

Yinka Smart-Babalola
Department of Theatre Arts
University of Ibadan,
Ibadan.
Email: Yinkasmart1@yahoo.co.uk

Marketing Nigerian Films: A Personal Experience

Introduction

The meteoric rise to prominence of Nollywood as a defining force in African cinema and postcolonial African cultural identity is well documented by scholars, critics and journalists (Okoye 2007, McCall 2007). Many journals, editorials and publications have been dedicated to the discourse and celebration of the industry which has risen in stature and posture steadily in the last twenty years. Different scholars who have written about the industry recently have looked at various areas of the business and the art of filmmaking in Nigeria. These include historical development (Hanes & Okome 1998, Ekwuazi 2008, McCall 2007, Oyewo 2003.); Structural analysis (Adagbada 2008, Ayakoroma 2008, Akangbe 2008, Adejumobi 2003); Religious expression (Ogunleye 2003, Adeniyi 2008); sociological and anthropological research (Ahmad 2008, Adeyemi 2008, Gwam-Nzeku 2008, Okilagwe 2008, Shaka 2003, Anyanwu 2008); theoretical and epistemological discourse (Okome 2008, Adejumobi 2003, Okoye 2007, Harding 2007); political relevance (Abone 2008); ethnological examination (Omoera 2008, Ekwuazi 2007, Adamu 2007, Mohammed 2007); field experience (Oyewo 2008, Ogunleye 2003); gender concern (Anyanwu 2003, Olujinmi 2008, Ewrierhoma 2008) and educational study (Bashiru 2007, Adeoti 2008, Ola-Koyi 2008).

Of course others have also vilified the industry for many reasons: Ukadike found Nollywood to be "ideologically bankrupt" and for "Local consumption" while Adesokan refers to it as a "Dubious bloom" in "heartbreaking and excruciatingly poor products" (Ukadike 1994 and Adesokan 2003, quoted in Chukwuma

Okoye 2007:24). It "suffers from the notion of exclusion ..." and "our film culture has become marked irrevocably by galloping peripherality" brought about by "the rise of the home video" (Osha 1998: 54); that "caricature variant" of the celluloid art "called the home video" (Darah 1997, quoted in Oyewo 2003) and many more. All these uncomplimentary comments may have been made rather too hastily considering that the contemporary Nigerian film industry is still very young and developing. Placing it on the same pedestal as Hollywood or Bollywood is not a fair assessment. We must also not fail to recognize how the video film industry came into being after several failed attempts at celluloid art brought about by imperialism and economic instability (Okoye 2007:21). However, we must acknowledge the present gains of the industry, one which the great African cineaste, Sembene Ousmane called a "great achievement" because Nigerians had found a way to reach African audiences with African stories. He enjoins other "African filmmakers to rethink their devotion to celluloid film and recognize that video was better suited to the vital task at hand" (McCall 2007:96).

However, the core business of home video-film marketing and distribution over the years, has received minimal attention from academics and researchers. There are a few rudimentary examinations of the economics and commodity aesthetics of the industry by some industry players at conferences and seminars. Also an experiential industry perspective into marketing of Nigerian video films and the attendant challenges has been sketched by Ibitola (2008). The paucity of academic interest in video marketing may be due to the fact that it is highly specialized, combining economic and commercial understanding with media arts management. And it is also possible that economists and media management scholars are yet to feel the significance of the industry with earnings conservatively estimated at 50million dollars per year in 2005 (Okome 2007) on the GDP and foreign earnings of Nigeria. Although, in this paper, it will be clear that the true earning of the industry, inclusive of foreign royalties in 2003 was far in excess of 250 million dollars per annum if the unrecorded trade in Europe and United States of America as well as other African Countries are taken into consideration.

In this participatory...

experience as a Nigerian home video marketer and distributor in Europe between 1997 and 2005. My attempt takes cognizance of my position as one of those fortunate few who belong to a small group of pioneers of the globalization of Nigerian video films and consistently pushed for internal reforms of the industry. This is a humble contribution to the growing body of academic investigations of Nigerian Video film relates a participant and an insider view of Nigerian video film marketing and distribution in the United Kingdom.

Film Marketing and Distribution Practices

The practice of film marketing and distribution in the west (Hollywood) and other cinematic cultures such as Bollywood and China is standard. Because the industry is streamlined mainly along a cinema experience, most films are made on celluloid and for theatrical exhibition. Except for some direct to Digital Versatile Device (DVD) digital movies which are becoming increasingly popular in these countries – especially in the USA, films are made for exhibition at cinemas and art houses. It is when a film has done the theatrical rounds of cinemas that it is then released on DVD (or Video Home System-VHS-before 1998). The film will further premiere on Television as syndicated content for major TV conglomerates such as BSKYB, BBC, FOX, ITV, FIVE TV, Canal TV, etc. This allows for absolute exploitation of all commercial possibilities for any given film. There is always a window between each area of distribution or commercial exploitation in these systems and between regions. Though digital technology has considerably shrunk the time available for all areas of exploitation, this system is still largely operational in the United Kingdom even till today. There is an economic understanding between markets. For instance, it takes some time, up to ninety days at times, between a United States of America release and a United Kingdom release. Ditto between the cinema and DVD release to TV premieres.

Before any theatrical exhibition though, most films are taken to various film festivals for trial exhibitions as well as for punters' and critics' assessment of the work. Public interest in the films is also vigorously aroused through press campaigns and publicity tours by the stars. These in most cases would have begun even before a film

goes into production. It is commonplace for production companies to reveal the production budget and plans for the special effects for films before they are shot. These and many other publicity strategies are used liberally to market films in the western world. Moreover, the whole process of filmmaking in this world is very expensive and mostly underwritten by big studios whose influences are felt in every area of production, post production and distribution processes. Thus, a lot of films end up breaking into profit before all the distribution windows have been exploited, especially, major blockbusters, those that are star-studded, well marketed and publicized. Most films would have made substantial profit while still in the cinemas, while others do so by either the home video or TV release stage. In some cases though, some films just simply bomb! Not breaking even after all the distribution windows are exploited. There are also an increasing number of films whose DVDs sell out, making profit only at the home video window.

The exhibition of these films is handled by large exhibitors who own strings of viewing cinemas and multiplexes. These moguls cut distribution deals with the studios and independent producers during production or after they have seen the film at film festivals. In some cases even before the commencement of the production, a distribution deal is already procured, depending on the marketing savvy of the production studio or company or simply based on commercial reputation of the producer, director or the stars of the film. For exhibitions, a film opens simultaneously in cinemas across a region after it has been classified in that country or region. All adverts, press and public relations will be targeted at a particular region for maximum effect.

Home video distribution of major feature films has increasingly become an important commercial point for large studios, production companies and independent producers. Due to the availability of digital technology at home, many people can now afford to purchase and keep their favourite films even after they have seen them in the Cinema. Also, films made for home distribution are becoming increasingly popular, hence the rise in importance of home videos in Western cultures. Prior to this, films were mass produced on Video Home System (VHS) for home viewing. But since about 2000, VHS has completely disappeared from the market in the UK. It has

since been replaced with Digital Versatile Device (DVD) technology. With DVD, more films are sold directly into homes across the UK. Classics such as "The Sound of Music", "The King and I" and various Disney productions are still selling on DVD in the United Kingdom. Companies such as Love Films, Blockbuster Videos and Tesco, with international network of retail and rental outlets and online shops, have made DVD films available to many homes across the Western world.

Television distribution, which is the last in the commercial order, is handled by professional programme syndicators and content buyers. They secure premieres for films on TV networks across different regions of the world. The amount of money paid for a particular film is not uniform but depends on many factors, which include the film's popularity, the stars, the production values, demand and competitions. Most films end up on TV anyway because they form a strong content base for television schedule all over the world.

This is the order in which a typical Hollywood or Bollywood and British film for that matter, reaches its audiences. The African experience is however different.

African Film/Video Distribution: From African Art House Films to Nollywood Video Distribution

John McCall (2007) rightly asserts that most African films shot on celluloid did not reach the African audience. The whole process of film production and distribution in the early independent periods of African nations was funded and handled by foreigners. Due to this fact, many feature films shot between 1955 and 1975 in Africa were heavily manipulated and censored by their European backers. Also the foreigners who owned the chains of cinemas in Africa naturally favoured foreign films and thus saturated their cinemas with them, excluding the African features. Moreover, the despotic tendencies of many post-colonial administrations in Africa muzzled the independent voices of artistes and filmmakers. Early Sembene Ousmane films were banned in Senegal by the government of Leopold Senghor (McCall 2007:92). Filmmakers in Nigeria such as Eddie Ugbomah and Francis Oladele as well as others suffered severe forms of censorship at the hands of despotic rulers.

This is why most early African films turned out as Art house films shown at French cultural centres and foreign embassies across Africa. The producers were also making the kind of films that their backers and sponsors wanted to see; films that reasonably denigrated the African subjects but endorsed the European image of 'primitive' Africans. In Nigeria, but for the singular effort of Yoruba travelling theatre practitioners such as Hebert Ogunde, Ade Afolayan, Moses Olaiya and a few others, who took their theatre to the large screen and showed them to their existing theatre audiences across Yorubaland, most of the early Nigerian films, like their French counterparts, did not reach African audiences (McCall 2007: 93-95). Hence, African stories were not really told until the emergence of the democratic video technology that birthed the now popular home video which has taken African stories, funded and told by Africans, to Africans across the world.

It is pertinent to state that the Nigerian Video film, though not originated by petty traders at the Idumota market in Lagos, was popularized and organized as a business venture by the Upper Iweka 'boys' and Idumota retailers of blank VHS tapes in the late 80s. They took the risk of putting recorded dramas and popular TV programmes on VHS tapes in order to quickly sell their old stock of VHS tapes. This was the accident that began a new movement and one which has finally given voice to the artistes and cine professionals and created a distinct identity for post-colonial African culture.

The home video distribution system that has evolved in Nigeria is still largely primitive and labour intensive. Many associations have also emerged in various parts of the country for people in the trade. Ibitola (2008) has identified six marketing associations located in different parts of the country. Members of these associations are responsible for maintaining the existing network of retailers and local distributorship while opening up new ones as the market expands. They still rely largely on a point to point distribution system, moving large quantities of videos on Video Compact Disc (VCD), (and on VHS till 2006) to different parts of the country on release dates. Although the National Film and Video Censors Board has introduced a distribution blueprint to improve the system by licensing national, regional, state and local distributorships at exorbitant costs, it seems that the existing system of individualistic

Nollywood in London: Globalizing Nigerian Video Films

In the early period of Nollywood explosion there was no real Nigerian video distributorship in London. 'Best of the Best African Videos' and 'African Video Centre' were the most visible African video retailers. These were opportunistic businessmen who saw a gap in the market for African videos in the late 80s and cashed in. But they did no more than sell mainly pirated or badly dubbed videos to their hungry customers who parted with 10 pounds for each of these tapes. Even though they had been retailing films for a number of years before I produced my first feature, they had never distributed any film and they did not develop any network which anyone could use for video distribution in London as at 1997.

My foray into Nigerian video film distribution and marketing was accidental. I had earlier learnt the lesson as a budding Nollywood producer that one has to be ready to distribute his own film in order to make profit from the unorganized home video market in Nigeria and UK especially if the fund from the film did not emanate from a marketer. This is because right from the beginning, the industry was peopled with what Okome (2007) rightly recognized as carpetbaggers who are out only to make quick profit. These business people produced their own films or supported the productions they market. A lot of the marketers are also closely related by blood or kinship. Therefore it is very difficult for just anybody to break into the Nigerian market without the support of powerful cliques and cabals.

In 1997, after many years as a professional theatre actor, director and producer, I produced my first video film, "11th Commandment". This was in London where I had relocated a year earlier at the height of Abacha's despotism. One had little choice than to resort to the video film as a medium of artistic expression and professional refuge when I got to London. Having undergone training as an actor and director at the University of Ibadan and worked with cine professionals such as Ladi Ladebo in three different film productions, I shunned the video film in the early nineties, as most elites and formally educated artistes of that period did. Needless to say, one had earlier experienced an unpalatable exposure in the industry. I was a make-up and continuity officer in Dele Odule's first film "Oro

Kanka" in 1992, which was directed by Jide Kosoko and marketed by Nek Video links. The treatment meted out to English theatre professionals on the set made some of us to resolve that the indigenous theatre practitioners did not want the English language theatre practitioners in the industry. The indigenous theatre artistes are mainly the members of the Yoruba travelling theatre tradition whose membership and practice are derived from years of apprenticeship with a theatre company or a star artiste, while the English theatre in Nigeria is mainly practiced by those who have had formal training in a University in Nigeria or a drama school abroad. Thus a lot of these elites stayed away from the Videofest that culminated into what is today known as Nollywood.

Theatre practice of course was a very precarious profession in Nigeria. Without state or institutional support, it was tortuous for the average theatre producer who had no sponsors or patrons in the early 90s. This is aside from the abhorrence of the military towards theatre and media practice and practitioners. I left Nigeria with this despondency about theatre practice – so much so – that when I got in the UK the idea of going through another ordeal of live theatre became scary apart from the fact that there was virtually no real professional African theatre industry that one could tap into in London when I arrived. By 1995 the home movie industry in Nigeria had become somewhat popular and it offered a clean start for serious theatre professional adventurous enough. Moreover, the video production fever was yet to catch on in London so much that our film "11th Commandment" became the first feature shot and completed in London to get into the market followed by Ayo Shonaiya's 'More Blessing'(1997).

African video shops offering poor quality video rental started business in 1989 in London. African Video Centre founded by Segun Akindayini and his wife opened in Peckham, South London and later Dalston, North London, to serve the growing needs for Black films from Africa and the Caribbean. Best of the Best African Videos also had a shop on the busy Walworth Road, South London. Together, these two businesses held a strong duopoly in the London video market. With the growing popularity of Nollywood, more shops soon opened up mainly in areas with dense black populations. These included African food markets and shops. These shops basically

retailed and rented pirated films on VHS tapes. There was disorder and everyone was making a quick buck with little or no understanding of the copyright implications of their facetious piracy.

I opened a video production studio on Peckham High Street in early 1997 with the aim of producing video films and corporate events. We shot and post produced "11th Commandment" between June and September 1997. The film, written and directed by Femi Ogunjobi and produced by me became possible because a number of professional actors from Nigeria had relocated to London around that period and some were also on holidays there. It was relatively easier to produce the film than market and distribute it. I had erroneously believed that there was going to be a ready distributor among the existing retailers, but this was not so because the existing shops were mere retailers and rental outlets. After a very successful premiere of the film in which all the players were invited, I got a distribution offer from the biggest shop at that time, African Video Centre. They were going to distribute a total of 500 pieces of VHS tapes in London at a price that I thought was ridiculous. It was depressing. How was I going to break even as a producer if I was unable to sell enough copies of the film in the UK? This was what prompted the resolve to market and distribute the film myself in London. Soon enough, our production studio turned into a distribution outlet. With support from Lloyds Bank, we were able to mass produce copies of the film on VHS and commenced distribution. After covering the entire Black dominated parts of London, we moved the professionally duplicated and packaged videos to places like Manchester, Dublin, Holland and Germany; selling them through a network of African food retailers and rental outlets. In less than 90 days of release, we were able to sell over 2000 copies of the film. This was a time when there were no Nigerian films officially released in the UK. For publicity, we had posters and hand bills pasted and distributed with the tapes. We also relied on word of mouth which worked in our favour because the Nigerian community in the United Kingdom loved the film.

The success of this effort emboldened us to produce our next film during a visit to Nigeria in search of a marketer for "11th Commandment". While we had some agreement in principle for the film, it was not released in Nigeria till date because we ran

afoul of what has turned into a real problem in the Nigerian film industry: the polarization of video marketers along ethnic lines. Yoruba marketers market only Yoruba films while Igbo marketers market all English language films. But the real problems were that the producers of English language films were mostly Igbo while Yoruba producers mainly produce Yoruba films. There were a few exceptions such as Tunde Kelani, Tunji Bamishighin and Tade Ogidi who made some English films at some points in the development of Nollywood. It is on record though that some of the films made by the three producer/directors in English language never achieved the kind of success their Yoruba productions achieved. This situation effectively excludes a lot of trained English language artistes of Yoruba ethnic origin from the industry. In 1997, there was already ethnic suspicion in the video market when we brought the "11th Commandment", made in English language, to Nigeria. This was so much that the film received little interest from the Igbo marketers while the Yoruba ones will not touch English language movie anyway. Needless to say, it was in response to this that I have produced over twelve feature films since this event, all in Yoruba language with commercial success in Nigeria and Abroad.

Upon returning to the United Kingdom in early 1998 with a new film in Yoruba language, "Eru Akata", I repeated the same marketing procedure we used for our first film with greater success. And soon every shop started asking us to supply them with original films because of the clarity of our productions. I then teamed up with the then biggest Nigerian music distributor in the UK, Phillip Dada and together we found "Sound Image Ventures", a music and video distributorship. Starting from our studios on Peckham High Street, we soon expanded to a retail corner shop in Camberwell, South London. We took over the marketing and distribution of Nigerian music and film in the United Kingdom and Europe by storm. We also continued the production of films at the rate of one film per year.

The organization of Sound Image marketing and distributorship in United Kingdom was patterned along the Nigerian system. We approached Nigerian marketers and producers to buy the rights for UK distribution at an agreed fee. The producer or marketer in Nigeria printed the London release video jackets which were usually different

from the ones used in Nigeria and sent these along with a master tape to London. We then mass produced the videos professionally at Cannon Videos in London. We released the London copies in hard case packages at least 2 weeks before the Nigerian release. This was to create another regional marketing window for Nollywood and also forestall Nigerian copies getting to London through the numerous foodstuff retailers and other travelers before ours.

By the time the films were released in Nigeria, we would have saturated our market with better packaged and original copies of the films. We usually penalized errant marketers or producers who failed to stick to the release window arrangement. In reality, the longer the time difference between the London release and the Nigerian release, the better the sale of the films in the United Kingdom. Once the producers and marketers saw that the arrangement favoured them, we were soon flooded with more films than we could handle. The release of Tunde Kelani's "Ole Ku" and Richard Mofe Damijo's "Out Of Bounds" in London (1997) was the turning point for globalizing Nigerian videos. With the success of these films as well as our own productions, many business people soon joined Sound Image as marketer/distributors. Some of the existing retailers too soon began to purchase London/UK rights from Nigeria.

We usually bought rights at between one to two pounds per jacket and the number of jackets purchased depended largely on the popularity of the films and the producer. Hence, the films produced by big actors/producers and marketers often sold from a minimum of 1000 jackets to a maximum of 3000 jackets in London. Where we had advertised and carried out extensive publicity for a film in other releases and on the many pirated Nigerian community radio stations, posters, handbills, weekly magazines and newspapers, the film usually sold well upon release. Some films of course, sold less than one thousand copies. We sold a copy of a film from between five to seven pounds recommended retail price at the height of the video boom. The wholesale price was usually four to six pounds per tape. When we started, we used to release a film every 2 weeks. At the height of the boom in 2002/2003, the London distributors were releasing jointly about ten to fifteen films a week.

In 2002, the Nigerian Video Marketers Guild in London had 100 members and each tried to release at least one film per week.

There was relative success on the London marketing scene during the VHS era. This was due to the fact that we had better control of the technology. It was more expensive to buy the needed equipment that can copy the encoded market copy videos. Dubbing a tape was also time-consuming. Therefore, many retailers and rental stores simply relied on our original films. Also, we encouraged new entrants into the retail market while also expanding the market through the existing African foodstuff retailers. It was usual to release one thousand films on Friday, and by Monday we would be back in the studio to collect more copies for the market. The viewing public simply could not get enough.

In early 2003, I started another film retail business in East London called "The Smart Place" (TSP). We also had a studio and a distributorship, "YSB International", at the basement of the studio. While still maintaining business relationship with "Sound Image Home Entertainment" which was then solely run by my former partner, "The Smart Place" expanded the business to the East London in direct counterpoint to the existing retailers in East London who were mainly pirating our releases. TSP became the model for the market in terms of visual aesthetics and business practices. Another reason why we had to open TSP was due to the debt structure of the video market.

As mentioned above, we modeled the market after the Nigerian experience; supplying finished products to a network of retailers. Retail being 'the sale of goods in relatively small quantities to the public' (Oxford Dictionary 1996), in London and Nigeria, the practice is what Ibitola (2008:48) called the "convenient dumping system". This system is in direct contradiction to the fundamental role of retailing, which is breaking bulk and selecting a product range in small quantity to the public (Rosemary Varley, 2006). A marketer produces or purchases a film, paying upfront for the production, then also pays for the publicity and marketing. He then pays for the film to be mass produced which he in turn releases into the market on credit and on sale or return basis. This gives the marketer serious power because he has invested little or nothing in the transaction. The retailer has not requested for or bought the

quantities he could handle successfully, but had the films literally dumped at his doorstep. The marketers believed this to be the best in order to sell more videos. But the problem began with the production and release of very many films per month, more than the retailer was willing to account for after sales, because it amounted to so much money. The retailers found this system very convenient and made such a killing at the marketers' expense, using the monies in their charge for private purposes. This was also the case in London, where retailers were using distributors' money to buy properties while marketers languished in perpetual lack, always looking for money to meet up with the demands of coming releases, while many shops owed them a lot of money.

An average shop that sold 50 copies of a film, if there are 10 films released in a week, would have received 500 films in that week. At a recommended retail price of 5 pounds per tape, an average shop in London did a conservative business of 2500 pounds per week. Of which only about 500 pounds was their profit. But the money that belonged to the distributor did not get paid as and when due. The catch was the distributors were unable to stop distributing because the producers and marketers in Nigeria were producing more films that they rushed into the market. Any attempt to stop supplying erring retailers resulted in piracy of the films, so this debt situation spiralled until we felt that it was better to run our own retail outlets. The video film business in London at the beginning of the new millennium was big business and many people wanted to play a part. With about 50 retailers doing an average of 25,000 films weekly at the rate of 5 pounds per tape, this comes to about 6.5 million pounds per annum. This coupled with the rental figures; put the earnings in the industry in the United Kingdom beyond 10million pounds per annum by 2003.

It is also pertinent to state that 98% of films released legally in London at this period were Yoruba films. Retailers imported English language films directly from Nigeria, first on VHS and later on VCD. This was partly due to the earlier mentioned ethnic suspicion on the part of Nigerian marketers and producers of English language movies. Of the Nigerian population in the United Kingdom, Yorubas were disproportionately higher than all other ethnic Nigerian groups put together. Hence Yoruba films were in higher demand. But as

the market opened, English language films became popular especially among second generation Nigerians who do not speak or understand their mother tongue and other African in the Diaspora. This asymmetrical demographic representation made the average Nigerian marketer of English language films who is primarily Igbo wary of doing business with the mainly Yoruba London marketers. I marketed almost all English language films legally released in London, such as "Raging Storm" (1998), produced by Frank Onwuchie, and "Dangerous Twins" (2004), produced by Tade Ogidan. These were procured directly from their producers using old connections. However, English Language video films were no less popular especially amongst non Yoruba Nigerians and other Africans and black British audiences. At over 10million pounds per annum, the players that got the best of the industry during this boom were the retailers. They continually diverted the money belonging to distributors to other businesses while paying back whatever they owed in bits at sporadic intervals. This situation coupled with indiscriminate piracy made it imperative the distributors to begin a process of setting up more retail outlets in key areas of the United Kingdom.

TSP was founded in 2003 while Sound Image was remodelled and expanded. These shops, though independent, worked as sister companies from the North and South London with the largest African population. The game changed for some time due to us gaining more control of the east end of London and we were able to properly monitor and supervise most of the retailers in that part of the city. And instead of giving films to debtor retailers, we sold them directly to the customers and rental outlets. Within a short time, we were able to turn Hackney, East London and Camberwell in South London, into video markets of London, from where all new releases emanated every week. We were soon joined by the likes of A&C Worldwide, F&F General Stores, Kashi Videos and so on. With about ten regular distributors and over 50 shops, Nigerian films were served virtually in all of the UK. Soon enough, we expanded the business into Ireland and then Europe; from Germany through Holland to Austria and Spain. In every major European city with an African food store or African restaurant, we had representatives. Before the decline of the VHS in 2003, we would send film jackets and

master copies to representatives in Ireland, who in turn duplicated and distributed in their domain.

The only real threat to the business of Nigerian video film marketing and distribution at this time was the issue of piracy. Piracy was highly encouraged by the video rental businesses that were out for a quick buck. Even though it could be costly to do, some shops actually broke the encoded tapes to pirate them. They just simply bought one copy of the films and then made copies to rent and even sell. Therefore, while so many people were watching the films, not as many bought the original films. This issue was a constant source of worry for the handicapped London marketer. We were unable to prosecute known pirates because it was costly to seek legal action against pirates. This was what led to the emergence of an umbrella body of Producers and Marketers of Nigerian Entertainment products in 2001.

The Federation of Nigeria Entertainment Industry (FNEI) UK was formed to regulate the industry and position the players for better result and expansion. We involved everyone who did anything in the industry so that we might have a broad base. The association worked well at the beginning with concrete support from Nigerian artistes, producers and marketers. In 2003, FNEI organized a major Entertainment Awards which about fifty of the biggest mix Nollywood stars, producers and marketers attended from Nigeria. It was such a successful event because all sections of the industry were represented. We used the opportunity to call the attention of the stakeholders to the plight of marketers in London. FNEI canvassed the attending industry leaders to encourage their different associations in Nigeria to curb film proliferation because some of us had noted that the supply was outstripping demand for our products and this was not healthy for the industry.

Shortly after the 2003 FNEI Awards, I was voted the president of the association. I brought the campaign to stem film production and release to Nigeria. I met with all the leaders of the Igbo and Yoruba marketers who were the backers of the industry. I also spoke with major film producers and associations, such as Association of Nigerian Theatre Practitioners (ANTP), Movie Producer's Association of Nigeria, Actors Guild of Nigeria (AGN) and Filmmakers Cooperative. The ideas that we canvassed for were that: 1) that

should control the output in terms of number and quality to gain more market and possibly better price for the products; 2) that we should classify and register our films in the United Kingdom in order to control piracy and secure government support for our efforts.

Most of the meetings we had were successful and all the players saw our points. But in reality they were unable to actualize our agenda. There was nothing really that we could do from London if the control and improvement was not from Nigeria, the main production and market base. The marketers in Nigeria were in a much deeper crisis than we were. They had to keep releasing films every week in order to get payment from retailers who owed them a lot of money, which has amounted to substantial debt over the years. Any marketer that did not release film regularly had no leverage to use to get some money from their debtors because they paid only those marketers who constantly released films constantly at the expense of those who did not. This is one of the reasons why so many films had to be released every Monday in Idumota, hence, in London.

Effect of DVD and Internet Technologies on Nollywood in London

The incursion of DVD technology and internet video streaming into Nollywood in London was both a good and bad omen for the Nigerian video film industry in London. DVD, at its introduction in the late 90s in the UK was hailed as a major breakthrough in media, communication and information technology. This is because the disc has more space than the ordinary compact disc (from 4 Gigabytes upwards as compared to CD's 80 Megabytes) and can take more footage of video at its highest quality. However, Nigerian video marketers in London did not upgrade to the DVD until about 2004. This was due to the fact that the customers themselves did not upgrade their equipment quickly as the cost of DVD players was prohibitive upon its introduction. Besides, the cost of mass producing the disc professionally was steep. Moreover, the Video Compact Disc (VCD) had been introduced into the Nigerian market with its very cheap and rugged players. As a result, the marketers continued selling their films on VHS tapes and importing VCD of English language films from Nigeria. That the compact disc technology

the parts 1 and 2 of films which would normally contain four discs, into one DVD disc on their computers, scanned and printed the covers and then flooded the market with the films. Gradually this practice became increasingly popular and acceptable amongst Nigerians, until the whole industry migrated to DVD technology. The pirates who were at first, copying and selling English language films that were purchased from Nigeria, soon became emboldened, buying copies of official London released films, copying them and flooding the market with cheap DVD copies. At this time also, internet sites selling and renting pirated Nigerian films started to operate.

The situation became a fierce battle between marketers and pirates, some of whom were technologically better prepared than the marketers. The marketers soon decided to regain control of the market by dropping their own price to the level of the pirated ones. Between 2004 and 2005, piracy had attracted more people who saw a cheap way of making money. Not only were internet sites selling and renting pirated films, some operated sites offered free online streaming of Nigerian films for the cheek of it. The sales started to fall in our network of shops and soon many shops closed down while others resorted to piracy to survive.

Nigerian marketers and producers were at this point unable to rein in the galloping rate of film releases. We tried to use the British Government, through the British Trading Standards office to arrest known pirates. They asked us to conform to the United Kingdom laws by taking our films in for classification with the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) before releasing our DVDs. And if after that they see any copy of such film pirated they will arrest the culprits. We thus used a new video film just produced by Sound Image, "Erinlakatabu" directed by Yemi Amodu as a test case when Nigerian producers were not forthcoming on the issue of classification. "Erinlakatabu" became the first Nigerian film to be officially classified in the United Kingdom at the cost of about 800 pounds. We had wanted Nigerian producers to add this cost to their production cost at the post-production stage or that Nigerian marketers made allowance for it in their budget. They probably felt the sales figure was not worth the extra cost. But I argued that had this been done, the sales would have increased dramatically over

time because of government support that would have accrued from British classification and we would have been able to keep piracy under control with more classified films in the market. Anyway, no other marketer or producer from Nigeria or in the United Kingdom followed suit. We were alone in this crusade.

Upon the release of *Erinlakatabu*, it was notoriously pirated in defiance of all threats. We tried to arrest some pirates and internet business operators, but could not successfully prosecute them for lack of money to hire solicitors and go the whole hog. We soon abandoned the idea of prosecuting the identified pirates in frustration. Because we were losing so much money to pirates, we took the only option available: we stopped buying London rights and all marketers/retailers were encouraged to purchase directly from Nigeria the films that they needed in their own shops. That ended the era of London release. And it was brought about by the new DVD and internet technologies. DVD images are clearer and the disc could take more footage, thus removing the need for two discs for one film as in the case of VCD, it was the standard for market copies for films in the UK but was far easier to duplicate on personal computers. This cheap and faster form of duplication made it possible for pirates to flood the market with Nigerian films at cheap prices. The fact that it was easier to rip DVD unto computers also aided the proliferation of internet portals offering cheap Nigerian films for sale or rent.

Today Nigerian films are more than ever before heavily present in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in Europe, but in a disorganized and informal manner – much as it was pre-1997. Travelers and local merchants fill their bags in Lagos upon journeys abroad and video shops in London receive cargo packages of latest releases weekly. The pirates, some of whom are former marketers, are still hard at work and it seems that any producer willing to prosecute them must be ready to go the whole length with purpose and determination.

Conclusion

Marketing and distributing Nigerian video films in the United Kingdom presented a lot of opportunities and challenges between 1997 and 2005. Ibitola (49) has observed that illegal exportation of

Nigerian films and lack of royalty from foreign sales are some of the challenges facing the industry. While agreeing in part with this observation, I would like to point out that most of the marketers and producers know the major pirates of Nigerian films in Europe and United States of America and even have cordial relationships with them, including travelling abroad upon their invitation. That Nigerian producers are not receiving royalties abroad is also a function of their inability to play by the rules of foreign nations. If marketers and producers were willing to classify their films in the UK the story today would likely be different. The same thing goes for USA or any other country where Nigerian producers sell their films. It was lately that Nigerian films were forced into classification before their release in Ghana. When the right thing is done, we can then expect the full cooperation of the host countries in our quest to earn foreign exchange legally and prosecute the pirates who are the bane of the industry.

The introduction of DVD and internet technologies which should have been major advantages to the industry, especially outside Nigeria, was hijacked by pirates to the detriment of the producers and marketers. The obvious solution is that market copies of Nigerian films as standard, should immediately be migrated to DVD. Pirates are still having a field day in Nigeria, United Kingdom as well as other locations abroad because marketers have stuck irredeemably to VCD as the industry standard. This means that pirates can always turn them to DVD which is the standard in western nations. In Nigeria, pirates release DVD-9 containing multiple Nigerian and Foreign films under the noses of marketers in Alaba International Market. If classified DVD films were released in the United Kingdom, there is no doubt that many legal businesses including European nationals will show more interest in distributing our films. Any Nigerian film that can get into the Blockbuster or Tesco network would have really opened a new vista of opportunities for the industry. But these major retailers will not touch illegal products, hence the peripherality of our films in the developed world. Once all films are released on DVD and a distribution system is in place, Nigerian producers and marketers will regain control of the UK video market and royalties will flow into their hands.

It is also necessary to remind ourselves that Nigerian movies

distribution can be streamlined along the western experience. Our films can go through all the commercial windows as it was the case with early Yoruba video films in the 90s. Most of the Yoruba video films of this period were theatrically exhibited across the Southwestern parts of Nigeria and in Benin Republic before they were released on videos. There is urgent need to revisit this system instead of rushing films into the video market thereby killing other potential commercial windows. Kunle Afolayan has proved that this can be done successfully with his latest award winning film, "The Figurine" produced in 2009 and theatrically premiered in London in December 2009. The film is still in the theatre and may not be available on home video until 2011.

But most important as Ekwuazi (2008:299-307) has rightly canvassed, is the urgent need to introduce standards and ethical control into the industry at all levels. We must streamline all government agencies and empower the practitioners (305-306) for appropriate wealth to be created for Nigeria from the industry. There are just too many films in circulation that most are not selling well again. There is a pressing need for all areas of the industry to be standardized. Production and business professionals in the industry need further training and better remuneration packages in clement working conditions, if the films are to improve in production value. The proliferation of films has caused a significant drop in demand and price. Sharp Television moguls and government media houses across Africa, Europe and America are using the sweat of Nigerian video film producers and marketers to build media empires, paying pittance or nothing for unlimited broadcast rights on satellite, cable and terrestrial televisions. Marketers also need serious capital injection in order to fund expansion of their businesses in Africa, Europe and Americas. The planned stifling of the industry through the introduction of stealth tax in form of unaffordable licensing fees for all levels of distribution by the Nigeria Film and Video Censors Board should also be rejected by all industry stakeholders until the Nigerian government can demonstrate cogently how it intends to help the industry grow in terms of film funding, education and training, combating piracy, distribution grants and awards as well as infrastructural development for the industry.

References

- Abone, Clementina (2008) 'Film Medium and the Democratic Space in Nigeria', in Onookome Okome (ed) *International Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Scholarship*. 3-5, 20-25.
- Adagbada Olufadekemi (2008) 'Yoruba Texts on the Screen', in Foluke Ogunleye (ed) *Africa Through The eye of the Video Camera*. Mancini. Academic Publishers. 183-197
- Adamu, A. U (2007) 'Currying Favour: Eastern Media Influences and the Hausa Video Film' in Onookome Okome (ed) *Welcome to Nollywood: Africa Visualizes. Film International* 28 (5), 77-89
- Adejumobi, Moradewun (2003) 'Video Film Technology and Serial Narratives in West Africa' in Foluke Ogunleye (ed) *African Video Film Today*. Manzini. Academic Publishers 51 -68
- Adeniyi, Victoria O. (2008) 'Beyond Entertainment: Christian Video Films and Evangelism in Nigeria' in Foluke Ogunleye (ed) *Africa Through The eye of the Video Camera*. Manzini. Academic Publishers. 238-248
- Adeoti, Gbemisola (2008) 'Nollywood and Literary Performance Studies in Nigerian Universities: A case study for School-to-Street Connection' in Foluke Ogunleye (ed) *Africa Through The eye of the Video Camera*. Manzini. Academic Publishers. 198-214
- Adeyemi, Taiwo (2008) 'Re-Inventing the African Family through Video-Film: The Nollywood Paradigm' in Foluke Ogunleye (ed) *Africa Through The eye of the Video Camera*. Manzini. Academic Publishers. 146-154
- Ahmad, Murtada B. (2008) 'Kosegbe: A sociological Metaphor Displayed in an African Film' in Foluke Ogunleye (ed) *Africa Through The eye of the Video Camera* y. Manzini. Academic Publishers. 176-182
- Akangbe, C. A. (2008) 'Mythology in Yoruba Drama: A study of Lere Paimo Films' in Onookome Okome (ed) *International Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Scholarship*. 3-5, 207-224
- Anyanwu, Chukwuma (2003) 'Towards a New Image of Women in Nigerian Video Films' in Foluke Ogunleye (ed) *African Video Film Today*. Manzini. Academic Publishers, 81-90.
- Anyanwu, B. C. (2008) 'Film and National Development in Nigeria' in Onookome Okome (ed) *International Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Scholarship*. 3-5, 80-90
- Ayakoroma, B. F. (2008) 'Genres in Contemporary Nigerian Video Film Industry: A Study of Developmental Trends' in Onookome Okome (ed) *International Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Scholarship*. 3-5, 266-277

- Bashiru, A. L. (2008) 'Enter-Educate Concept as a New Paradigm for the Nollywood Film' in Onookome Okome (ed) *International Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Scholarship*. 3-5, 176-189
- Ekwuazi, Hyginus (2007) 'The Hausa Video Film: The Call of The Muezzin' in Onookome Okome (ed) *Welcome to Nollywood: Africa Visualizes. Film International*. 64-70
- Ekwuazi, Hyginus (2008) 'Nollywood: Historical as Economic Determinism or as an Accident in Evolutionary Trends/Creative Process' in Onookome Okome (ed) *International Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Scholarship*. 3-5, 135-142
- Ekwuazi, Hyginus (2008) 'Nollywood: Living in the Bondage of Wealth Creation' in Onookome Okome (ed) *International Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Scholarship*. 3-5, 299-307
- Evwierhoma, Mabel E. (2008) 'Women Through the Eye of the Camera: The Aesthetic Challenges of Nigerian Films' in Foluke Ogunleye (ed) *Africa Through The eye of the Video Camera y. Manzini. Academic Publishers*. 112-118
- Gwam-Nzeku, Grace (2008) 'Gender; Culture and the Process Message in Nollywood' in Onookome Okome (ed) *International Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Scholarship*. 167-175
- Hanes, Jonathan & Okome, Onookome (1998), 'Evolving Popular Media: Nigerian Video Films' in Jonathan Hanes (ed) *Nigerian Video Films*. Jos. Nigerian Film Institute.
- Harding, Frances (2007) 'Appearing Fabu-lous: From Tender Romance to Horrifying Sex' in Onookome Okome (ed) *Welcome to Nollywood: Africa Visualizes. Film International*. 10-19
- Ibitola, Biodun (2008) 'Marketing and Distribution of Video Films in Nigeria' in Foluke Ogunleye (ed) *Africa Through The eye of the Video Camera y. Manzini. Academic Publishers*. 46-51
- McCall, John C. (2007) 'The Pan-Africanism We Have: Nollywood's Invention of Africa' in Onookome Okome (ed) *Welcome to Nollywood: Africa Visualizes. Film International*. 92-97
- Mohammed, Aminu F. (2007) 'Women, Religion and Guilt in Hausa Home Video: An Assessment' in Onookome Okome (ed) *Welcome to Nollywood: Africa Visualizes. Film International*. 98-105
- Ogunleye, Foluke (2003) 'Christian Video Film in Nigeria: Dramatic Sermons Through the Silver Screen' Foluke Ogunleye (ed) *Africa Through The eye of the Video Camera y. Manzini. Academic Publishers*. 105-128

- Okilagwe, O. A. (2008) 'Exploring Cultural Engineering and the Film in Nigeria' in Onookome Okome (ed) *International Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Scholarship*. 54-63
- Okome, Onookome (2007) 'Editorial' in Onookome Okome (ed) *Welcome to Nollywood: Africa Visualizes. Film International*. 4-9
- Okome, Onookome (2008) 'Film Theory and Criticism: From World Cinema to the Nigerian Cinema' in Onookome Okome (ed) *International Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Scholarship*. 64-79
- Okoye, Chukwuma (2007) "'Looking at Ourselves in Our Mirror:' Agency, Counter-Discourse and the Nigerian Video Film" in Onookome Okome (ed) *Welcome to Nollywood: Africa Visualizes. Film International*. 20-29
- Ola-Koyi, S. B. (2008) 'Theatre Arts Programme and the Video Film Industry' in Foluke Ogunleye (ed) *Africa Through The eye of the Video Camera y. Manzini. Academic Publishers*. 215-222
- Olujinmi, Bunmi (2008) 'The Image of Women in Yoruba Video Films: An Evaluation' in Foluke Ogunleye (ed) *Africa Through The eye of the Video Camera y. Manzini. Academic Publishers*. 119-127
- Omoera, S. O. (2008) 'Benin Visual Literature and the Frontiers of Nollywood' in Onookome Okome (ed) *International Journal of Multi-Disciplinary Scholarship*. 234-248
- Oyewo, G. A. (2003) 'The Yoruba Video Film: Cinematic Language and the Socio-Aesthetic Language' in Foluke Ogunleye (ed) *African Video Film Today. Manzini. Academic Publishers*. 141-150
- Oyewo, G. A. (2008) 'The Making of Yoruba Video Films: An Actor's Experience' in Foluke Ogunleye (ed) *Africa Through The eye of the Video Camera y. Manzini. Academic Publishers*. 82-93
- Shaka, Femi (2003) 'Rethinking the Nigerian Video Film Industry: Technological Fascination and the Domestication Game' in Foluke Ogunleye (ed) *African Video Film Today. Manzini. Academic Publishers*. 41-50
- Varley, Rosemary (2006) 'Retail Product Management: Buying and merchandising'. 2nd Edition Routeledge. Oxon & New York.