

### AFRICAN CINEMA AND NOLLYWOOD: CONTRADICTIONS

Almost from the moment of cinema's invention, Africa has been inserted into its global system, but on the most unfavorable terms: it has been the dumping ground for second-run "B" movies from Hollywood, Bollywood and Hong Kong, films that are often racist and always estranged from African realities and purposes, while the formidable technical, infrastructural, and capital requirements of making and distributing films made it nearly impossible for Africans to respond in kind with their own films. Because of these steep infrastructural and capital requirements, cinema everywhere depends on state support, and postcolonial African states have proved indifferent, timorous, corrupt, and inept at providing it; the postcolonial African elite has been as philistine as Fanon predicted, without the power or interest to invest in culture (Fanon).

These dire determinations have produced two responses that could hardly be more radically different. The first is an intellectual's cinema—not so in intention, certainly, but largely so in effect—locked in a painful contradiction between, on the one hand, its passionate desire for an African expression of cinematic culture and its often politically and socially radical purposes, and, on the other hand, the reality of neocolonial dependency. This cinema has never approached commercial viability, the form of a real industry that produces on the basis of profits from previous production; instead, it depends on the drip of grants from foreign sources, administered intravenously. It has established a small but respected niche for itself in the contexts of international cinema, but has reached audiences in Africa only sporadically and fleetingly.

Twenty years ago, the appearance of cheap and easily-operated video equipment made possible a whole new kind of filmmaking that escaped the problematic of celluloid cinema and immediately proved phenomenally successful with the African public. The "video boom" arose on a commercial basis: not the corporate, capitalist commercialism of Hollywood, but the commerce of the African market—an enormous energy of exchange, but without large capital formations, bank loans, or much relationship with the formal sector at all. This business is a matter of bundles of unconvertible and more or less untraceable currency rapidly changing hands amid grimy

concrete, but (in the way of African markets) it quickly extended itself into long distance trade and—in the central instance, Nigeria’s “Nollywood”—insinuated itself into the Nigeria that billions of dollars of oil money have built, ruined by the bust that followed the oil boom: a Nigeria where more families had VCRs than had refrigerators or potable tap water (Barrot), where streets were so dangerous that staying home to watch a video was preferable to going out at night to a cinema; a Nigeria also of many television stations, hordes of hungry university graduates, expatriated internet entrepreneurs, and a machinery of publicity ready to roll out the red carpet for film stars. So far attempts to link the video industry with formal sector institutions have mostly demonstrated this grassroots mercantile culture’s incompatibility with and resistance to fully capitalist structures. The video films have grown into a huge phenomenon—Nigeria is now said to have the world’s second largest film industry in terms of number of films produced (behind Bollywood), and the third largest in terms of revenues (behind Hollywood and Bollywood). The videos have spread far beyond Nigeria’s borders, but are only beginning to be recognized, let alone assimilated, by the institutions of international cinema.

## COMMON GROUND

These radically different formations spring from common ground: there are powerful commonalities in the history of cinema across Africa.<sup>1</sup> Cinema arrived with colonialism and as a tool of colonialism. It was used to dazzle the “natives” with the superiority of western technology and to indoctrinate them. The British, French, and Belgian colonial authorities established film units to make propaganda and instructional films (on such topics as hygiene and farming techniques), tailored to their notion of African audiences. More ambivalently, commercial cinemas became essential features of colonial cities, powerful instances of modernity, along with electric lighting, amplified popular music, factory wages, and motorized vehicles. Africans became avid filmgoers—“cinema is our night school,” as Ousmane Sembene, the founding figure of African cinema, famously said—and quickly began incorporating American cinema into their popular culture. But, more than on any other continent, the relationship between Africa and cinema was radically asymmetrical. Africans consumed cinema but could not make it. Under French rule, they were formally forbidden to make films without a license that in practice was never granted. In any case, Africans did not have access to the expensive equipment and materials required to make films. Extensive technical education is also required; a small number of Africans acquired this by working for the colonial film units.

After independence, the new nations sometimes inherited the equipment and personnel of the colonial film units and sometimes made ambitious new investments in film production facilities. But the new governments, like the old colonial ones, were nervous about the subversive potential of film, and in practice feature film production was neglected in favor of newsreels and documentaries. Corruption, bureaucratization, and bad planning took a heavy toll on government film units.

Moreover, there was the problem of distribution. The cinemas across Africa were supplied by a duopoly of foreign distributors who required block booking contracts, excluding the cinemas from showing anything but their second-run American “B” movies, supplemented from the 1960s on by Bollywood productions and then, later, Hong Kong martial arts films. Even if the cinema owners were willing or able to get out of these exclusive contracts, an African film that needed to recover its production costs could not compete on price with the films being dumped by the world’s largest film industries, so there was no commercial incentive for the cinemas to show local films. This structural problem has kept the cinema distribution system closed to African films up to the present. In the wake of the Structural Adjustment Programs of the 1980s, which devastated economies across Africa, and then the advent of digital technologies, many cinema houses have closed, disappearing altogether in some places.

### AFRICAN CINEMA

From the late 1960s, however, there has been a cohort of Africans determined to make films, and they have managed to do so on a small scale. The essential procedure was described by Sembene as “*mégotage*”—scrounging for cigarette butts, raising bits of money wherever possible, through personal or family savings or loans, perhaps from local businesses or the government.

Two different supranational structures proved crucial to the growth of African cinema. One is European funding. After independence, the government of France stopped blocking filmmaking by Africans and began to support it, partly as a way of maintaining a cultural relationship with its former colonies, and partly as a strategy of expanding the alternatives to the hegemony of Hollywood, which threatened to engulf France’s own film tradition. Until recently, most celluloid African films have been made with at least partial funding from the French government. The money came with important strings attached. It was fronted in exchange for the rights to

distribute the films in non-commercial venues such as French Cultural Centers; after such screenings, it was unlikely that commercial distributors would be interested in the films. French cameramen, editors, and so on were often imposed on productions in order to guarantee technical quality (and to guarantee work for people in the French film industry), which had the effect of compromising the development of indigenous film aesthetics; and postproduction work had to be done in France, with the result that no matter how many films were shot in Africa, Africa never acquired its own infrastructure for filmmaking. This system has lately become more diversified, with the European Union, European television networks, and a variety of foundations and other non-governmental organizations becoming sources of funding. Once made, the films make the rounds of international film festivals, art house cinemas, and educational institutions. They seldom get shown in Africa, and they do not turn a profit that would support future filmmaking. Instead, the filmmaker must again run the gauntlet of foreign funders.

The other important supranational institution is Federation of Panafrican Filmmakers (FEPACI), a filmmakers' organization formed partly as a vehement reaction to the foreign-dominated system just described. Its one important and sustained success has been Panafrican Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO), the bi-annual film festival held in Burkina Faso. Attempts at other pan-African institutions failed. It remains largely a Francophone institution. FEPACI is heir to the tradition of pan-Africanism, and its pronouncements, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, were inflected by tricontinentalism and the radical theories of "Third Cinema." Taher Cheriaa, addressing African filmmakers, wrote, "Your cinema shall be a militant cinema. It shall be first and foremost a cultural action with social and political value, or it will be nothing. If it eventually can also become an economic action, that will only be a by-product" (Ngangura). This radical phase, dominated by filmmakers such as Sembene, Med Hondo, and Souleymane Cissé, did not actually last very long. It gave way in the late 1980s (this is a by now a conventional periodization) to a "calabash cinema," catering to European tastes for images of a pristine, primitive Africa, a tendency led by Idrissa Ouédraogo with his films *Yaaba* and *Tilai*, and then, in the mid-1990s, to a period of various styles and themes, whose exemplary figures are the experimentalists Jean-Pierre Bekolo, whose films are energized by engagement with transnational popular culture, and Abderrahmane Sissoko, a visionary poet and philosopher.

From the beginning, to speak or write about African cinema has been to complain about its structural dependency. The most recent book on the

subject describes a situation in which strategies to radically change this structure seem to have collapsed; the new generation of filmmakers has moved on to more individual and psychological themes, borrowing eclectically from the aesthetics of world cinema without worrying about African authenticity (Diawara, *African Film: New Forms of Aesthetics and Politics*).

## THE VIDEO REVOLUTION

The production of feature films on video emerged as something fundamentally new and different. The case of Ghana, where video films began to be made in the late 1980s (just before the first Nigerian ones), is a particularly dramatic example of an entirely fresh start, a new form invented by newcomers, few of whom had any connection with the celluloid filmmaking which had existed in Ghana. (The two pioneers were William Akuffo, a film projectionist, and Socrate Safo, who had been training as an auto mechanic.) The new form was based in new conditions of possibility: a newly liberalized media environment and cheap and easily-operated video technology that permitted films to be made on sheer enthusiasm and negligible budgets, grassroots initiatives that met with immediate grassroots success (Meyer, "Popular Ghanaian Cinema and 'African Heritage'"; Meyer, "State Film Policies vs. Popular Video-Movies in Ghana: Discourses and Clashes"; Garritano, "Contesting Authenticities: The Emergence of Local Video Production in Ghana"; Garritano, *A History of African Popular Video*). These conditions exist everywhere, and video production has begun to happen everywhere.

A number of factors though made Nigeria's Nollywood the continent's juggernaut. Nigeria has a quarter of the population of sub-Saharan Africa, so Nigerian phenomena are normally colossal. Nollywood's huge internal market gives it an advantage like Hollywood's. Like Hollywood, Nollywood also profits from the international power and prestige of English (Adejumobi, "English and the Audience of an African Popular Culture"). During the oil boom years of the 1970s and early '80s, ownership of a television and (more unusual in Africa) a VCR became normal for the rapidly expanding middle class, and an infrastructure of piracy arose to duplicate and distribute video cassettes of foreign films to put into those VCRs. It was businessmen involved in that infrastructure (led by Kenneth Nnebue, whose *Living in Bondage* (1992) is considered the inaugural Nollywood film) who saw the profit to be made in Nigerian-made films distributed through the same system (Larkin, "Degraded Images, Distorted Sounds: Nigerian Video and the Infrastructure of Piracy"). These businessmen still largely control the

industry. The Yoruba traveling theater tradition, which had already passed from stage to television and celluloid film, quickly adapted to video and brought its loyal audience (predominantly Yoruba, but of a remarkably broad social spectrum) to the new medium (Jeyifo; Barber, *The Generation of Plays*). Most importantly, Nigeria had the oldest and by far the largest television broadcasting apparatus in Africa and, therefore, a large number of personnel experienced both in front of and behind the cameras. Actors and directors still shuttle between television serials and Nollywood films, and the Nollywood aesthetic (talky, plot-driven but rambling and long—films are normally in at least two parts of two hours each, a form that has been called “mini-serials” [Adejumobi, “Video Film Technology and Serial Narratives in West Africa”]) remains closer to that of television serials than to norms of international cinema.

Since the “video boom” began in 1992, Nigeria has produced roughly 14,000 feature films (Ferdinand O. Abua 2002 and 2004; Gana).<sup>2</sup> In 2007 alone, 2,700 films were released; the rate has fallen since then as the result of one of the industry’s periodic crises. The glut of films on the market, the many video rental shops, and widespread piracy have depressed sales and profits. The films are constantly on television, which also depresses sales. (As well as the many broadcast stations that regularly screen them, the South African direct satellite television network M-Net has three channels called Africa Magic, one devoted to English-language Nollywood and Ghanaian films, one to Yoruba films, and one to Hausa films.) The average budget of a Nollywood film has risen to about \$50,000. Films are typically shot in two or three weeks and postproduction takes another two or three weeks; the producers hope to recoup their investment in the two weeks after release, before pirates get hold of the film or it is buried under the next avalanche of film releases.

The export of Nollywood films (and the similar Ghanaian films carried in the same stream) is no less remarkable than their domination of their home market. They have created, as John McCall puts it, “The Pan-Africanism we have” (McCall, “The Pan-Africanism We Have: Nollywood’s Invention of Africa”), the most powerful and influential images in circulation of African tradition and an African modernity. Their popularity has begun to have visible effects on many cultures as far away as South Africa (Krings and Okome, *Nollywood and Beyond*). Similar film industries are springing up: Johannesburg now has its “Jollywood”; Tanzania has “Bongowood”; Kenya has “River Road”; and so on. The films are wildly popular in the Caribbean, and appear to have influenced the video films coming out of Jamaica and

Haiti. There are cable television channels dedicated to them in the U.K. and Houston, Texas. Many internet sites in the U.S. and Europe sell them or stream them. Within four blocks of my office in Brooklyn there are eight shops selling them, mainly to Caribbean immigrants and African Americans. Each shop displays a different selection from an underground media universe of mainly pirated films sold for \$5: beside the Nigerian and Ghanaian films, there are Dave Chappelle concert films, African American gangster films, Jamaican gangster films, Jamaican music videos, Jamaican and African American pornographic films, and Chinese martial arts films. Farther down Flatbush Avenue, in an African neighborhood, the mix is different, including Senegalese dramas, Malian music videos, and recorded soccer matches of African teams.

### CONTRASTS

The products of the Nollywood system, geared to make films so quickly and cheaply and in such large numbers, are fundamentally different from African celluloid films. Nollywood films are made to fit the small screens on which they are normally seen. The video cameras now in use are mostly of pretty high quality, but the sound recording quality is seldom good enough to stand up to theatrical presentation. The contrast in the investment of time is more important than the technical differences or even the budgets (African celluloid film budgets are very low by world standards, though much higher than for Nollywood videos). Normally it takes years to assemble the funding for a celluloid film, and a script is the primary tool for conjuring up the money; the script therefore is written and rewritten, reviewed and judged for a long time, during which it is the major landmark in the life of the director, who is in many cases the writer.

Nollywood films run on their stories—as has frequently been noticed, they neglect the visual aspect of cinema in favor of the narrative and what the actors can do with the dialogue, and audiences will put up with almost any technical level or bad acting if the story is interesting enough. But the script is generally banged out with the same speed and carelessness as the rest of the film. The scriptwriter and the director are often both hired hands who spend very brief periods with a particular film. The actors, who appear in dozens of films per year and notoriously may be rushing between multiple sets at once, also spend little time with the script. In many cases—particularly with films that are not in English—there may not even be a script, only a scenario from which the actors improvise. Akin Adesokan has written

brilliantly about the near impossibility of a director overcoming the engrained procedures of actors from the Yoruba traveling theater tradition, which include an established persona that actors carry over from one film to another (giving them a reason to resist getting too far inside a new character) and methods of collective improvisation around conventional situations, which are the quickest and cheapest way to get a film made as well as providing the satisfactions of a familiar art form (Adesokan, "Practicing 'Democracy' in Nigerian Films").

African celluloid filmmaking is an auteurist cinema: it usually takes a nearly lunatic commitment on the part of an individual to get a film made, the filmmaker playing many roles from scriptwriter to distributor; there are no supporting, let alone competing structures, no standing machinery of production. In Nollywood, most often the producer/marketers call the shots, sometimes including providing the story and making casting decisions. And it is primarily the actors—the stars—who sell the films.

Genre is the most important structure guiding a potential buyer through the stack of the week's new releases, even more important than the faces of the actors on the film's jacket or the names of the director and marketing company. Nollywood films are essentially generic; they cannot afford not to be, both in the sense that a film that does not clearly signal its nature will get lost in the market and that individualizing a film takes both time and money, complicating a system that works fast because everybody already knows what to do.

The two traditions have different postures in relation to foreign influences, though it is important to remember in both cases that virtually all African filmmakers and film audiences have always already been exposed to thousands of foreign films from childhood on: the films they make are in large part a response to Hollywood, Bollywood and Hong Kong and do not spring immaculately from some pristine African authenticity. The celluloid tradition, often haunted by the notion of authenticity and/or motivated by the desire to make an oppositional response on behalf of the continent, has found shelter from the floods and torrents of transnational media commerce and transnational media forms in its protected niche of art house, multicultural, or dedicated Africanist contexts.

Nollywood embraces and absorbs transnational media forms—mass media forms, exclusively—with the unselfconscious eclecticism characteristic of the "African popular arts" (Barber, "Popular Arts in Africa"), in a process of



critical selection and adaptation governed by its audience's complex desires, predispositions, and ontologies. The role of the marketers who pirate foreign media and are the kingpins of the Nollywood distribution system needs to be taken into account here—they have always been described as an obstacle to the evolution of the video film industry because of their narrow and closed ideas of what will sell. Nevertheless, this is an extraordinarily pure case of a market structured by the desires of the audience alone (Barrot repeatedly makes this point). The marketers, after all, are only trying to give the audience what it will pay to see. No big corporations make money from the industry or exploit it to train audiences to be consumers in a capitalist economy (often taken to be the situation of Latin American *telenovelas*) (Haynes, "Introduction"). There is a Nigerian National Film and Video Censors Board, but the normal paranoid vigilance of governments with respect to cinema is greatly lessened because the videos are normally viewed in the privacy of homes, not in a clearly public domain before assembled and potentially inflammable crowds (Barrot). The Nigerian government, particularly under the military regimes under which Nollywood arose, has been too intent on looting the nation's oil wealth to concern itself with Nollywood's small-scale commercial formations (Larkin, "Degraded Images, Distorted Sounds"). The government has been happy to give way to the international neoliberal regime of an open media environment; in any case, trying to control digital technology is a Sisyphean task. The government has shown increasing concern with Nollywood as the determining shaper of Nigeria's national image at home and abroad, but it has little real influence over what kinds of films get made.

The critical issue, then, is thrown back from the familiar paranoid analysis of the influence of foreigners on African film production to the question of what Nigerians want to see and why. Unless we simply buy into the notion of "false consciousness," this is complicated. Clearly one can find abundant evidence of the power over Nollywood's imagination of the globally hegemonic American mass media imagery, even when detached from structures of command and control—the situation is a nice illustration, in fact, of Gramsci's distinction between hegemony and domination. But things may not be as straightforward as they seem: for instance, foreign commodities, behaviors, and accents function as trophies within deeply rooted African traditions of status assertion and in longstanding "strategies of extraversion" (Bayart).

The net cultural effect of Nollywood is debatable and is hotly debated. It certainly is contradictory. The films are a proud example of import substi-

tution, of an unprecedented claiming of African screens for African images, of providing images of African culture that can travel and function as a source of identity—images both of rooted traditional culture (as featured in the genre of the “cultural epic,” for example, launched by *The Battle of Musanga and Igodo*) and of an attractive African modernity, with businessmen in embroidered robes making big deals on cell phones, nice cars driving past tall buildings and shopping plazas, African-styled mansions with families inside dealing with their problems according to norms that negotiate between the bourgeois nuclear family and indigenous structures and roles. All over the world, African people and people of African descent see themselves in these films, or see things they want, and are grateful for the relief from the usual images of Africa as the land of poverty and catastrophe.<sup>3</sup> But the films are often taken to task for their meretricious displays of wealth and their relentless plumbing of the moral depths of contemporary Nigeria. The power of Nollywood images to travel as a “minor transnational practice” (Adejunmobi, “Nigerian Video Film as Minor Transnational Practice”) is the result of processes of homogenization which involve a loss of cultural depth.

The videos fully register the inroads made by Pentecostalism (Meyer, “The Power of Money”; Meyer, “‘Praise the Lord’”; Meyer, “Religious Revelation, Secrecy, and the Limits of Visual Representation”) and Islamic fundamentalism (Adamu), which have been rapidly and programmatically eradicating indigenous religious traditions, with massive collateral damage to cultural forms. In the celluloid tradition, Christianity appears surprisingly little, and Islam generally does so as a cultural form rather than as a guiding spiritual force; indigenous African religious and magical beliefs and practices appear frequently, but normally either as signs of backwardness and superstition (e.g. women and children suffering from unjust witchcraft accusations) or as figures for African tradition, valorized within the fiction (e.g. about educated Africans who must recognize the powers to be found in the village world they have left and now return to) but not necessarily demanding literal belief. Sembene set the tone of ironic distance. Africa is in the grip of a spiritual conflict of enormous historical proportions between the world religions and indigenous belief systems, but the celluloid films hardly register this fact, because it does not fit into the master narratives undergirding African cinema (and its funding), of African authenticity and resistance to Hollywood forms.

The videos fully engage and powerfully harness this conflict, through the genre of “Christian videos” (whose leading directors include Mike Bamiloye and Helen Ukpabio [Oha; Ukah]) and in many other stories that pit spiritual

forces against each other. In Nnebue's *Living in Bondage*, the first and massively influential Nollywood film, the hero joins a secret cult that practices "money rituals," in which a human sacrifice magically produces enormous wealth, and he needs the intervention of a Pentecostal preacher to be saved from this spiritual bondage. The iconography around this cult is partly satanic, neatly reversing Christian symbols, and partly indigenous African; in a telling moment, a hypodermic needle is used to draw a victim's blood, which is then squirted into a calabash, joining suggestions of primitive African tradition with the modernity appropriate to the cult members, who all drive late-model luxury cars. Many films, like Ojiofor Ezeanyanachie's *Agbako: Land of a Thousand Demons*, locate evil spiritual forces in the rural, traditional past, while many more, like the same producer's early hit *Blood Money*, associate evil spiritual forces with sleek office towers and other accoutrements of contemporary wealth and power (Meyer, "The Power of Money").

The conflict between Christianity and demonized forms of indigenous beliefs by no means exhausts the videos' representation of the supernatural. In innumerable cases, reflecting an immemorial African practice, characters turn to a diviner to explain and solve a problem, from a mysterious illness to barrenness. Ghosts, particularly of wives and mothers who have died melodramatic deaths, haunt their former homes (for instance, in *Blood Sister*). Local deities punish erring communities until they mend their ways or remove some source of pollution: this happens both in the traditional rural settings of the cultural epic genre (*Igodo, Pestilence*) and in contemporary settings (Tunde Kelani's early classic *Oluwa Ni Ile*). In the vigilante film genre (Lancelot Imasuen's *Issakaba* series), nefarious local elites whose reign of terror employs both thugs and dark magical practices are defeated by vigilantes armed with amulets and weapons that glow in the presence of malefactors. However the spiritual is represented, this habit of representing a universe with an immanent spiritual dimension in no small part accounts for the videos' popularity. Perhaps half of all the videos have a supernatural element.<sup>4</sup>

An increasingly popular kind of film—for example Emem Isong's *Guilty Pleasures*, whose story centers on a jet-setting playboy fashion photographer who returns to Nigeria and seduces his brother's wife, a retired model turned wealthy but bored housewife—seems to exhibit a dramatic erosion of African culture in favor of American models. (I should stress that this is only one kind of film among many.) It is of a piece with the American-style reality and game shows that now are prominent on Nigerian television and the American-style hip hop that dominates Nigerian radio. The stories tend to be about the romantic trials and tribulations of couples, focusing on a

private emotional realm, unlike the general Nollywood tradition, which tends to be oriented towards a broader social horizon of the family and tends to be focused on issues of fertility and children more than on the moment of courtship. The setting for this new kind of film<sup>5</sup> is often a fantasy of western-style luxury, with African culture or social forms appearing in residual form if at all. There may be some narrativized conflict between tradition and this sort of modernity, normally around the choice of marriage partner (such a conflict is almost invariable in the new genre of “royal” films), but more often huge swaths of culture are simply jettisoned without comment; the film just imagines living in a different world.

Huge losses are involved in this abandonment of cultural identity, losses that are themselves the result of all the economic and political failures of postcolonial Nigeria. When the younger generation imagines the good life, they import the forms. Characters in these films do a good deal of coming from and going to America and Europe. But the situation is not as bleak or as clear as this description suggests. An older, colonial sense of inferiority never appears: it is a multicultural world to which the characters assimilate, African-American culture rather than American culture being the standard point of reference and bridge; signifiers of African pride and identity come frequently and naturally amidst the Gucci sunglasses and SUVs. The viewers are preferring to watch a Nigerian film rather than an American one, after all, just as the hip hop music on the radio is predominantly by Nigerian bands, in Nigerian pidgin, and standup comedy (another popular contemporary form) is American in format but pidgin in expression. There is enormous poverty in Nigeria, but also enormous wealth—plenty of resources with which to construct a walled-off personal happiness, or so the videos imagine.

## INSTITUTIONAL RELATIONS

Because of the video films’ radical difference in character from African cinema, the story of their relationship to all the institutions of that cinema is one of indifference, painful incompatibility, sometimes fierce resistance, bafflement, and tentative curiosity. When the videos emerged in Nigeria and Ghana they were met with scathing condemnation from the existing celluloid filmmaking establishment in those countries: epithets like “interlopers,” “untrained incompetents,” or “stark illiterates” were common. Government officials, editorial writers, and academics were also as a body embarrassed by the technical quality of the videos and by the images of the

nation they offered, and offended by their abandonment of the cultural nationalist projects of nation building with which film production had always been closely linked. In no small part the vituperation was motivated by the condescension of a male educated elite for a popular, mass-media kind of art whose primary audience was women. Two decades later, most Ghanaian academics are still practicing passive resistance towards their country's most important cultural form, publishing almost nothing about it and apparently waiting for it to go away (Haynes, "A Literature Review"). Nigerian academics, however, have written hundreds of articles about the videos (though the Nigerian university system has not been exactly nimble in responding to the video revolution), and in general, Nollywood has to a considerable extent filled the void in Nigerian culture left by the collapse of celluloid film production, the decline of literary drama (see the mournful reflections of Femi Osofisan on his lack of an heir [Osofisan]), and the expatriation of literature, whose center of gravity is now somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic: most of the leading writers live abroad and the younger generation often shows signs of having been through American MFA programs.

International film festivals, including FESPACO and other African film festivals, for a long time excluded the video films entirely because they were on video. As the video phenomenon has reached un-ignorable proportions, the festivals have looked for a way to recognize it, but the situation is profoundly awkward. As a European festival programmer said to me, though international film festivals pride themselves on their adventurous broad-mindedness, in fact the only kind of film that festivals find genuinely disconcerting, outside the given framework, and truly foreign to the viewing habits of their audiences, are Nigerian and Ghanaian videos. Festival organizers feel they cannot charge a steep admission fee for a film that betrays its low budget in all kinds of ways, from bad sound quality to soap opera-like acting (Anne Delseh, personal communication, Granada, May 2009). A couple of strategies have emerged to deal with this situation. One is to feature the works of Tunde Kelani, the most respected Nigerian director, or, recently, the young Nigerian filmmaker Kunle Afolayan, who make films that can be screened on an equal footing with other African films—but who are not really Nollywood filmmakers, though they have affiliations with the industry. They work in a different manner, with more time and higher budgets, outside the Nollywood marketing system. The other strategy is to screen one of the several documentary films made by foreigners about Nollywood (*This Is Nollywood*, *Welcome to Nollywood*, *Nollywood Babylon*), convene a panel of experts to discuss the Nollywood phenomenon, and only then risk exposing the audience to an actual Nollywood film or two.

Nollywood films occasionally get screened in theaters abroad on special occasions organized by the filmmaker in conjunction with an African expatriate community, but they never get into the regular theatrical distribution system. The only Nollywood film available on DVD in the United States from one of the companies that specialize in African cinema is Kelani's *Thunderbolt*, from California Newsreel. There is no mechanism for a library to acquire a study collection of Nollywood films. Meanwhile, in a separate dimension, an enormous system exists to distribute Nollywood and Ghanaian films in the U.S.: hundreds of shops, dozens of internet sites that sell or stream them, thousands of films posted to YouTube by fans. Most of the films moving through this system are pirated; in some cases, the producer will sell the rights to an American distributor for a small sum, for lack of a better alternative.

## ACADEMIC STUDY

In the academic world, the division between the study of celluloid films and video films is deep. Few individuals have done serious work on both sides of the divide, though a handful of recent or forthcoming volumes straddle it (Adesokan, *Commissioned Agents*; Austen and Saul; Diawara, *African Film*; Dovey). The divide has ideological and disciplinary dimensions. The major work on African cinema has come from scholars grounded in film studies or literature, for whom the concepts of the filmmaker as author and the individual film as a text to be read with sophisticated formal and hermeneutical strategies are central and natural. At the beginning, there were strong political motivations behind nearly all African cinema criticism: Pan-Africanism, anti-colonialism, anti-racism, liberationist discourses influenced by Latin American theories of "third cinema," cultural nationalism associated with nation-building, and, in some of the more formalist attempts at defining an *African film* language, an extension of the French project of resisting Hollywood's hegemony (Diawara, *African Film*). More recently, the intellectual structures behind work on African cinema have followed the general trajectory of postcolonial, postmodern, and feminist studies, in some cases, e.g. Kenneth Harrow's (Harrow), coming around to contradict the original position, with its grounding in pre-postmodern master narratives and assumptions about authenticity.

Academics coming out of this formation have tended to be baffled by the video phenomenon. Much of the basic account we now have of the videos has come from people working from the perspectives of cultural studies,

particularly the study of popular culture stemming from the Birmingham School, and of the anthropology of media.<sup>6</sup> African scholars have tended to shy away from anthropology as a discipline, and they use it less as a framing body of theory to help them. Particularly for the younger generation of Nigerian academics, the videos are a self-evident phenomenon and topic for research, arousing a host of cultural issues. Because the videos are such a huge phenomenon, with effects in the real world that can be studied, a wide range of disciplines are now being brought to bear on them: mass communications, economics, sociology, linguistics, geography, public health, and so on (Haynes, "A Literature Review").

This is not to say that cinema studies has not or should not be brought to bear on the videos (Haynes, "What Is to Be Done?"). But there are practical obstacles, such as obtaining a set of canonical films, which is a necessary precondition for discussing the videos as an artistic tradition as opposed to describing them as a phenomenon with examples picked more or less at random. Scholars coming from African cinema need to learn to deal with some unfamiliar topics, such as genre films or the roles of a star system and powerful producer/marketers, which, given the nature of African celluloid cinema, have been given little attention in their studies. There are theoretical and methodological issues to be sorted out, such as the usefulness and limits of interpretative strategies like auteurism and textual close reading in dealing with an art form that is produced and consumed in a flood.<sup>7</sup>

### CONVERGENCES?

The divisions between African cinema and the video films, in every dimension, are so deeply rooted that they will surely persist. Viewed from the perspective of what Africans are watching, African cinema seems more marginal than ever, but there is no reason for it to die—unless its funding dries up. (The funding, and therefore the rate of production, is currently in a moment of crisis, as the French government has handed off primary responsibility for supporting African filmmaking to the European Union, which has been slow to pick up the ball.) The motivations and tastes that have created and sustained African cinema remain; there will always be audiences who will prefer Abderrahmane Sissako's *Bamako* to all two thousand of the Nigerian videos produced in the same year (2006). African fine arts and literatures, after all, have gone on for years without broad popular or African governmental support, depending in large part on foreign networks.

But there is an implicit hollowing out of the claims by filmmakers, impresarios, and critics that the celluloid filmmaking tradition that has been constituted as African cinema is the authentic voice of the continent when it is dwarfed by this other, much more popular formation. Ferid Boughedir wrote in the 1980s that the political tendency was “the royal road” of African cinema (Boughedir); while this is much less true now, the political tendency is still the horizon of most African cinema criticism. In Nollywood it is very hard—or, to be frank, impossible—to find anything as immediately satisfying to a critic coming from this direction as *Bamako*'s passionate intelligence and aesthetic sophistication as it tackles the devastating but intangible problem of Africa's insertion into the world economy and polity. But if we pretend to be concerned with the African masses, we should take them seriously enough to listen to them, trying to understand their mentalities and desires (Barber, “Popular Arts in Africa”). It would of course be naïve to suppose the subaltern is speaking directly through the video films; but it would also be perverse to ignore what we can learn from this largest and most articulate of all expressions of African popular culture.

Nollywood does not wear high seriousness on its sleeve: Frank Ukadike writes, “these videos are grounded in an anapologetic commercial culture and seem quite indifferent to the social responsibility agenda of contemporary African cinema” (Ukadike, “Images of the Reel Thing”). Yet the videos constantly address the problems of Nigerian society through a whole repertoire of genres and symbolic complexes. A deep and wide moralism is inextricably bound up with almost all its products—bound up intimately even with its constant displays of garish, meretricious wealth. This moralism is directed at individual and social behavior and so, arguably, obstructs properly ideological thinking and hence is conservative (Adesokan, “Practicing ‘Democracy’ in Nigerian Films”). The myriad stories about money rituals, which have been a hallmark of Nollywood thematics since *Living in Bondage*, can be taken as a sign of superstitious backwardness; but they can also be seen as a powerful symbolic figure for and critique of Nigeria's predatory ruling class, whose acquisition of unearned oil wealth through opaque politico-economic processes organized around murderous cartels is indeed occulted from public view, if not an occult phenomenon in a magical sense (Haynes, “Nnebue”). Such are the kinds of issues facing an interpreter of this film tradition. African cinema and its critics have not had difficulty understanding one another, for the most part; they have been partners in a joint project, articulated in complementary dimensions. But there are deep differences between the purposes and mentalities of most of the video filmmakers and the academics writing about them, and therefore more necessary work of interpretation.



Finally, having asserted a profound division between African cinema and the videos, it is time to ask whether there are not convergences between the two traditions, or similarities based on their common African origins.

There are issues of perspective that might be at least partially undone by shifting points of view that have become conventional. Pierre Barrot begins his book by breaking down the opposition between Nollywood's supposed crude filmmaking and inferior technology and the supposed polish of African cinema by pointing out that at least some of African cinema is actually as rough as Nollywood, and when Africans get to see celluloid African films the viewing conditions are also usually rough (Barrot). The construction of our notion of African cinema around a few sophisticated directors and the model of a politically or at least socially engaged non-commercial cinema leads us to ignore phenomena that do not fit the model, such as the sporadic attempts at a popular, commercial filmmaking, like the comedies and melodramas of Pierre Dikongue-Pipa and Daniel Kamwa. If our horizon was the whole audio-visual environment of particular nations, things would appear differently than if our attention stays focused on the cream rising to the top of international festivals.

The thematic prisms through which we view films also magnify the sense of difference. African cinema tends to be immediately described rather abstractly in terms of its social topics or ideological approaches, whereas the videos are normally described in terms of manifest content: story lines, settings, genre. The videos are routinely seen through the interpretative categories of African cinema and found wanting. What would happen if we read African cinema through Nollywood? *Yeelen's* tale of sorcery and generational conflict would be familiar to Nigerian audiences, though the film's pacing and visual aesthetics would be strange. Tunde Kelani's *Ti Oluwa Nile* and Sembene's *Xala* are much alike in the way that a threat from a magical dimension is deployed to represent communal norms and to generate steady irony, deadpan humor, and the acute discomfort of the representative of a corrupt elite. Many, many Nollywood films focus on the materials of Sembene's *Mandabi*: domestic issues in a polygamous family (the concern of a subplot in *Living in Bondage*), fraud (there is a genre of films about "419," the internationally famous Nigerian scams, and) and betrayals (comic actors such as Nkem Owoh and John Okafor habitually play tricksters, and betrayals are at the heart of Nollywood's predominant melodramatic mode), a traditional man confronted with modern institutions (Nkem Owoh specializes in such parts also), and the disruptive effects of a family member making money abroad (a standard element in the many

Nollywood films shot in Nigerian expatriate communities in Europe and North America). And so on. The incessant complaints about the need of African cinema to please funders in Paris and Brussels and audiences in Berlin and Toronto may distract us from its need and desire to reach African audiences as well, which has always been its primary motivation, whatever the outcome has been, and these African audiences have nearly everything in common, in their concerns and sense of humor, with Nollywood's.

There are recent material convergences. The sharp division between celluloid and video technologies is breaking down in Africa as everywhere else: Sembene himself shot *Faat Kine* on video. There are a few Francophone filmmakers (a disappointingly small number, actually) like Boubacar Diallo from Burkina Faso, the heartland of African cinema, who have adopted the Nollywood model of cheap and popular video filmmaking. Cameroon now produces Nollywood-style films, on a small scale (and mostly in English), as well as celluloid films (in French). A handful of Nollywood directors (led by Jeta Amata) have acted on the fairly widespread longing to make films on celluloid; a handful (including Lancelot Imasuen, Kunle Afolayan, and Stephanie Okereke) are pursuing strategies of exposure at foreign film festivals and theatrical screenings abroad and at home that are very much like those of African cinema directors; a few have taken money from foreign sponsors to make films on social topics such as AIDS (Francis Onwochei's *Claws of the Lion*). South Africa has emerged as a major force in media across the continent, rivaling France: like Nollywood, it is commercial and Anglophone; like France, it commands large capital and technical resources. South African corporations (principally M-Net and Nu Metro) export their soap operas across the continent, build multiplex cinemas in various places, broadcast African cinema along with the staple Nollywood and Ghanaian films on satellite channels, and put up the money for the production of new films. Nollywood has built its own institutions, notably BoBTV (Best of the Best African Films and TV Programmes Market) and AMAA (African Movie Academy Awards), which have successfully cultivated international connections, showcasing and serving as a market for films from across the continent and beyond. Foreign embassies in Lagos, eager to somehow engage with Nollywood, sponsor film festivals that bring international art films to Nigerian audiences and run training workshops. All of these developments mean that Nigeria is no longer as cut off from the wider African cinema as it used to be. And the Nollywood example is constantly in front of filmmakers from more or less everywhere in Africa.

These convergences should not be exaggerated. In spite of experimental developments at the top end, Nollywood will doubtless mainly continue to serve its domestic and wider African audiences in the way it has been doing, and the most important developments on Nollywood's horizon tend in a direction utterly unlike the existing African cinema. Large corporations and banks are circling around Nollywood, trying to figure out how to get involved, seeing enormous potential profits if the considerable problems of interfacing with Nollywood's unruly business culture can be solved. Amaka Igwe in Nigeria and Socrate Safo in Ghana have created organizations to manufacture films and television serials at a steady high volume—a studio system, unlike the artisanal production of both Nollywood and African cinema. Nollywood should not be seen as an imitation of Hollywood (Marston, Woodward and Jones)—it is something profoundly different—but the name does point towards the aspiration to be a big, glamorous entertainment industry, which is not what African cinema has been about. It seems likely that in the future the media environment across Africa will be dominated by some combination of South African capital and infrastructure and Nigerian creative energy. African cinema may find a niche in this system and an alternative to dependency on European money; it may also provide inspiration as the Anglophone filmmakers expand their aesthetic as well as material resources.

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## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> In the context of this article, "Africa" excludes North Africa: culturally, Egypt and the Maghreb are very different from sub-Saharan Africa, and, in spite of a few significant institutional connections (the continental filmmakers' organization FEPACI (Panafican Federation of Film Makers) and the festivals' Journées cinématographiques de Carthage and FESPACO (Panafican Cinema Festival of Ouagadougou) and a few co productions, the cinemas of North and sub-Saharan Africa are quite separate phenomena, eg. Lizbeth Malkmus and Roy Armes, *Arab and African Filmmaking* (London: Zed 1991) and Roy Armes, *African Filmmaking: North and South of the Sahara* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006). South Africa is generally excluded from this account since its cinema developed in isolation under apartheid and under different economic conditions. Standard studies in English of the development of African film are Manthia Diawara, *African Cinema: Politics and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), Frank Nwachukwu Okadike, *Black African Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), and Femi Okiremuete, *Modernity and the African Cinema* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> About a quarter of these are in Hausa: the Kano-based, Hausa language, northern Nigerian film industry generally is not considered part of Nollywood, and the films are quite different: they regularly include Indian-style song and dance numbers, and exist in a tense relationship with Islamist censorship and conservative Hausa cultural values. Abdalla Uba Adamu, *Transglobal Media Flows and the African Popular culture: Revolution and Reaction in Muslim Hausa Popular Culture* (Kano: Visually Ethnographic Productions, 2007), Brian Larkin, "Indian films and Nigerian Lovers: Media and the Creation of Parallel Modernities," *Africa* 67, no.3 (1997), Hausa Dreams and the Rise of Video Culture in *Nigerian Video Films*, ed. Jonathan Haynes (Athens, Ohio. Ohio University Press, 2000; reprint, 2004. *The Television Reader*. Robert C. Allen ed. pp.354-366. (London. Routledge.), and *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure and Urban Culture in Northern Nigeria* (Chapel Hill, N.C. Duke University Press, 2008). Another quarter of the films are in Yoruba, most emanating from the Yoruba traveling theatre tradition. A smattering of other films are made in languages besides English, Igbo, Edo, Urhobo, etc.

<sup>3</sup> The results of audience surveys were discussed in several papers presented at the conference, "Nollywood and Beyond: Transnational Dimensions of an African video film industry" in Mainz, Germany, May 2009: Adedayo L. Abah, "Mediating Identity and Culture: Nigerian videos and African immigrants in the U.S.;" Kaia N. Shivers, "Toward a Future Understanding of Nollywood and the African Diaspora in the United States;" Francoise Ugochuwu. "The Reception and Impact of Nollywood in France: a preliminary survey."

<sup>4</sup> In the last five years, such films with religious or magical elements have become less common, but one must be careful about interpreting market fluctuations as deep historical shifts of mentality (Oluchi Dikeocha, personal communication, Lagos, July 2010).

<sup>5</sup> At an informal film forum screening (Lagos, July 2010) of *Guilty Pleasures*, the filmmaker Amaka Igwe and her producer husband Charles Igwe complained that none of the African social mechanisms for resolving marital conflicts were in this film. Charles Igwe contrasted the cultural deracination of this film with Amaka's film, *Violated* in which the Delta tradition of a strong matriarchal role structured the story. I have used *Violated* as an example of a kind of filmmaking whose luxurious settings and bourgeois, apparently Western lifestyles are very far removed from the lives of the mass Nollywood audience (Haynes and Okome).

<sup>6</sup> See the works by Meyer and larkin already cited: John C. McCall, "Madness, Money, and Movies: Watching Nigerian Popular Videos with the Guidance of a native Doctor," *Africa Today* 49, no. 3 (2002), "Juju and Justice at the Movies: Vigilantes in Nigerian Popular Videos," *African Studies Review* 47, no.3 9 (2004), "The Invisible Movie Industry," in *Nollywood and Beyond: Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry*, ed. by Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome (forthcoming), Matthias Krings, "Muslim Martyrs and Pagan Vampires: Popular Video Films and the Propagation of Religion in Northern Nigeria," *Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts and Contemporary Worlds* 1, no.2-3 (2005), "Nollywood goes East: The Localization of Video Films in Tanzania," in *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century: Fespaco Art Films and the Nigerian Video Revolution*, ed. Ralph austen and Mahir Saul (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, forthcoming), Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome, "The 'Beyond' of Nollywood: an Introduction," in *Nollywood and Beyond: Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry*, ed. Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome (forthcoming), Jonathan Haynes and Onookome Okome, "Evolving Popular Media: Nigerian Video films," *Research in African Literatures* 29, no.3 (1998).

<sup>7</sup> Franco Moretti in his essay "Conjunctures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (2000), claims that the premise of close reading maintains there are only a few canonical texts worth reading. I believe this is wrong due to the complexity of signification of African popular discourses.