Nollywood products with audiences across Africa and in the Diaspora. Such extensive activity was brought under the radar of a 2009 UNESCO report, which determined Nollywood as the second

most prolific film industry in the world in terms of number of films produced trailing behind Bollywood and followed by Hollywood in third place. Shockingly, the American commercial motion picture sector, which for so long has been considered dominant in world cinema, was eclipsed by a mere twenty-year old film industry, one marked by ghastly low budgets, cheap visual effects, and a terribly inefficient distribution system. Consequently, the world turned its eye on Nigeria in order to make sense of its populist narratives and aesthetics. In tandem with the hesitant introduction of Nollywood video films into international film festivals, film studies in academic institutions as well took up the project of incorporating the Nigerian video industry into its purview.

Perhaps the most pressing question following Nollywood's mapping onto the atlas of world cinema is: what will happen to Nigeria's video industry? This isn't as much an aesthetic or technological question as much as it is an economic and political one. Just as Nollywood is passing into the wave of New Nigerian Cinema, a movement attempting to translate the cheap video narratives into polished exportable theatrical releases, a primary concern for film studies is how to celebrate Nigerian voices in the Western sphere and on international platforms without altering, damaging, or otherwise overshadowing the ideological position of the video films and the possibilities of spectatorship with African audiences at home and in the Diaspora. Certainly, the Nigerian video industry requires a large amount of international aid in order to construct a solid infrastructure for exhibition, schematize proper distribution channels, protect against the detrimental effects of piracy, secure funding for higher quality equipment and training, and allow theatrical releases at home and on international festival platforms. Yet, if global organizations attempt to provide the needed improvements in the conditions for national video production, then we might observe the same tendency of neocolonialism epitomized in the SAP's intervention. It is in this sense that Pierre Barrot warns: "If the Nigerian video industry is to evolve by facing up to the outside world, it will do so through its own expansion beyond its frontiers, and not by the occasional incursion of foreign professionals into Nigeria" (Barrot 134).

The same air of caution surrounds much of the discourse of Nollywood Studies in academic humanist traditions. Shot on video with little to no budget, financed by philistine merchants rather than production companies, and dispersed through black markets on VCD for screenings in corner shops and living rooms, Nollywood imagines an alternative model of film production, distribution, and exhibition to major industries like Hollywood, thus offering a counter-narrative to film cultures built from highly systemic ways of creating and seeing cinema. It is in this sense that Nollywood demands a reconceptualization of the basic tenants of film studies in order to understand how its images are produced and circulated among various audiences. Likewise, Nollywood poses a challenge to pejorative connotations surrounding digital technology, which over the past several decades has inspired an entire discourse concerning the 'death of cinema,' to which the Nigerian filmmaker Tunde Kelani responds: "Perhaps we should begin a process of technical re-orientation before we lose our way completely. The digital revolution if embraced could help us to overcome the divide between us and the developed nations" (Kelani 92). The same concern also emerges in the guise of Afro-pessimism, a discourse coloring study in a range of disciplines from anthropology and political science to economics and even film studies, which attempts to 'understand' the

cultures of various African societies as a function of difference from the developed world inherited by the political ontology of slavery and colonialism translated into the rhetoric of neoliberalism and late capitalism. It is here that the term “Nollywood” reflects the necessity for global audiences to recognize the Nigerian video industry in terms of, and in relation to, the seemingly normative system of production, distribution, and exhibition crystallized in Western film cultures.

The intent of this website is to open up space for a new dialogue between scholars and industry practitioners to appreciate, support, and learn from the Nigerian video films and to move beyond reductive knowledges of African culture and the Diaspora bracketed by the dominant perspective of Hollywood. In his article “What Is to Be Done?: Film Studies and Nigerian and Ghanaian Videos,” Jonathan Haynes, the leading scholar of the West African video revolution, argues that simply studying Nigerian video films as thematic citations in the scope of African culture and society fails to confront the unique formal properties of the videos and how they intersect with the shape and history of Nigeria’s film culture and models of spectatorship. To this end, he promotes the full integration of West African videos into film studies via such conceptual apparatuses as genre, auteurism, and film history and preservation. Through these methodological lenses, one may begin to not only study the Nigerian video industry, but reconceptualize already established hierarchies of knowledge structuring our understanding of the atlas of world cinema, which circulates in academic and popular discourse.

#### Works Cited

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