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The Nigerian Film, Spectatorship and Globalization

Abstract

Every national art form deserving of the name, should say something about the culture that produces it, not just in local, but in international dimensions. Nigerian literature, for instance, has demonstrated such ability to connect Nigeria to the global circuit, mainly through the quality and the quantity of its output. Thus, Nigerian literature now has a global audience that is keen to identify with its accomplishments, its portrayal of Nigeria, especially its postcolonial aspects, and its determination to join the global conversation. The Nigerian film establishment, popularly known as Nollywood, has achieved in glowing terms, all of the above specifications, especially on its own terms—its peculiar characteristics. The fact of Nollywood's overwhelming success has been widely documented—billions of naira in revenue, a prolificacy that has ensured its place as the third most prolific national film establishment in the world, an audience reach that has made it one of the most popular and important entertainment outfits in the world today, etc. This paper is interested in how Nollywood has eventually become a global phenomenon, from its very modest beginnings, and how it has maintained that enviable status.

The Nigerian film establishment, better known as 'Nollywood', in many senses, qualifies as one of the more successful entertainment stories ever told in the modern world. It has achieved its status of accomplishment out of nothing, and has defied all odds to establish its own peculiar production, promotion, marketing schema, and indeed its own poetics on its own terms. Today, as one of the three most prolific and most important film industries of the world, Nollywood has carved a global niche for itself, participating significantly in the now almost crucial and critical conversation on the globalized agenda.

Even though evidence abounds of the existence of the video file industry before the advent of the remarkable block buster movie, *Living in Bondage* 1 & 2, what many can remember as the effective inception of the now all-powerful Nollywood is the 1992 release of the film. This is probably why Jonathan Haynes, arguably the most prominent expatriate scholar of the Nigerian film identifies *Living in Bondage* as laying the foundation (alongside *Glamour Girls*) for the video industry that would come to be called Nollywood ("Nnebue" 30). While it has also been noted that Nollywood is not an example of the proper film industry, it needs to be stated that Nollywood has risen from very humble beginnings, to the place of domineering prominence which it enjoys now.

In tracing the history of the video film in Nigeria, Femi Shaka acknowledges the influence of the Structure Adjustment Programme (SAP), an infamous economic revival scheme introduced by the country's military leader, General Ibrahim Babangida in the 1980s. This move effectively dealt a death blow on the Nigerian economy, as it was counterproductive, principally by devaluating the naira ("Introduction to file" 134). According to Shaka, this situation made it absolutely impossible for celluloid film producers to operate in Nigeria, paving way for the evolvment in the late 1980s and early 1990s, "of crude video file productions in Onitsha and Lagos" (135). These crude experimentations by especially Solomon Eze (a.k.a. Mike Orihedinma) from the Onitsha axis and Babatunde Adelusi from the Lagos axis. The artisinal efforts surprisingly paid off and ultimately led to the commencement of a vibrant, economically sustainable home video establishment.

In any history of the Nigerian Video film industry, deserved credit

has to be given to the influence of preceding artistic forms, especially the television dramas and soap operas of the 1980s and 1990s. According to Shaka, a point to note here "is that many of the directors and producers of television soap opera of the mid 1980s and early 1990s such as Zeb Ejiro, Chico Ejiro, Amaka Igwe, and Bolaji Dawodu later crossed over into video film production in the 1990s" (35).

The Peculiarity of Nollywood Production Pattern

We have said earlier in this paper that Nollywood achieved success and establishment mainly on its own terms. This is incontestably one of the truest statements about Nollywood. What we mean here is that Nollywood devised its means of sustenance, and circumvented the usually tumultuous path to success of the average world film industry. Among the stories that have been told about the origins of Nollywood is this one about an Igbo merchant who did not know how best to dispose of "a large cache of VHS cassettes, which he imported from Taiwan until the prevailing socio-economic and political circumstances presented the opportunity to divert the "use of these VHS cassettes, into recording and retailing of local theatre performances and productions" (Okome "Spectatorship" 4). Afolabi Adesanya in his own account, talks about "a desperate desire by producers to remain in the motion picture business" in the late '80s, which led to the production of films on "shoe string" budgets. ("From Film to Video" 16). The idea of "shoe string budgets, which meant that films could be produced with little or nothing, yet rake in incredible returns has now assumed mythical proportions, and has remained a huge part of the Nollywood fable.

Ahmed Yerima would synthesize all of the above views, and raise others when he submits to Ezechi Onyerionwu about the efforts of the home video producers, many of whom were producing drama for T.V. stations. For Yerima, "when they were able to get the master-tape done and get sponsorship, they found it easier to multiply and to duplicate that was how the home video started." (Onyerionwu "Television Drama" 19) for Yerima, Adesanya and Okome, this practice was sustained by the fantastic turnover it yielded, and the ever-increasing audience patronage, which only keeps plummeting. This is why for Adesanya, "what the feature filmmakers could not

achieve in two decades of indigenous film marketing, the videographers accomplished with much ease and in a jiffy, to the chagrin of film producers who are mostly yet to reconcile themselves to this new wave ("From Film to Video" 16).

Perhaps the most significant factor accounting for why the "Videographers" have remained in business cannot be divorced from their unalloyed fidelity to audience tastes. The overriding success formula for Nollywood has been the ideal of giving its audience, according to Femi Shaka, which mainly consists of the womenfolk, teenagers, semi-literate junior civil servants, traders, artisans, mechanics, etc, who mostly do not possess the intellectual wherewithal to constitute a critical audience ("Introduction to Film" 140). This is more so when the major players -financers, producers, promoters and marketers are barely educated, highly profit-oriented business men, Jonathan Haynes, would say, in this respect, of Kenneth Nnebue, a pioneer financer, producer and promoter of the Nigerian video film: "his great strength which is also Nollywoods, stems from his proximity to the popular imagination," since "he works from what he reads in the newspapers, hears on the radio and picks in conversation around him" ("Nnebue" 31) for Hope Eghagha, it is commercialism that "has defined the tenor of Nollywood," not the noble aspiration towards artistic excellence or intellectual stimulation. Eghagha goes on: "what I am saying is that the level and calibre of sponsorship and also financial remuneration determines the kind of themes and subject matters that Nollywood subscribe to" (Onyerionwu "Commercialism" 25).

Spectatorship and Globalization in Nollywood

Most of what have been said above about Nollywood's peculiar history and production formula explain to a reasonable extent, the industry's local and international popularity and its status as a global entertainment heavyweight. The world is still struggling to come to terms with not just what Nollywood has become, but *how* it has become what it has become. This 'curio' identity has earned Nollywood significant credit in international film circles. Onokome Okome is delighted about the attention Nollywood has secured at international film festivals. He is perhaps most excited about the 2002 festival of African and Caribbean film held in Barbados where

Jane Bryce, one of the organizers of the festival spoke glowingly of Nollywood's uniqueness in not just "the visual culture of Africa but in the world cinematic expression on a whole, ... and why it" compels attention from those outside its field of operation and cultural vision ("Spectatorship" 1). This is in spite of the fact, Okome adds, that Nollywood does not care for any attention from the outside" (1).

Still articulating the global status of Nollywood, Okome says in another context that "Nollywood, the latest cinematic experience, has moved from the margins of social life in Nigeria to the core of social and cultural experiences and it is now being slowly discovered by the rest of the world" ("Africa at the movies" 5). Okome would also rightly posit that indeed, Nollywood has captured the hearts and minds of cinema buffs all over the world ("Africa at the movies" 6). And if Okome's views here needs to be substantiated, one of the most authentic validations should come from Philip Cartelli, who in a recent article entitled "Nollywood comes to the Caribbean" analyses the impact of the Nigerian video film in the Caribbean country of St Lucia, where "at least 80 percent of the music or videos being sold come from Nigeria" (12). For Cartelli, "Nigeria films in the Caribbean are not limited to St Lucia, their popularity extends through all of the former British colonies in the region including Dominica, St. Kitts and Nevis, Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana" (113).

If we add the above to submissions by the likes of Jonathan Haynes about Nollywood films being exhibited on certain streets by New York² Hope Eghagha's statements about the remunerable popularity of Nollywood in Central and East Africa (Onyerionwu "Commercial" 25), and the Nigerian film's reasonable prominence in Europe and Asia, as mainly propelled by the African Diaspora, the global identity of Nollywood is truly not in doubt. Add these to the fact that Nollywood dominates television programs in many parts of Africa, and it becomes even clearer that Nollywood now definitely operates an international spectatorial base. Its spectatorship has been attracted into its world, not merely out of curiosity, but because like Haynes and Okome would assert in the seminal paper "Evolving Popular Media: Nigerian Video films," Nollywood, based on the variety of forms, styles, themes and languages of expression, "give us something like an image of the

Nigerian nation." (21). This is more so when the country itself is one of the most popular and populous in the world.

Global Themes and Subject Matters

Beyond the international/global acclaim that Nollywood has attracted through its popularity as a remarkably important means of audio-visual entertainment, it also interrogates globalization through the various themes and subject matters it attends to. Many of the recurrent thematic directions – the get rich quick syndrome, transnational migration, war, HIV/AIDS, political irregularities, gender issues, cultural celebration, among many others, speak to the international sites of contemporary discourse and global conversation. This means that, although, like Okome would consistently stress, "Nollywood is extremely aware of its local audience," like in Nigerian literature, this awareness has gradually begun to shift to the global sphere, where as we have posited earlier in this paper, the Nigerian video film has managed to internationalize the local and localize the international. This is probably what Okome means when he talks about Nollywood "generating knowledge at the local level about the global that have eluded the watchful eyes of the state and corporate capital." (*Africa at the Movies*" 4). Thus, beyond an articulation of the post-colonial predicament of Nigeria, which in itself qualifies as a global agenda, Nollywood argues for the global citizenship of the Nigerian, and the African, who has been caught in the web of the socio-economic, cultural and political complexities of the modern world. The linkages that Nollywood tries to establish between the Nigerian and the international environment can be psychological as well as physical. Psychological in the sense that characters, representing the dreams and aspirations of the average Nigerian itch to be connected to the global existential grid, where the global culture and its production are considered superior to the Nigerian and the African; physical, in the sense that the Nigerian is an issue in the international scheme of things. To further elaborate, in the former, the Nigerian aspires to the status of a global citizen by making a spirited effort to increase his eligibility for the good things of life – good food, a good car, comfortable accommodation, good education, etcetera, are according to the globally sanctioned existential standards. Thus, when the Nigerian

film captures the get-rich-quick syndrome, manifesting even in terms of money ritual, this is the sensibility that is being pointed out. In the latter, as we see in some Nollywood films, when we encounter the Nigerian character grossly affected by the oil politics of the Niger Delta with its environmental implications, a Nigerian character involved in the transnational migration, or displaced by the civil war in Liberia or Sierra Leone, or even battling with the dreaded HIV/AIDS, a more physical and concrete point is being made about the globalized agenda from the Nigerian point of view. It is perhaps in the bid to sketch-out this dichotomy between the physical and psychological linkages to the international conversation that Biodun Jeyifo distinguishes between "the colonization of the body, of physical energies and capacities such as we find in the older modes of labour exploitation" and the colonization of the psyche—"newer modes of alienation, so rarefied that at the present time, they appear only as virtualities and phantasms which we can only perceive dimly" ("Colonialism and Modernity" 613). Jeyifo's point here holds more water if we consider what has generally been appraised as the relationship between globalization, neocolonialism, and modernity.³

In the context of globalization, Nollywood elevates even audiovisual knowledge and information which one would ordinarily identify as peculiarly Nigerian to an issue of international concern by bringing them within interaction with similar phenomena from other world environments. Apart from issues like the Niger Delta, human trafficking, HIV/AIDS, wars, transnational migration, there are others like terrorism, the kidnapping variant of which appears in recent years to have been domesticated in Nigeria.⁴

In conclusion, from its modest beginning as an essentially home-bred art form, which has largely depended for its establishment, growth and sustenance on local circumstantial, human, environmental, and physical resources, Nollywood has carved a reputation for itself as an international artistic phenomenon, participating as actively and persuasively as any other in the conversation about the global agenda, especially in the 21st century. It has not only put forward this argument on the strength of its unique production and market forces, but through its subject matters and themes, which global flavour has been well-noted.

Notes

1. The 'proper' film production format is the celluloid or the 35 mm, which is popular elsewhere. But the Nigeria format is the video film, which is not taken very seriously in the league of significant cinematic cultures.
2. In two separate personal conversations with Ezechi Onyerionwu in 2008 and 2010, Professor Jonathan Haynes speaks about the prominence of Nigerian video films in the New York film market.
3. To several especially Africanist scholars, the concept of globalization has far reaching implications of neocolonialism, especially in the modern context. That the African, to these scholars, occupies any space whatsoever in the global scheme of things means that the space is mediated by a quest for what is Euro-American.
4. One could argue that the motivations for kidnapping in the other, volatile cultures of the world is the kind of multi varied socio-political and economic exploitation which also has variants in Nigeria.

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