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Context and Nature of Contemporary Nigerian (Nollywood) Film Industry*

Duro Oni

Introduction

The Presentation looks at the development and issues in the development of the Nigerian Video film industry tracking the major landmarks in what Haynes has described as the major contemporary Nigerian art form. The presentation also investigates the recent trends in the financing of Nollywood films and assesses the impact of the new funding on the making and distribution of Jeta Amata's *Amazing Grace* and Amstel Malta's *Sitanda*.

Jonathan Haynes (2006) has asserted that:

Nigerian video films are the leading form of Nigerian popular culture. By the mid-1990s, they were appearing at a rate of about 500 a year; by now, there is an annual torrent of more than 1,000 films, which are sold as cassettes or as video compact discs, screened in a variety of formal and informal venues, and broadcast on television all over Africa.

* Aspects of this keynote address were first presented at the Open University Ferguson Centre Workshop on The Nigerian Video/DVD Film Industry: Background, Current Situation and International Prospects, Held on the 9th & 10th August, 2007 in London.

The early feature films were made on 16mm and 35mm gauges. From the seventies to the early eighties almost a hundred films were produced in celluloid. These include Francis Oladele's *Kongi's Harvest* (1970) and *Bullfrog in the Sun* (1971); Ola Balogun's *Alpha* (1971) and *Amadi* (1975); Ladi Ladebo's *Count Down at Kusini* (1976); *Ajani Ogun* (1976), directed by Ola Balogun, *Bisi Daughter of the River* (1977) with Jab Adu and Kola Ogunnaike; Adamu Halilu's *Shaihu Umar* (1976), *Kanta of Kebbi* (1978) and *Ija Ominira* (1979), directed by Ola Balogun. Others include Hubert Ogunde's *Aye* (1979) and *Aropin Ntenia* (1982); Wale Adenuga's *Papa Ajasco* (1984); Brendan Shehu's *Kulba Na Barna* (1994) and Bankole Bello's *Oselu* (1996) (Oni 2004: 339).

Successive military regimes and some inept civilian administration in Nigeria led to the massive devaluation of the Nigerian currency under the infamous Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) which was sold to the public as an alternative to the country's rejection of the IMF loan. The devaluation of the national currency made importation of essential tools for the running of local industries difficult, thus resulting in the closure of many of such industries. By extension, the impact of SAP soon made filmmaking very un-attractive, as it became nearly impossible for any filmmaker working with celluloid technology to meet the rising cost of importing film stock or carrying out post production and editing abroad.

Faced with possible extermination, due to spiral cost of producing in cine format, the Nigerian filmmaker turned to the relatively cheap and less cumbersome Video technology. What she lost in quality she gained in quantity! The foray of the Yoruba Travelling theatre groups into the video film business started in 1988 when Kenneth Nnebue with late Isola Ogunsola produced Ogunsola's play, *Aje Ni Iya Mi* (Haynes and Okome 1997, 24). The Yoruba were therefore the first set of people to get into the video film production. Nollywood proponents consider *Living in Bondage*, which came after, as a signpost for the future of what was to become Nollywood.

Unfortunately, most of these early video films, apart from the very first ones, were badly produced. The exceptions include the works of Tunde Kelani, (*O le ku, Campus Queen*), Amaka Igwe (*Violated*), Zeb and Chico Ejiro (*Domitilla, Shame*), Andy Amenechi (*Mortal Inheritance*) and a few others. The reason for the perceived low quality of these films is easily discernible from the sheer number produced. Some statistics would suffice to illustrate this:

- Between 1997 and 2003, a total of 4,425 works on video were produced
- Between 1997 and 2003, 3971 were censored and classified by NFVCB, and released into the market
- In 2004, 1094 received the approval of the NFVCB
- In 2005, 1100 received the approval of the NFVCB
- In 2006, 1509 received the approval of the NFVCB
- 2007 – In the first seven months 909 video works have received the approval of the NFVCB (i.e. Jan – July)

Source: NFVCB

Ethnic Dimensions of Nollywood

Most of the video films produced in Nigeria come from the major ethnic groups, the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba with some producers also from the minority groups. What is critical, however, is that it is the Igbo films and the ones in English language that are commonly referred to as Nollywood. The Yoruba movie makers do not seem to agree with such a name and they still prefer to operate under the aegis of the Association of Nigerian Theatre Practitioners (ANTP) while film makers such as Tunde Kelani would rather operate as a member of the Independent Television Producers of Nigeria (ITPAN). The Hausa movie industry is also currently toying with the names Kannywood for producers in Kano and Kalliwood for producers in Kaduna.

Below is a breakdown of the video films by language classification for 2006:

| Language | English | Hausa | Yoruba | Edo | Ekik | Total |
|---------------|---------|-------|--------|-----|-------|-------|
| No. of titles | 130 | 252 | 565 | 56 | 2 | 1514 |
| Percentage | 8% | 17% | 37% | 4% | 0.13% | 100% |

Highlights of Current Trends: Jeta Amata's *Amazing Grace* and Amstel Malta's *Sitanda*

Jeta Amata's production of *Amazing Grace* in 35mm celluloid film format takes the issue of quality to yet another level. While *Amazing Grace* received some support from the government of Cross Rivers state and from Diamond Bank in Nigeria, the efforts for the initiative and sheer drive of the production must surely be given to Jeta Amata and his London collaborators.

In 2005 Amstel Malta, a brand of malt drink brewed by the Nigerian Breweries, organized a Reality show from which they picked upcoming artistes to feature in a major video film production titled *Sitanda*. The movie which was directed by Izu Ojukwu became a video film to be reckoned with as it made an impressive showing at the Africa Movies Academy Awards for 2007. *Sitanda* can be said to be the first production wholly supported by a private corporation in Nigeria. We are optimistic that the kind of support received from private companies for the production of these two films have started a trend that will endure.

Establishment of Guilds

The Nollywood moviemakers are today creating a kind of check and balance for themselves by the establishment of guilds in the various segments of the industry such that the industry is no longer left open to all comers. Such guilds include the following:

- Directors Guild of Nigeria (DGN)
- Association of Movies Producers of Nigeria (AMP)
- Actors Guild of Nigeria (AGN)
- Screen Writers Guild of Nigeria (SWG N)
- Nigerian Society of Cinematographers (NSC)
- Nigerian Society of Editor (NSE)
- Creative Designers Guild of Nigeria (CDGN)

The establishment of these guilds has led to marked improvement in the quality of video films.

Nollywood: What is in a Name?

Among the major issues in Nollywood is strangely the name with which the industry is now known, which was apparently first used in 2002 by

Matt Steinglass in the New York Times (Haynes 2005) who for want of a name for the emerging Nigerian Video film industry simply used N- to connote Nigeria and called it Nollywood after the American Hollywood and India's Bollywood. Even though the name has become the identity of the industry (there is a Nollywood Magazine published by New Age Newspapers) some of the stake holders like Kanayo O Kanayo, Tunde Kelani and others seem not to be comfortable with the name.

In an interview published in the *Sun* Newspaper, Nigeria, of Friday 2nd December, 2005, titled: "Nobody Pays Nollywood Actors Millions" Sola Fosudo, who is an actor/director, captures the sentiments of the opponents of the name:

I think we are confusing the concept. In America, there is a place called Hollywood where actors and producers meet for the purpose of making movies. In India, there is Bollywood where the business of movie making also takes place. Here, we talk about Nollywood, yet if an American visits the country and requests to be taken to Nollywood, where do we take such a person to?

Jonathan Haynes, considered a foremost expert on Nollywood, has however argued to the contrary:

"Nollywood" is here to stay because the term is irresistible to journalists and, more importantly, because it neatly expresses powerful aspirations by people in the video film industry and by their fans to have a big, glamorous entertainment industry that can take its place on the world scene and appeal to international audiences.

Reflecting the dissatisfaction of the Yoruba film makers while reporting on their proposed Yoruba Film Festival, Steve Ayorinde (The Punch, Thursday June 14, 2006, p.14.) has this to say:

However, it can be deduced that the festival has another agenda, which is to correct the erroneous impression that the new Nigerian cinema experience started in 1992. This was part of the reasons offered by the president of ANTP and YOWFEST's chief organiser, Prince Jide Kosoko, in inaugurating a festival that is decidedly ethnocentric.

Analysis of Research Questionnaire for Movie Directors – A Selection

Below are statistics obtained from questionnaires administered among video film producers and directors in Lagos. The data resulted from a research I carried out as a Senior Overseas Fellow of the Ferguson Centre.

The acquisition of digital technology for making of movies has contributed to the improvement observed in recent Nigerian movies.

RESULTS/RESPONSES

| | | RESPONDENTS | % |
|-------------------|---|-------------|-----------|
| STRONGLY AGREE | = | 21 | 41.2 |
| AGREE | = | 23 | 45.1 |
| DISAGREE | = | 2 | 3.9 |
| STRONGLY DISAGREE | = | 0 | 0 |
| UNDECIDED | = | 5 | 9.8 |
| | | <hr/> 51 | <hr/> 100 |

Recent interactions between Nigerian moviemakers and their international counterparts are a strong factor in the observed improvement in recent Nigerian movies.

RESULTS/RESPONSES

| | | RESPONDENTS | % |
|-------------------|---|-------------|-----------|
| STRONGLY AGREE | = | 15 | 29.4 |
| AGREE | = | 27 | 52.9 |
| DISAGREE | = | 4 | 7.8 |
| STRONGLY DISAGREE | = | 2 | 3.9 |
| UNDECIDED | = | 3 | 5.9 |
| | | <hr/> 51 | <hr/> 100 |

Do you consider movies produced with foreign collaboration better than locally made ones?

RESULTS/RESPONSES

| | RESPONDENTS | % |
|-------------------|-------------|-----------|
| STRONGLY AGREE | = 15 | 30.0 |
| AGREE | = 24 | 48.0 |
| DISAGREE | = 7 | 14.0 |
| STRONGLY DISAGREE | = 1 | 2.0 |
| UNDECIDED | = 3 | 6.0 |
| | <hr/> 50 | <hr/> 100 |

Research Questionnaire for Movie Producers - A Selection

What number of movies do you produce in a year?

RESULTS/RESPONSES

| | RESPONDENTS | % |
|-------------|-------------|-----------|
| 1 | = 11 | 21.6 |
| 2-4 | = 28 | 54.9 |
| 4-6 | = 11 | 21.6 |
| 6 and above | = 1 | 1.9 |
| | <hr/> 51 | <hr/> 100 |

In what language do you produce your movies?

RESULTS/RESPONSES

| | RESPONDENTS | % |
|----------|-------------|-----------|
| English | = 26 | 44.8 |
| Pidgin | = 23 | 5.2 |
| Nigerian | = 17 | 29.3 |
| Mixed | = 12 | 20.7 |
| | <hr/> 58 | <hr/> 100 |

How long does it take on the average to shoot the movies?

RESULTS/RESPONSE

| | | RESPONDENTS | % |
|----------------|---|-------------|-------|
| 1 month | = | 25 | 49.0 |
| 2-3 months | = | 18 | 35.3 |
| 4-5 months | = | 4 | 7.8 |
| 6 months above | = | 4 | 7.8 |
| | | <hr/> | <hr/> |
| | | 51 | 100 |
| | | <hr/> | <hr/> |

How do you raise funds for your production?

RESULTS/RESPONSES

| | | RESPONDENTS | % |
|------------------------|---|-------------|-------|
| Personal Funds | = | 36 | 69.2 |
| Financial Institutions | = | 5 | 9.6 |
| Other Sources | = | 11 | 21.1 |
| | | <hr/> | <hr/> |
| | | 52 | 100 |
| | | <hr/> | <hr/> |

Respondents did not indicate when funding has been through marketers, who more or less control the industry.

Do you usually have enough funds to produce your movies?

RESULTS/RESPONSES

| | | RESPONDENTS | % |
|---------------|---|-------------|-------|
| Barely Enough | = | 36 | 75.0 |
| Always Enough | = | 6 | 12.5 |
| Undecided | = | 6 | 12.5 |
| | | <hr/> | <hr/> |
| | | 48 | 100 |
| | | <hr/> | <hr/> |

The Challenges

There are many challenges facing the video film industry in Nigeria. These include:

- Access to funding
- Quality control
- Improved distribution network
- Elimination of piracy and copyright infringement
- Improved public utilities
- Better working relationship with the governmental bodies
- Bridging the gap, if bridgeable, between the different production associations

In order to move the industry forward, these problems will need to be surmounted.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude this presentation by looking at the recent trend from Digital Video Production to 35mm, quoting from Tunde Kelani's latest work:

Future trend in advancement of digital filmmaking alternatives gives . . . hope for the survival of African Cinema. The various tools and opportunities to excel are already endless [with] the real battle for the soul of digital cinema and digital filmmaking already underway with the production of the hybrid digital filmmaking cameras, Genesis, Viper, Infinity, Dalsa, Arri D20 and many more. While these cameras are quite expensive, . . . there will always be room on the technological ladder where for instance some bright brains are already testing a digital camera system boasting 2k and 4k resolution at the fraction of the cost of the hybrids.

Tunde Kelani's latest work, *Pourquoi Moi* produced by Abdel Hakim Amzat, the managing director of Laha Productions based in Cotonou, Benin Republic, was shot in HDV with some sophistication of a low-cost mini 35mm adapter, a Vaio Pc running propriety production softwares and currently in post production in Final Cut Pro Studio 2 on the Mac computer platform processed into 35mm print.

From Matt Steinglass's "When There's Too Much of a Not-Very-Good Thing", the Nigerian Video Film Industry has grown in leaps and bounds with great potentials of becoming a major industry.

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