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*Full Length Research Paper*

# The Nollywood Narrative: Africa's Golden Goose on a Global Spotlight?

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**Nollywood has come to stay. The industry keeps graduating from an emerging *Nigerian toddler*, to a *robust global adult* around the African continent – thus, flaunting its tentacles across other continents of the world. Some critics claim it emerged as a response of early film makers to the misrepresentation of African systems by colonial imperialists to which the latter produced films from an African perspective to correct the anomaly. Whether the “cinematic corrigendum” or silver screen decolonizing factors are anything to go by, the fact is, Nigerian home movies have made their way across the globe. Occupying third place after America’s Hollywood and India’s Bollywood, Nollywood has hit the global spotlight. Using the conceptual method, this essay went memory lane to view the initial stimulus, currents and cross-currents of the Nigerian motion-picture industry. It equally probed the factors that enhance as well as mar the growth of African cinema, the Nigerian version. It anticipated the scholarly strides of a “local” story turn *global*.**

**Keywords:** Silver, screen, heartbeat, Nollywood, industry, movies, African, drama

## INTRODUCTION

It is alluded that Africans are story tellers. Wherever they come from and whoever tells them, “good stories have energy within them that can propel and influence man’s emotions” (Egere, 2012, p.199) - they help to reinvent and recreate events in people’s minds. African stories constitute the incubator of *African drama*. Given this allusion, it takes good listening for the *story-teller* and his *audience* to relate. It is in this light that Egere states that “stories without audience are futile like a dead lion” (2012, p. 199). As such, African para-social relations comes to the fore when audio-visual presentations are displayed for both auditive and visual purposes in private as well as public usage(s). The audience/listener impact induced by the intrigues of the silver screen makes many clued to Nigerian home movies. Perhaps the gradual departure from the *tales by the moon light* to a metamorphosed *tale by the movies* underscores the

relevance of the movie culture in our clime. Therefore, *talking movies* is not strange to our sensibilities.

It is with this understanding that one asserts that the entertainment industry in Nigeria has come to stay. Credit must be given to the phenomenal industry, Nollywood. Today, against all cynicism from film critics at home and abroad, it is feeding Digital Satellite Television’s African Magic Movie Channel. Although Nigeria is yet to have a big screen or television village, her movie industry has taken its place with the likes of America’s Hollywood and India’s Bollywood. This is courtesy of the diligence, ingenuity and patriotic efforts of artistes plus the teaming viewers often glued to their domestic screens, without whom the industry would be out of business (Dyikuk, December 10, 2012, p. 66-67).

From its emergence till now, the industry has encountered hiccups and challenges. It is with this in

mind that this article hopes to navigate through the conceptual method in attempting to answer the questions of: when and how Nollywood come about, the affronts and accolades accorded the industry, its global outreach and further prospects. Haven sailed across the dynamics of academic postulations, this piece hopes to land safely ashore the possibilities of further researches and promptings about what one would refer to as, *the heartbeat of African cinema*.

### **Nollywood, the incubating Stage**

The name Nollywood makes *noise*. This popularity demands an introspection on why the appellation was so given. The simplest explanation could be because the American movie industry is called Hollywood - a district of Los Angeles, California, which lent its name to the American motion-picture industry. A name said to have been coined by H. J. White, the "Father of Hollywood" (Gaelyn, 2010). In the same light, Bollywood emerged from *Bombay*, India (The Economist, 2010, p. 85-88). Towing the same lane, "Ghana and Liberia have christened their nascent dream factories *Ghallywood* and *Lolliwood* respectively" (The Economist, 2010). The originator of the Nigerian Nollywood concept may have taught of the great *River Niger* from where the name Nigeria was given by Flora Shaw, wife of the explorer, Sir Fredrick Lord Lugard - After all, our currency is called naira. It therefore makes sense to join the *global-swing* of anything "*wood*." Little wonder artistes of Kano extraction call their Hausa-language film industry, *Kannywood*. Given the exposure and acceptability of the concept within and globally, it is convenient to conclude that Nollywood tickles the fancy of all.

One would have taught that Nigeria's Sports sector will key into the same universal appellations of Spanish *Laliga* and German *Bundesliga*. Fortunately or unfortunately, it is content with Nigerian Premier League. Again, another borrowed concept from United Kingdom's English Premier League, the formers erstwhile *Masters*. This necessary digression gives the foundation of the unfortunate psychic-belief that modelling the West in everything is key to fame and universal acceptance. Conversely, originality pays.

There is the speculation that Nollywood came up as a reaction by early African (Nigerian) film makers who rose up against western imperialism. In their thinking, the colonial overlords had misrepresented Africa to the world by presenting her people as sub-humans/ savage and culture, as *paganic*. Thus, early African film makers like their intellectual negritude counterparts, rose up to present the true picture of Africa to the world. African drama and cinema became the platform for this decolonization process which sought to promote African (Nigerian) identity. This school of thought holds that, it is

this initial stimulus that gave birth to what we have today as Nollywood.

Conversely, Shaka is of the opinion that the use of videocassette recorder (VCR) for private and domestic purposes like wedding, naming, anniversaries and burials ceremonies paved the way for the introduction of the video equipment into the country. He argues that its (video equipment) use as a narrative medium of popular entertainment in Nigeria and other Third World societies grew out of two impulses: "the fascination with modern technology and the creative adaptation of such technology to solving pressing domestic problems, often in manners the original producers of such technological equipment never envisaged" (2003, 41). The estimation is that the negative effects of globalization took its toll on a nation wanting everything new and modern. But how far this will go in solving domestic needs is a bigger puzzle.

The first Nigerian films were produced by filmmakers Ola Balogun and Hubert Ogunde in the 1960s, but they were frustrated by the high cost of film production (Adesokan, 2006). The 1960s showcased television broadcasting in the country and in the 1980s, state-owned stations began broadcasting. Consequently, popular theatre productions were initiated in Lagos which were circulated in video. This gave birth to small-scale informal video trade productions (Cinema of Nigeria).

Scholars pin down the origin and commercial explosion of film production in Nigeria to Kenneth Nnebue's "debut" movie *Living in Bondage* 1 and 11 - an Igbo-language film with English subtitles produced in Onitsha (Mordi and Onu, 1999). Nnebue via his NEK Video Links had earlier produced two Yoruba movies *Aje Ni IyaMi* (1989) and *Ina Ote* (1990). His subsequent movies *Glamour Girls* 1 and 2 (1994) and *True Confession* (1995) hit the new waiting movie market in Nigeria (Shaka, 2003, pp. 44-45).

It should be noted that early African film makers refuse to be associated with what is today Nollywood claiming it went against the currents of the parameters that set the ball rolling - Meaning, the current industry has departed from the vision of the *founding fathers*. Whether this argument holds water is an ongoing debate.

### **Video film technology in Nigeria. Affronts or Accolades?**

The Nigerian film industry is beset by many challenges. The industry did not find delivery easy as the gestation period lasted. The morning sickness and nausea associated with its prenatal period can only be looked back with nostalgia. The factors that marred it from hitting the ground running at its initial stage among others included; political, economic and piracy related matters:

(a) **Political:** Government policies did not allow the safe delivery of the child. What could be termed stillbirth became the portion of the home movie market as

stringent measures stood in the way of providing the laboratory and equipment for film production in Nigeria. It is clear that the Nigerian military government in the late 1980s and early 90s did not support the Nollywood course as opposed to other African countries.

(b) **Economic:** Like the first factor, private investors were not given loans to start up with. The devaluation of the naira by Ibrahim Babangida-led military junta occasioned by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) via the Structural Adjustment programme (Haynes, 1995, p. 1-2) stifled the growth of the industry. Importing equipment into the country became very difficult because of austerity measures (Shaka, 2003, p. 42).

(c) **Piracy:** As a result of the austere nature of things in the country within the time under review, film producers began to employ substandard materials for the production of home movies. These “fake” Compact Discs (CD) had a waiting market since before this time, very few people could afford home video machines. Rental houses saw a huge clientele and video-vendors began to increase in numbers. So long as Nigerians kept buying the pirated CDs, movie producers had a job and kept smiling to the bank. The low cost of this commodity was another big bait for gullible amateur customers who could return, exchange or purchase another CD if it goes bad or cannot play on the video machine.

These initial challenges seem to have prepared the industry for much greater trials. Experts who are insiders or outsiders could sit back and analyse Nollywood from various perspectives. Being on the African continent pegs the ethical principal on African Traditional Values. Be it on the side of censorship or moral safeguards, commentators would have more than enough to say about how Nollywood has feared all these years. Both viewers and academic's criticise Nollywood for these reasons; obscenity, money-mania and sexual exploitation for roles. Other reasons include; lack of technological know-how, lack of government's support/poor investment and brown-envelop/politics:

**Obscenity:** That a good number of new home movies are loaded with obscene scenes is more than obvious. Ezeala observes that “it is very disturbing the level of immoral acts being allowed in the Nigerian movie industry - There is no film, whether comedy or classical, watched in Nigeria that has no sexuality attached to it. The sexuality comes in different forms and constitute obscenity to the watching eyes” (October 21, 2013, p. 61). A classical case in point is that of American-based Nigerian actress Judith Opera Mazagwu popularly known as *Afrocandy* who “...sees herself as a *sex symbol*. This, coupled with her belief that sex sells, may have propelled her into producing her first porn movie where she acted nude. Although a porn movie, *Destructive Instincts* was not her first body-show off. She also exposed vital parts of her body in her video album, *Voodoo/juju woman* and

*Ikebe Squad*” (Eseke, June 24, 2013, p. 13). Such is the sorry-side of some Nigerian movies.

**Money-mania:** It is disheartening that the craze for money has affected the movie industry in terms of time, quality and production. Most producers put pecuniary gains before professionalism (Dyikuk, December 10, 2012, p. 67). It takes ten to fifteen years to produce a movie elsewhere in the world but in Nigeria, movies litter the market like pure water sachets. The commercial side of the screen seems to supersede the success in view – customer's satisfaction is not put into cognizance.

**Sexual exploitation for roles:** Cases abound where actresses are given roles not based on merit/professionalism but on the grounds that they warm the bed of the producer. Many have had to succumb; others who insist on their moral scorecard are victimized or blackmailed. A few have had to speak out. Upcoming artistes are the most vulnerable because they are often naïve about the “game” or are simply too desperate to appear on the screen.

**Lack of technological know-how:** I had earlier decried the technical malfunction of the Nigerian home movie industry in an article; *Let the Movies Tell the Story* thus: “the predictability of the flow of events or roles of the actors in a plot; the length of time spent on each episode sometimes is unnecessarily long” (Dyikuk, December 10, 2012, p. 67).

**Lack of government's support/Poor investment:** In an economy that is not private sector driven but capitalist inclined, no industry will thrive; same with Nigerian movie industry. Government foot-draws as regards funding the arts. This has driven some artistes and producers abroad for greener pastures – a sure case of brain drain. Nigeria is yet to have a big screen or a large television village akin to Hollywood. This lukewarm attitude has equally killed the cinema culture except for these days that new movies are advertised to be televised at the cinema in major Nigerian cities like Lagos, Abuja and Port Harcourt with the hope that the practice is revived. The menacing insecurity challenges staring the country in the face is another monster standing in the way of huge investments in the arts to the pleasurable relaxation of Nigerians at the cinemas.

**Brown-envelop syndrome/Politics:** The brown-envelop now speaks such that instead of producing films that reform society, one finds film producers playing to the gallery. As *willing-tools* in the hands of *politicians*, some artistes and producers are paid to shoot movies that have certain selfish motives. The brown-envelop syndrome has dragged some actors and actresses from their lofty abode of the fourth estate of the realm to the shambles of politics without a soul. Some contested elections, failed and are confused as to their real calling while those still in active politics may never return to the movies.

## Global Nollywood: Echoes of African Magic

Despite the aforementioned affronts on Nollywood, it has held its head high. Just within two decades, Nollywood has hit the global spotlight. Lancelot Idowu, one of the Nigeria's best-known directors bared his mind thus: "Nollywood is the voice of Africa, the answer to CNN." In the same vein, Jean Rouch, a champion of indigenous art in the Niger compared Nollywood to the Aids virus. The viral effect of Nollywood is worrying that people are talking of the "Nigerianisation" of Africa in such a way that the whole continent has come to "*snap its fingers the Nigerian way*" (The Economist, 2010). This heroic feat makes one to regard her as the *heart-beat of African cinema or drama*. The reasons for this "good news" are not far-fetched as we shall discover:

**The "Magic" of African Magic Movie:** It seems "magical" that without Nollywood, the "magic" of DSTV's Magic Movie Channel will be demystified. That Nigeria's Nollywood is feeding the South African Channel's bouquet reveals the former's place in global affairs.

**Cultural transportation:** There is nothing as sweet as having a people's culture projected on an international platform. Knowing or unknowingly, Nigeria is exporting her beliefs and idiosyncrasies throughout the world. This surely places her in proper perspective as the *social lungs* of Africa. This is because, "when a film is produced, it traverses kilometres, crossing borders, touching lives" (Ogundele, 2003: xi).

**African Big-brother:** That Nigerians are partnering with Ghanaians, Tanzanians and other Africans to shot movies gives the country the feeling of a "*big-brother*." The names of Ghanaian artistes like Yvonne Nelson, Van Vicker, Jackie Apiah who have collaborated with Nigerian actors/actresses ring a bell. Genevieve Nnaji has acted a number of Ghanaian films. Beyond this feeling, there is a display of the marriage of cultures. This engenders social and bi-lingual interactions, intercultural marriages and educational opportunities for studies and research abroad.

**The Economic reason:** A large and waiting market within the African continent and overseas means economic advantage for Nigeria. That Nigerian movies are rented and sold across the world means that those in the industry will be smiling to the bank. Nollywood no doubt enhances trade and investments across the board. The fortunes thereof, paves way for the economic contribution of the country to the world economy.

### Further Cinematic Prospects and Possibilities

The forgoing places before the Nigerian film industry great prospects and possibilities. Whatever accolades that will come its way depends on a critical intellectual introspection to learn from past pitfalls. Major experts in

the sector, stakeholders and government ought to ensure that:

(a) Professionalism is the watchword for both artistes and producers such that money comes second to viewer's satisfaction.

(b) Artistes are assigned roles based on merit to check compromised commitments.

(c) The Nigerian Film and Video Censors Board doesn't relent in its role as watchdog to checkmate those who wish to do their own thing especially those who engage in piracy. "Having a ready market for products is enough reason for the industry to ensure that only films that pass its censorship test are allowed to get to the market" (Ezeala, October 21, 2013, p. 61).

(d) Nigerian films showcase the basic general African flair and spirit thus, showcasing the Nigerian content, concept and culture.

(e) Scriptwriters have passion and originality for good screenplays and Nollywood in conjunction with government debuts a big screen or television village.

It is noteworthy that scholars are drumming the beats of the invaluable place of Nollywood in the Nigerian polity. Erven unequivocally states that the arts: "...scream and kick and participate in our country's struggle for liberation in whatever haphazard way they can, probably at the expense of some of their sensitive craftsmanship, but definitely for their own soul's sake" (1998:vii). Ogunleye concurs to this submission when he asserts that "in Nigeria, video films that comment on the shoddy handling of our nascent democracy are becoming widespread. Very soon, the government would realize that the video has become engrafted as part of the fourth estate of the realm, which demands accountability from them" (2003: x).

## CONCLUSION

No doubt, the Nollywood narrative is a loaded *drama* turning into a *thriller*. Against all tides, the industry has fared well. Accordingly, Egere observes that: "interestingly, Nigerian movies dominate TV screens in Africa and are exported even to the West and other parts of the world" (2012, p. 57). With creditable comments as the above and scholarly commitments, the golden goose will deliver. Dancing on the back of mother Africa may not be sufficient; the skein has got to keep flying to unlimited possibilities. Presently, the world appears to seek a cinema that romances with the past in hope of dialoguing with the future. African movie industries like Nollywood should produce films that entertain, educate and moralize. Even as they seek to mirror society, the local content of artefacts, customs/cultural images and idioms ought to be given pride of place.

The world seeks good artistes, script writers, producers

and experts for a robust cinema, nay Nigeria/Africa. With professionalism comes expertise in different fields of human endeavour. Arts and entertainment should not be different. The performing arts should provide various platforms for *culturetainment*, *edutainment*, *infotainment* and *mediatainment*. People crave for an enlightened, informed, pleasant and harmonious society. It behoves the arts to provide various podia for this adventure. These ambitious moves of Nollywood in less than three decades might just catapult her beyond our imagination and fantasies. The 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigerian story should be; “*tales by the movies, not by the moonlight.*” *Let the movies tell the story while the stories sell the movies.* The Nollywood narrative is a “*local*’ story turn “*global.*” The story has just begun!

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