

Diasporic Experience in the Production and Distribution of Nigerian Film: The UK Experiment

Julius-Adeoye 'Rantimi Jays PhD^{1*}, Gabriel Adekola Oyewo PhD²

¹Department of Theatre and Film Studies Redeemer's University (RUN), Ede Osun State, Nigeria

²Department of Theatre and Film Studies Ekiti State University (EKSU), Ekiti State Nigeria

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*Corresponding author: Julius-Adeoye 'Rantimi Jays PhD

Abstract

Review Article

As the hunger for Nigerian video film grew among the diaspora audience, especially in Europe and the United States of America, so, the desire of Nigerians in these areas to make film. Especially the films that reflect their living experiences in the new found land, and when necessary, merge it with narratives that project Nigeria's different social culture. In recent years, there has been an upsurge in the numbers of video film produced by Nigerians living in the United Kingdom. These films employ Nigerian narrative, feature some Nigerian based actors and in most cases are screened in cinemas in London and major cities of Nigeria. This paper looks how Nigerian films produce in the United Kingdom follow filmic tradition associated with the home country. It will also look at the distribution methods adopted by the producers of the films both in the UK and in Nigeria, while at the same time exploring the place of social media and Internet television sites in this area. This is necessary because the advent of Internet and mobile applications technology since the last decade, has made Nigerian video film a major beneficiary of globalization as they are now available freely and on subscription based Internet sites for its ever widening diasporic audience.

Keywords: Diasporic, Nollywood, Nigeria, Experiment.

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INTRODUCTION

Nigerian film is no longer determined by the border or space of production but by the Nigerian-ness associated with its narrative. Nigerian-ness in this case is a narrative identity that encompasses the totality of communication and attitude associated with any of the different ethnic and popular cultures within the geographical area known as Nigeria. It is occupied with the intention of using familiar characteristics to entertain audience, or educate and enlighten anyone, especially one with cultural affiliation to it. Nigerian film is used here in a generic form for both film made in video/digital and cinematic format. As captured by Julius-Adeoye [1]:

The portrayal of socio-cultural background within the Nigerian society by the filmmakers who are identified as Nigerians, with the intention of serving principally, audiences who are Nigerians by citizenship or cultural affiliation irrespective of -production space and certification- ought to qualify as Nigerian film.

This explains why some films made by Nigerians in Europe and North America are categorized as either Nigerian film or Nollywood. As it is difficult to probe these films along ideological line, we rather define them along the narrative structure that has become the most significant in many of the productions. Julius-Adeoye [1], posits:

As the hunger for Nigerian video film grows among the diaspora audience, especially in Europe and the United States of America, so, is the desire of Nigerians in these areas to make films, especially films that reflect their living experiences in the new-found land, and if necessary, merge it with narratives that project Nigeria's different social culture. In this regard, the production of Nigerian video film by diasporic Nigerians is a product of nostalgic feeling occasioned by a sense of shared cultural memory (527).

Beyond the "nostalgic feelings" there exist more factors that account for the popularity of Nigerian film among the diasporic audience as captured by Jedlowski [2] and Ajibade [3]. Jedlowski is of the

opinion that the popularity is “due partly to the fact that some of the films are shot abroad, often in collaboration with expatriate communities” (100), while Ajibade argues that Nollywood’s “popularity is also partly based on the narratives, which are easily recognized and held dear by ordinary Nigerians” [4].

Jedlowski’s doctoral dissertation extensively researched “Nollywood abroad” in Europe, especially, Italy where there are large numbers of migrant Nigerians and Africans, he argues:

... for the Nigerian production companies active in Europe, Nollywood has worked as a brand to gain recognition. However, the position of these production companies in relation to the video industry in Nigeria is ambiguous. They found themselves stuck in between European and Nigerian audiences, styles, production and distribution strategies. Their in-betweenness is at the same time their strength and their weakness. They would hardly exist without such a condition, but this same condition condemns them to a radical marginality toward both Nigerian and European cinema [2].

In order to escape the “radical marginality” at least in Nigeria, many of the Nigerian film producers in Europe employ the blend of a few ‘reigning’ Nigerian actors with those in Europe and screen the films in Nigerian cinemas after the Europe premiere. In all, Nigerian video films abroad or “Nollywood abroad” is fulfilling more than an entertainment function. It is making major contribution to diaspora memory and identity and also to the development and entrenchment of minority ethnic culture in Western nations. While the 1990s birthed and increased the diasporic audience of the Nigerian film through the hitherto distribution of pirated VHS, VCDs, and DVDs, before the end of the first decade of 21st century, the availability of the Internet and subscription television networks give them unlimited access to this filmic tradition. According to Julius-Adeoye:

Apart from drawing mammoth following among diaspora Nigerians, and Africans through the concept of transnationalism, it has also birthed interest in production of the genre among these classes of audience. Moreover, the advent of Internet and mobile applications technology since the last decade makes the Nigerian video film a major beneficiary of globalization [5].

The quotation above lends credence to Samyn [4] position that:

Nigerians in Europe, who do not want to miss out on the success of this flourishing industry,

have seized the initiative and begun producing their own films. As they live abroad, they feel the urge to tell their stories and often in the manner of Nollywood. With its distinctive use of cheap digital technology and video, Nollywood has made this possible (100).

In spite of the popularity being enjoyed by Nigerian video film among the diaspora Africans and even in the Caribbean, the “expressed hope that a Western audience would yield more profit [3]” is still in the horizon. This is because, the films are yet to make it to the mainstream of Western cinema, and the online viewing by subscription community is mainly populated by African population.

Defining Nigerian-ness in Nigerian Films Produced in the Diaspora

The question now arise, can the video films made by these Nigerians in diaspora be categorized as Nigerian film? It is our position that film as a medium of communication that takes place between the filmmaker and the audience, is not necessarily defined or limited by the environment where it is created. This position also holds true in relation to the production of Nigerian film. It does not derive its name from the ‘production space’ but draws-in the narratives ‘totality of communication’ and intended audience to define its Nigerian-ness as an identity. In a nutshell, majority of Nigerian filmmakers in the diaspora are principally in the reproduction of their culture, and in the same vein, inventing a new ‘sub-culture’ - one based on location but with many elements of the former.

The portrayal of socio-cultural background within the Nigerian society by the filmmakers who are identified as Nigerians, with the intention of serving principally, audiences who are Nigerians by citizenship or cultural affiliation irrespective of -production space and certification- ought to qualify as Nigerian film. However, there is still the dialectic of ‘being a Nigerian, but not a Nigerian filmmaker’. Attachment to the Nigerian-ness and otherwise may be personal, political or cultural, as the filmmaker may no longer be a Nigerian by nationality but a citizen of his adopted or birth nation. His intended audience is neither defined by nationalism, cultural affiliation nor racial boundaries. The filmmakers in this category consider film as language, embodying universal messages and made for comprehensive audiences. Therefore, the resources for the production, is sought through the available organizations saddled with support and sponsorship of art and culture creation in the country of domicile. The films are produced in celluloid or other high-end cinematic equipment, instead of the digital video format that is more popular in Nigeria. Where the latter is the case, they are often produced for exhibition at film festivals or as experimental works.

It is apparent that Ngozi Onwurah's *Welcome to the Terrordome* [6] and her other works, Chineze Anyaene's *Ije- The Journey* [7], Biyi Bandele's *Half of a Yellow Sun* [8] –the film version of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel of the same title and Destiny Ekaragha's *Gone Too Far* [9] are some in the category of film as universal language of expression. In fact, these filmmakers and their ilk, frown at the stereotype associated with defining film by them as black or African film. On the other hand are the video filmmakers who operate within the borderline or periphery of the cinema; they explore the small community of Africans in the country and reach out to others through the numerous online platforms. Therefore, they link their 'fringe film' to the main thread of their people and 'fraternal' country Nigeria. In spite of this seeming distinction, there exists among the 'fringe film' filmmakers the problem of 'branding' of their art, either as Nollywood film or Nigerian film.

Historiography of Nigerian Video Film in the UK

There are two groups of Nigerians making film in the UK. The first are the anti-stereotypes mainstream filmmakers and the second are the 'fringe film' video-filmmakers that are pushing the frontier of global Nigerian video film or Nollywood identity. For the second group, the term Nigerian or Nollywood is an identity- a brand that defines their art and ways of making it. Although we have framed these filmmakers into two groups, it does not remove from their individuality. The two groups are peopled with independent filmmakers who depend largely on personal funds or other sources of funding for their films.

The historiography of Nigerian film produced in the UK is likely to present some ambiguity because of the two groups of filmmakers highlighted earlier. While the "mainstream filmmakers" push for national and global acceptance as filmmakers by sourcing funding from the UK government and other known agencies for cultural production have their films certified, visible and documented. Many of the "fringe filmmakers" on the other hand are self-funders who attempt to reduce cost of production, so, in most cases do not certify or register their films and this makes the work undocumented. The undocumented video films produced to serve "fringe community in the UK presents a dilemma to film historians.

The British Film Institute (BFI) documents *Welcome to the Terrordome* [6] by Ngozi Onwurah as the first film made by a black woman to be released in the UK. However, she had made some short films *Coffee Coloured Children* 1988, *The Body Beautiful* 1990, *Fight of the Swan* 1992, and *And Still I Rise* 1993 before now. From that beginning by Onwurah and other filmmakers with Nigerian ancestry to Joseph Adesunloye's *White Colour Black* 2016 and Shola Amoo's *A Moving Image* 2017 with their first features,

it is clear that films made by Nigerians have a long history within the mainstream British cinema. Even when funders push African stories to them, they make it a global African narrative.

As earlier mentioned, it is tricky to attempt the historicizing of Nigerian video film produced in the UK due to many factors. The most paramount of these factors is the lack of documentation and the style adopted for the productions. Since the 1990s, the producers and actors of Nigerian video films of Yoruba language have had the penchant for shooting some scenes of their movies meant for release in Nigeria while on holiday or visit to London. With video camera in hand, they take advantage of the landscape, and apartments of their friends or family members before concluding the production process in Nigeria. After the success of the film in Nigeria and among the Yoruba community in London, these 'chanced actors' ended up becoming producers themselves, and supporting production of other Yoruba works. Some recent examples of these films are: Tade Ogidan's *Family on Fire* 2011 and Muyiwa Ademola's *Wala Ni London* [10]. However, producing English language Nigerian films in London developed after the global reference to the genre as "Nollywood" at the turn of 2000. A bigger inspiration than the Yoruba language film is Tony Dele Akinyemi's *Dapo Junior* 2000 made in Holland with Saint Obi and Liz Benson featuring alongside Netherlands based Nigerian actors.

A major influence on Nigerian films in UK making an in-road to the mainstream is the collaborative production between Nigerian filmmakers and actors based in Nigeria and those in the United Kingdom as well as non-Nigerian actors and crew. This experiment that has become a main stay has impacted positively on the cinema release of the films made in both UK and Nigeria. Some good examples are Chinedu Omorie's *Silvertown* (2016), Lancelot Imasuen's *Invasion 1897* 2014, Destiny Ekaragha's *Gone Too Far* 2014, Obi Emelonye's *Onye Ozi/The Messenger* 2013, Ruke Amata's *Shameful Deceit* (2013), Christian Ashaiku's *Amina* (2012), Obi Emelonye's *Last Flight to Abuja* (2012), Tade Ogidan's *Family on Fire* (2011), Obi Emelonye's *The Mirror Boy* (2011), Jeta Amata's *The Amazing Grace* (2006), and *Osuofia in London* (2003). The collaboration and technological input have not altered the filmic style and technique as described by Geiger (2013), "Nollywood's ... or 'homemade' techniques arguably heighten perceptions of the video film's indexical nature, suggesting every day and ordinary aspects of human encounters rather than fabricating screen illusion" (68).

Is it possible for any film tradition not to 'fabricate screen illusion'? This is confusing because narrative film is a fabricated screen illusion. Feature film narratives aim for entertainment, and the filmmaker mediate reality by aiming to attain this. The

attraction of the diaspora African audience to Nigerian video film is hinged on what Arthur 2016 captures as “recognizable and relatable fictional” narrative. According to Arthur, Nigerian video film style is:

... a transnational cinema with consumers across the African diaspora, continuously creates a fantastical affective world that offers immigrants tools to connect with their African cultural values. Nollywood films culturally appose traditional values with both the delights and dilemmas of globalization to reveal a recognizable and relatable fictional realm for many Africans dealing with the vestiges of colonial rule. With hyper-dramatic plots that glorify and critique life on the continent, Nollywood becomes a means to an end for African immigrants... [11].

Distribution Network Adopted by UK Nollywood

Nigerian video films produced in the African continent and in the UK are available freely on the Internet and on subscription based digital television for its ever-widening “worldwide African diasporic audience [2]” in Africa, Asia, Australia, the Caribbean, Europe, North and South America. Online digital content redistribution media like IrokoTV, OHTVBoX.com, IbakaTV/Yoruba TV, Yorubahood, YorubaplusTV, ApataTV, OlekuTV, nigerianmovenetwork.com, nollyland.com, YouTube, Netflix, Amazon Prime and many others, are leading in this regard.

In spite of its status as film on “the fringe of the periphery”, Nigerian video films produced in the UK or somewhere else with a number of London based Nigerian/African actors, are making in-roads into the major cinemas in the UK. While majority of them screen simply as one-off premiere in a small hall like a social events gathering of friends and enthusiasts, others rent cinemas for a day or a week of screening to public audience. In both cases, audiences to these screenings pay entrance fee ranging from 10 to 25 pounds per view. Immediately after the screening, the film is released to digital television channels at a fee or simply released online for subscription download or streaming.

In 2017, there was an upsurge in the number of Nigerian films produced and screened in UK cinemas. For example, Sukie Oduwole’s *Talking Dolls* opened on 21st July to a spilled-over audience at Odeon Imax London and Buckingham; Chimobi Nwosu and Peace Osigbe’s *Who Am I*, produced by Stella Maris Okafor opened in London on 18th August and in Birmingham on 21st August; Mike Godson’s *London Fever* and TY Moore’s *Apostle Do Good* premiered on 25th August and 29 September in London respectively. Other films premiered are *Wives of London* produced by Rita Akpojator and directed by Nelson Spyk at Kew Gardens, London on 30 December.

The idea of financial breakthrough through creation of commercial film and individual celebrity status of the actors and filmmakers are allures that complement the package. However, contrary to some Nigerian video filmmakers who had migrated to London, United Kingdom in search of better economic condition, to continue in their video film production prefer the term “UK Nollywood”, new entrants prefer “Nigerian film”. The difference between the two positions is not much in aesthetic of narratives but mostly in the migration history, education, level of integration within the society and connection with local Nigerian diasporic communities. The latter regard Nollywood as a derivation of Hollywood – a concept that denies the filmic tradition its own uniqueness but an inferior copy of Western tradition, and thus, not define Nigerianness or Africa as capable of evolving its own narrative technique while using the film medium.

UK Nollywood is a re-affirmation of Jedlowski’s “Nollywood abroad [2]”. To the UK Nollywood and “Nollywood abroad”, the branding toga is a marketing gimmick and a way to link up with the mainstream, especially in the area of collaboration and shared expertise. According to Jedlowski [2],

Some of the European production companies market their products as part of the Nollywood phenomenon, trying to achieve recognition through the strategic use of this branding. Others contest the international understanding of the Nollywood phenomenon, affirming new aesthetic and production values (13-14).

The association has seen collaborative production of major films between the UK group and the mainstream in Nigeria. Many film actors from Nigeria are featuring as leads in UK Nollywood productions and are being used as attraction during the premiere of film in UK cinemas. A case in view is *Talking Doll* [12] that has Daniel K. Daniel, Mofe Duncan, and Belinda Effah as leads. The collaboration is not only from the direction of UK to Nigeria, but also from Nigeria to the UK. Films like *Lost in London* [13] follow the trend of *Osuofia* in London as it details the adventure of Okon and Alexx Ekubo from Nigeria to London. *Lost in London* is wholly a Nigerian comedy film shot on location in London and Nigeria under the direction of Adebayo Olasunkanmi and produced by Uduak Oguamanam for Closer Pictures.

In the same instance, Nigerian blockbuster movies like *The Wedding Party 1 & 2*, *10 Days in Suncity*, *Lost in London* and few others were screened in UK theatres. *10 Days in Suncity* enjoyed a major break as it screened in 12 theatres in the UK divided between Odeon Cinema, Cineworld and Vue cinema, while *The Wedding Party 2* which premiered on 26 December 2017 stayed until 11 January 2018. This

popularity of Nigerian films in UK theatres has seen the entry of IMAX EMEA – a major films distribution company with over 1000 cinemas in more than 60 countries - into Nigeria through a partnership arrangement with FILMHOUSE – Nigerian registered film distributing company with about 20 cinemas in the country. According to information on Filmhouse's website to announce the signing agreement with IMAX:

IMAX is headquartered in New York, Toronto and Los Angeles, with offices in London, Tokyo, Shanghai and Beijing. As of March 31, 2015, there were 943 IMAX theatres (820 commercial multiplexes, 18 commercial destinations and 105 institutions) in 63 countries.

This suggests that Nigerian film or Nollywood is gradually moving from the periphery status in global cinema and making inroad into the centre as it enters into major theatres through the collaborative efforts of both the diaspora and Nigerian filmmakers.

CONCLUSION

The influence of Nollywood among Nigerians outside the African continent and their non-African friends has seen the duplication of this filmic tradition and name in the UK. As at the moment there are Nigerians and other Africans domicile in the UK who have gathered together and started UK Nollywood as an association of filmmakers and actors. They operate in the fringe of the mainstream of filmmaking, produce digital films on low budget through personal efforts and screen same to majorly African audience in cinemas across UK. These filmmakers use films to project their Nigerian-ness as their films are made to reflect the culture and patterns of life synonymous with different ethnic nationalities within Nigeria. While there are filmmakers of Nigerian origin in UK who distance themselves from localizing films language and culture, the UK Nollywood group embraces the medium as a way for them to project their identity and minority status. We have been able to isolate some specific film produced under UK Nollywood, the screening and distribution pattern, and the unique style of blending Nigerian actors on the African continent with those in the diaspora in order to make the film have a wider audience appeal.

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