

Stop Comparing Nollywood to Hollywood: Reorienting Western Understanding of  
Nigerian Cinema

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## Stop Comparing Nollywood to Hollywood: Reorienting Western Understanding of Nigerian Cinema

Nigeria has the second largest film industry in the world, but you have probably never heard of it. Thousands of films have been produced by the industry since its formation in the early 1990s, making Nigeria a significant cultural exporter whose products dominate the African continent and African audiences around the world. In 2014, for example, the Nigerian government estimated that the film industry was a \$3.3 billion sector with 1,844 movies produced in 2013 alone (Bright par. 2). However, many Western critics were skeptical of the growing industry for decades because of the perceived low video production quality, piracy issues, and the lack of theatrical exhibition. Even scholars who have praised the industry have repeatedly used terms and allusions that reduce and frequently over-simplify the intricacies of the Nigerian film industry by comparing “Nollywood” to Hollywood. While such comparisons are not inherently bad, such associations in scholarship and popular media perpetuate narratives of the Nigerian film industry as being inferior to the West, and undermine the achievements and individual success stories of Nigerians in the industry.

Several scholars have critiqued the limited framework from which academics frequently approach Nigerian cinema. Ramon Lobato points out that the majority of the scholarship on Nigerian videos has been produced by scholars outside of film and media studies in a way that is unparalleled in other national cinema research. Lobato claims, “This ghettoization is a function of the obscurity of African cinema within Western media scholarship, and the fast-and-cheap nature of the video film medium itself, which means that it is not taken seriously as ‘cinema’ by cinema scholars” (Lobato, “Creative Industries” 339). Carmen McCain also states that much of this problem is related to “the inequalities of the global academy” because “[s]cholars based in

European and American universities . . . often have more access to funding for research in Africa than scholars in African institutions do” (McCain 34). Likewise, Noah Tsika identified, “One of the most common temptations in Western accounts of Nollywood is to view the industry . . . according to an assumed orientation toward Hollywood cinema” (Tsika 17). Vijay Mahajan elaborates on this idea, explaining why Hollywood and the Nigerian film industry are so different. Mahajan writes, “Hollywood is very concerned about the potential for loss for intellectual property. For Nollywood, an estimated half of its revenue is lost to piracy . . . It shouldn’t be a profitable market, and yet it is. It is a different model. And it works in Nigeria – very well” (Mahajan 150). Although such observations identify the discrepancies in Western scholarship, few scholars (excluding Carmen McCain and Alessandro Jedlowski) have investigated the impact of terms and comparisons further than the recognition that the framework can be problematic.

The result of analogies that compare the Nigerian film industry to the United States is that Nigerian cinema is frequently understood through a Western perspective, which reduces the accomplishments of the industry. Certain language and cultural assumptions that inform Western scholarship run the risk of “Othering” Nigerian film from the presumed Western center. Stuart Hall’s theory of visual representations argues that difference, or “Otherness,” is judged against the dominant cultural group (Hall 234-239); when Nigerian film is juxtaposed against Western film, the assumption is that Western film is the ‘normal’ film with Nigerian film being the exoticized “Other.” However, consciousness of language and making fewer connections to the West can help situate Nigerian film at the center of the discussion instead of the object of comparison. Utilizing the terms “Nollywood,” “Netflix of Africa,” and “New Nollywood” as examples of popular analogies made by scholars and journalists, I demonstrate that reorienting

the focal point of industry research enriches the understanding of the Nigerian film industry in terms of Africa and Africans. In doing so, I will provide a brief history of the Nigerian film's industry from the early 1990s to 2017 that elaborates on production, distribution, and the new wave of cinema. Ultimately, I argue that the Nigerian film industry should not be compared to Hollywood because they differ completely in structure, distribution strategies, and cultural understanding of what has "value."<sup>1</sup>

## **PRODUCTION – THE RISE OF AN INDUSTRY**

Nigeria's colonial history influenced the conditions that caused the Nigerian film industry to emerge in the 1990s. After 400 years of slave trade and British colonial rule since the 1850s, contemporary Nigeria was "created" as a country in 1914, guided by the British, with disregard to the cultural diversity of several hundred tribal and ethnic groups that make up present-day Nigeria (Akinola 14). Although Nigeria gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1960, several military coups and a civil war tore apart the nation as groups battled for power, causing the country to have an unstable government and economy for decades. Coming into the 1990s, despite three decades of independence, Nigeria still suffered from a "reliance on extractive economic arrangements that characterized British colonial rule" (McCall 102). Resources left (and continue to leave) Nigeria's shores, but the country and its people receive little in return. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, poverty increased from 54% to 61% in the mid-1990s (Akinola 17). Desperation followed as people turned to informal ways to earn money. However, the effects of colonialism were not limited to the economy and government; they also were present in cultural imperialism infiltrating the larger continent. Before Nigerian films were

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<sup>1</sup> It is critical that I address my own identity at this time – I am a white, female, American citizen who has never been to any country in Africa. I am also limited to the English language, my own U.S.-centric ideas about film, and access to scholarship written by Western scholars. That being said, I intend to challenge the material published about the Nigerian film industry to produce a more complicated understanding of the industry.

on the market, Nigerians, and Africans alike, did not have many options for viewing Afro-centric movies. Until the mid-1990s, African films accounted for less than 0.1% of films screened on the African content – instead “dominated by American, Indian, and Hong Kong movies” (Lobato, "Creative Industries" 339). Although African and Nigerian films did exist prior to the 1990s, there were few titles and movies were largely inaccessible to the general population. This provides a quick sketch of the historical and social contexts that sets the stage for the emergence of an African voice

Nigerian film is commonly cited as originating in 1992 with Kenneth Nnebue’s Igbo film *Living in Bondage*, a “melodramatic tale of greed and supernatural retribution” (Lobato, “Shadow Economies” 56). Nnebue was facing an economic downturn in marketing a stockpile of blank videocassettes imported from Taiwan when he realized that he could sell his tapes for more money if they had content on them (Ezeonu 183). *Living in Bondage* was a massive success, selling hundreds of thousands of copies, causing other Igbo businessmen to invest in local movie production for profit – and thus, creating the Nigerian film industry (183). It is crucial to acknowledge that the Nigerian film industry developed from Nigerian entrepreneurs, not a consciously developed government policy, and that the industry was founded on films produced in indigenous languages (183). This detail is significant because it reveals how closely linked the industry has been to the Nigerian people and their autonomy to create a self-serving industry. The origin and conditions from which the industry arose suggest an initial difference from Hollywood because it emerged as a response to economic, social, and political struggle created by colonial and post-colonial circumstances, demonstrating how the Nigerian film industry is a uniquely West African cultural product.

One of the main aspects that distinguishes Nigerian cinema from other industries' films is the production timeline, content, and aesthetics. Early Nigerian filmmakers' video production was noted for its "velocity, low cost and informality" (Miller 119). Frequently, an average of ten scenes were shot in one day, and an entire movie could take only two weeks to film. Including one week of pre-production and one week of editing and packaging, "a movie *can* go from inception to sale in four weeks, though two months is the more common scenario" (119). Once a film was shot and edited, the videos were then "disbursed through countless small vendors in thousands of local markets and street stalls" (McCall 103). This rapid production has led to an extraordinarily large library of nationally produced films. The National Film and Video Censors Board reported that by the end of 2009, "the NFCVB had registered more than fourteen thousand Nigerian feature films made on video" (Haynes, "Genres" xxi). This number is a low estimate because it does not include the films that were denied registration or filmmakers who failed to apply. Although production styles have changed over time, the quick production turn around and ample number of films are still trademarks of the industry today.

The content and aesthetics of Nigerian films are also distinctly African. Nigerian cinema was deeply influenced by the tradition of Yoruba theater because many people from those troupes transitioned into Nigerian film and brought their artistic production, style, and relations to tradition and modernity to the video medium (Haynes, "Nigerian Video Films" 54). Though some of the content of the videos included common themes in mainstream American cinema such as horror, comedy, and romance, there were also uniquely Nigerian themes, such as mythic parable, witchcraft melodrama, and Christian morality tale (McCall 100). Furthermore, the aesthetics of early Nigerian film tended to have more in common with television than cinema, "reflected in the soundtrack, camera-work and editing style" – potentially an influence from the

popularity of soap operas and telenovelas frequently screened in West Africa (Lobato, "Creative Industries" 349). This televisual aesthetic was not simply a result of content shown in Nigeria, but also reflected the training of production personnel who "learned their skills on TV sets rather than in the celluloid cinema scene" (56). Combined with the melodramatic style of soap operas and the traditional influences of Yoruba theater, Nigerian cinema exhibited relatable content that Nigerians could identify with, resulting in high demands for Afro-centric narratives.

Even though the videos became widely popular in Nigerian popular culture, many Western eyes were skeptical of the films. Much of the Western dismissal of Nigerian film has to do with the disapproval of the perceived 'crude' production of the films. Early films were recorded on camcorders and distributed on VHS tapes (Lobato, "Shadow Economies" 57). While the visual aesthetics of video technology had been a disappointment to critics of the industry (especially academics and professional film producers), the cheaper camcorder technology used in producing these movies continued to "serve the purpose of the indigenous movie industries in the face of economic hardship" (Ezeonu 191). Meaning that when faced with the possibility of extinction, "the indigenous film industry adapted the more affordable technology to continue production" (192). Challenging the critics, scholar Jeffery Geiger points out, "Nollywood's 'lo-fi' or 'homemade' techniques arguably heighten perceptions of the video film's indexical nature, suggesting everyday and ordinary aspects of human encounters rather than fabricating screen illusion" (Geiger 68). This difference in understanding demonstrates how reorienting the point of reference can challenge perceptions about the Nigerian film industry.

The financing of Nigerian films also differ from Hollywood. While Africa's celluloid cinema had depended on foreign funding, schooling, and inspiration, "Nigeria's video industry is profitable and self-sufficient" and is "one of the fastest growing sectors of the Nigerian

economy” (McCall 100). The industry has created thousands of jobs and achieved “unprecedented levels of growth” – notably “without assistance from the state, NGOs, international agencies or film festivals” (Lobato, "Creative Industries" 338). Instead of large investors, individual “marketers” typically fund films and serve as executive producers, marketers, and distributors (Miller 119). Early budgets for Nigerian films approximated US\$20,000 to \$40,000 USD per film, although some reached as high US\$75,000 (Lobato, "Creative Industries" 342). Critically examining the production of Nigerian film demonstrates how reorienting the framework can affect the perception of the industry. Hollywood might aesthetically look more appealing to Westerners with higher budget films; however, Hollywood employs few people with a select handful of employees enjoying bloated salaries. On the other hand, the Nigerian film industry has smaller budget films, but employs thousands of people and provides economic opportunity in times of hardship. Neither is necessarily better than the other, but shifting the perspective provides a more complex understanding of the industry.

### ***“Nollywood”***

Although this background is a brief overview of the production aspects of the industry, it is vital to acknowledge the power of the name “Nollywood.” The term “Nollywood” appears to have first been recorded in the September 2002 *New York Times* article “Step Aside, Los Angeles and Bombay, for Nollywood” by journalist Norimitsu Onishi, who reported on the growth of the Nigerian film industry in the past decade (McCain 31). However, “Nollywood” as it is typically used is not synonymous with the “Nigerian film industry” – “Nollywood” refers primarily to the English-language films with production and distribution based in Lagos and a few other eastern cities, and is overwhelmingly controlled by the Igbos (Haynes, “Genres”

xxiii).<sup>2</sup> Even though this term is considered inaccurate when speaking about the entire Nigerian film industry, “Nollywood” is “widely accepted by the media, scholars, the Nigerian government,” and certain players in the film industry who celebrate the industry precisely for the “connection to the wider world its name implies”(McCain 31). As scholar Jonathon Haynes says, “The Nollywood brand is so powerful it is sometimes used to refer to all Nigerian filmmaking” (Haynes, “Genres” xxiv). Yet, using the term “Nollywood” as a catchall term for Nigerian cinema is academically irresponsible because the word erases the complexity of the industry and contributes to the marginalization of indigenous filmmakers in the scholastic sphere.

The result of using the term “Nollywood” in academic and popular discourse is that it homogenizes an entire industry to English-speaking films and reduces the diversity of the industry. Although the majority of Western scholarship has been focused on Nollywood, in terms of English films, the overwhelming majority of content is produced in one of Nigeria’s 510 indigenous languages (“Nigeria” 1). Scholar Carmen McCain identified that between 1994 and 2001, the Nigerian National Film and Video Censors Board (NFCVB) reported that 61% of films turned into the board were Nigerian-language films, and only 39% were English films. English popularity decreased in 2010 with the NFVCB reporting that only 12% were in English while around 55% were in Yoruba, 29% in Hausa, and approximately 3.5% were in Bini (McCain 33). By 2011, Nigerian-language films were about 75% of the productions being made in Nigeria (30). These statistics demonstrate how terms in scholarship can affect the way that communities think about a complex institution. Popular perception increasingly seems to be that the Nigerian film industry is a mostly English-language industry (32). This perception likely developed

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<sup>2</sup> Many of the quotes throughout this essay demonstrate how scholars use the term “Nollywood” as synonymous with the Nigerian film industry, further supporting my argument of how prevalent this phenomenon is in the academic sphere.

because of the international popularity of the English-language films coming out of Nigeria and its stars in the African diaspora. As Alessandro Jedlowski notes, English-language films were the ones that traveled the furthest and were most popular abroad (Jedlowski 16). However, the numbers challenge the assumption that the Nigerian industry is an English-dominated field by revealing that English films are increasingly becoming a minority in Nigerian cinema.

Additionally, focusing on the English content risks the elimination of the contributions by Nigerian-language films and creative players. People typically speak about Nigeria's three largest ethnicities, the Igbos, Hausas, and Yorubas, "but there are two hundred and fifty ethnic groups in the country, and the 'big three' amount to only half the population of 170 million people" (Haynes, "Genres" xxiii). And within Nigerian film, "ethnic specificity matters" (Adesokan 117). Various ethnic groups have their own internal film industry that is considered part of the Nigerian film industry, but not Nollywood. For example, the Hausa film industry, known as "Kanywood" (McCain 39) differs from Nollywood in style, aesthetic, and content. These films are predominantly produced in northern Nigeria and tend to have Muslim themes and include musical dance numbers, similar to Bollywood (Haynes, "Genres" xxiii). Therefore, to understand the Nigerian film industry as primarily the English Nollywood films ignores the works in indigenous languages that thrive in the Nigerian market.

Ultimately, the impact of utilizing a word that implicitly and explicitly connects the Nigerian film industry to Hollywood is that it causes readers to situate their understanding of the industry in terms of American values and definitions of success. When comparing Hollywood to the Nigerian film industry, economically Hollywood is undoubtedly a dominant player. But when shifting the scale to put Nigerian cinema at the center, Nigerian filmmakers blaze past the U.S. in terms of volume. UNESCO conducted a widely cited survey in 2009 that claimed Nigeria

had the second largest film industry in the world behind Bollywood, producing almost double the number of films made by the U.S. (“Nollywood Rivals Bollywood” par. 2). Although, as McCain identifies, the numbers are problematic in some ways, UNESCO reported that in 2006, Nigeria’s film industry produced 872 feature films compared to the United States producing 485 films (“Nollywood Rivals Bollywood” par. 2). As Lobato points out, while the Nigerian film industry is not the world’s largest film industry in terms of revenues or audiences, it is likely that the Nigerian film industry “produces more films that significant numbers of people actually watch than anywhere else in the world” (Lobato, “Creative Industries” 341). That is to say that amateur film production occurs in the United States, which would affect the total number of U.S. films, but few Americans watch those movies and prefer Hollywood films instead.

Although this reorientation puts the Nigerian film industry well ahead of the Hollywood, Nigerian cinema is still not always taken seriously because of the perceived “crude” production. A consequence of juxtaposing the Nigerian film industry with Hollywood is that audiences have a tendency to use a Western lens of understanding and judging film in order to make sense of Nigerian cinema. The term itself suggests that the “N” for Nigeria is a prefix to the root of the word, “ollywood,” therefore positioning the Nigerian film industry as secondary to the primary Hollywood. However, cultural values complicate this relationship. Pierre Bourdieu theorizes that taste is a cultural construction (Bourdieu 250). Meaning that Western ideologies of quality film would differ from African perceptions. Haynes claims that Nigerian film does not do well in the US market because Americans focus on “production quality” in order for a film to be good (Haynes, “Nigerian Video Films” 1-2). Despite the fact that Western critics may not approve of the video production style in terms of their own cultural understanding of quality cinema, the films have become widely popular across the country and world. Therefore, cultural taste and

constructions of “value” must contribute to the question of why the videos became so popular among Nigerians, because when judged in comparison to American values, the films would have fallen flat. Haynes claims that even though “the quality of the video is, it must be admitted, low” Nigerian films contain “a staggering amount of narrative energy” (xv). Western audiences may view Nigerian film as inferior because of the “low” quality production, but the popularity of Afro-centric stories suggests that narrative is more important than appearance, demonstrating how the definition of “quality” is culturally relative.

However, cultural judgment is not limited to film content. Scholar Jeffery Geiger claims certain criticism of the industry is inherently born out of a colonial mindset. Geiger argues that the idea of African colonization “was grounded in the idea of bringing order and aesthetic unity to the disruptive African scene,” connecting critics of Nigerian cinema to colonial ideals because “one of Nollywood's defining characteristics is in fact its lack of order” (Geiger 62). Geiger reveals that thinking of the Nigerian film industry in terms of Western cinema risks falling into neo-colonial ideologies about an African cultural product. This, in turn, undermines the rapid advancement the industry underwent in two short decades. Ultimately the reason that Nigerian films have become so widely popular is because the films are about Africans, for Africans, by Africans. This filling of a void has caused the films to explode across Nigeria and the entire world, causing Nigerian cinema to be “Africa’s most prolific and far reaching cultural industry (Garritano 44). Therefore, the frequent use of “Nollywood” in scholarship and popular media risks the possibility of limiting intellectual understanding to a homogenized industry, reducing the accomplishments of the Nigerian film industry and the people in it to a framework that prioritizes comprehending the industry in terms of the West instead of to Nigeria and Nigerians.

## **DISTRIBUTION – PIRACY, INTERNATIONAL FLOWS, AND GLOBAL POPULARITY**

With the explosion of Nigerian film popularity, marketplaces were soon flooded with copies of the movies. Early Nigerian films were not made for the big screen, rather they were made on VHS tapes to be sold and rented cheaply (Lobato, "Creative Industries" 340). Videos were frequently sold for approximately US \$3.50 per copy, and an eighth of that price for renting (342). On average, each film sold an estimated 50,000 copies, with popular titles selling hundreds of thousands of copies (Mahajan 151). Yet from the founding of the industry, piracy has been a rampant challenge that producers face. Piracy has been so high that in 2013, "it was estimated that pirated films outnumbered legitimate ones in the market by five or ten to one" (Haynes, "Genres" 286). However, piracy does not affect the industry in the same way it would in the United States and immediate dismissal would negate the complexity of the shadow economy.

Part of the reason that the Nigerian film industry's popularity expanded so rapidly was because of piracy. Circuits were already established from pre-existing pirate networks "otherwise occupied with the illegal distribution of Hollywood and Bollywood bootlegs" (Lobato, "Creative Industries" 340). This "infrastructure of piracy" had already been operating for years, largely because Hollywood films were restricted from entering Nigeria in the 1980s and were sourced from pirate networks largely from the Middle East (Crisp 81). Businessmen, like Kenneth Nnebue, imported blank cassettes, pirated foreign films, reproduced them locally, and distributed them through a network of shops, peddlers, and rental clubs (Haynes, "Genres" 11). These informal networks for foreign film easily transitioned to distributing Nigerian cinema in the 1990s. However, scholar Brian Larkin argues that research on piracy tends to focus on the

illegality of the issue instead of how complex infrastructures of piracy mediate and shape film consumption (Crisp 79). He claims that the formal and informal industries of Nigerian film developed in tandem and therefore could never be disaggregated (80). As Nigerian scholar Ifeanyi Ezeonu points out, some of the industry's "greatest enablers are petty traders and video pirates" (Ezeonu 183). Thus, scholarship focusing on the illegality or negative aspects of piracy reveals a Western understanding of intellectual property, which delegitimizes the informal sector that contributed to the success of the film industry. This is not to defend piracy, but rather to suggest that the distribution network is more complex than a moralistic understanding of copying intellectual property for profit.

While piracy may have contributed to the popularity of the industry both in Nigeria and surrounding nations, the act has not gone unchallenged by members in the industry. Even though pirating films is technically illegal, the Nigerian government "turned a blind eye to the pirating of Nollywood films, as it did to the pirating of foreign films" (Haynes, "Genres" 12). Therefore, creatives in the industry responded to piracy in a grassroots approach to minimize lost profits. One strategy was to produce more content in indigenous languages to fight transnational flows across borders. Scholar Carmen McCain argues, "The relatively smaller distribution networks of local-language videos, while still vulnerable to piracy, seem to give filmmakers slightly more control over video markets than the sprawling distribution of English-language films" (McCain 36). Meaning that fewer people speak Nigerian languages outside of Nigeria as opposed to the global prevalence of English, and therefore can act as barrier to transnational flows. Additionally, indigenous-language films frequently pay off economically and are more popular than English films. This move to indigenous languages has both served to support local cultural production, as well as increase revenues because films are less susceptible to piracy.

Piracy also contributed to Nigeria's increasing dominance of regional entertainment. In many parts of Africa, Nigerian films have "invaded markets in the neighboring countries," such as Ghana, Cameroon, Niger, and Benin" (Okome 30). As a result of widespread black market networks of informal distribution, Nigerian cultural influence has "extended far and wide," demonstrating the power of far-reaching alternative networks (Miller 123). People from countries throughout Africa have "complained about the proliferation of Nigerian movies, which are seen as riding roughshod over local cultural production" (125). This dominance exhibits how reorienting the industry paints a dramatically different picture. Although the Nigerian film industry may not seem like a threat to American cinema, it has become a powerhouse in Africa. Thus, when one understands the Nigerian film industry in terms of the United States and its cultural production, Nigeria appears juvenile and unthreatening. However, when shifting the focus to the Africa, Nigeria in many ways is viewed as a cultural imperialist that overshadows the media industries of surrounding countries. Therefore, putting Nigeria at the ideological center instead of the United States depicts a different understanding of the industry and its accomplishments, creating a more nuanced understanding of the significance of the industry on a global scale.

This influence is not limited to the African continent though. One of the largest markets for the Nigerian film industry is the Nigerian and African diaspora. The term "diaspora" is defined by international communication scholars Myria Georgiou and Roger Silverstone as "communities of people originating in a geographical location (often a nation-state) and settling in another" (Georgiou and Silverstone 116). Thus, the Nigerian diaspora refers to the estimated 20 million Nigerians living abroad (Haynes, "Genres" 237). Some of the main markets for the Nigerian and African diaspora are the U.K., the U.S., the Caribbean, and Sub-Saharan Africa, as

well as countries with small African immigrant populations including Spain, Italy, and Germany (Miller 125). Nigerian films have “not only created a market niche for themselves,” but also displaced domination by Hollywood, Bollywood, and Hong Kong films in the Nigerian diaspora (Geiger 68). A study interviewing members of the West African diaspora in Belgium revealed a popular reason why African immigrants connected with Nigerian film was because of “the representation of everyday lived experiences in Nollywood films, considered absent in most European and Hollywood films” (Dekie, Meers, Vande Winkel, Van Bauwel, and Smets 307). This identification reveals that Nigerian films are not simply cultural products for other Nigerians, but they also provide content for an audience that “is African or of African descent” (Adejunmobi 87). The films that Nigerian filmmakers create are intended for Nigerians and Africans, therefore distinguishing themselves from Hollywood because the movies are catered towards different audiences.

Additionally, global popularity led to additional forms of distribution, expanding beyond the physical copies of VHSs, VCDs, and DVDs. Until recently, satellite and cable television networks operating in Western countries with large Nigerian diasporas served as the primary means for formal distribution of Nigerian films outside of Nigeria (Adejunmobi 81). Several international channels are devoted to Nigerian films including British cable channels OBE Channel and Ben TV, as well as the French channel Thelma (Adejunmobi 81). There are also countless channels across the African continent that screen Nigerian movies (Adejunmobi 81). Video on demand (VOD) streaming also became popular after 2011, with several VOD sites emerging such as IbakaTV, WatchNigerianFilmsOnline, and iROKOTv (Dekie, Meers, Vande Winkel, Van Bauwel, and Smets 302). Distribution through the Internet became increasingly important for the young members of the African diaspora as demand increased (Adejunmobi 85).

Consequently, with the increase of popularity in streaming videos for the African diaspora, distribution companies began experimenting with new strategies to reach Nigerian audiences within the country.

### *“The Netflix Of Africa”*

It was this popularity of Nigerian films in the African diaspora that caused entrepreneur Jason Njoku to start his own Nigerian film distribution company. Raised in London by his Nigerian mother, Njoku noticed that his mother’s TV viewing habits changed after he returned from college. Njoku recalled that his mother transitioned from watching British soap operas to Nigerian movies on DVD purchased from African grocery stores (Thakkar par. 5). Njoku discovered that YouTube had free pirated versions of Nigerian movies in scratchy 10-minute segments, and despite the poor quality, the clips had tens of thousands of views. With a business plan in mind, Njoku traveled to Lagos to track down local movie producers to purchase rights to their films (Thakkar par. 5). He purchased 200 titles, paying up to \$1,000 for the agreements. Once back in the United Kingdom in 2010, he launched YouTube channel NollywoodLove and struck a partnership deal with YouTube to pay him ad revenue (Obenson par. 2). Within a year, the NollywoodLove channel was reportedly attracting over a million viewers per month from more than two hundred countries (Adejunmobi 82). Despite the traffic on the website (150 million viewers in 2011), Njoku was unable to convince management at YouTube to cluster advertising in order to not disrupt viewing of a full-length film. Frustrated with their inflexibility, Njoku closed NollywoodLove in early 2012 and founded iROKOTv – after securing \$3 million in seed funding from U.S.-based Hedge Fund Tiger Global – as a stand-alone site streaming Nigerian films (Obenson par. 2). A new era of formal Nigerian film distribution was born.

iROKOTv quickly grew in popularity. Since early investments in iROKOTv from Tiger Global and other investors, the streaming platform had seen “meteoric growth over a relatively short period of time” (Obenson par. 2). Within six months of becoming a standalone-streaming site, iROKOTv registered half a million viewers and attracted international investment worth \$8 million (Adejumobi 83). After one year the website was attracting over one million viewers per month in 200 countries (82). By 2012, iROKOTv had 4,000 Nigerian film titles and claimed to pay \$3,000 for the rights to stream a movie for three years (Haynes, “Genres” 286). In 2016, iROKOTv.com had offices in Lagos, New York and Johannesburg and was watched in 178 countries around the world (Obenson par. 3). Njoku claimed that his early investors made a 3,000% return on their investments into his company after only 5.2 years (Kazeem par. 6). Yet, despite Njoku’s great success, his company is repeatedly referred to in popular discourse as “the Netflix of Africa.”

It is understandable why iROKOTv was called the “Netflix of Africa” by journalists – the business model appears to resemble the streaming services of Netflix. This correlation became more widely talked about by news outlets after Netflix launched in Africa in January of 2016. However, the idea of streaming content is where the resemblances of the two global companies end; but the name stuck (similar to “Nollywood”) and is repeatedly alluded to in journalistic articles. Njoku addressed these comparisons, saying, “Netflix isn’t iROKOTv. iROKOTv is iROKOTv . . . There is only one Netflix of Africa. And that is Netflix” (Matuluko par. 3). Indeed, the two streaming platforms provide drastically different content. iROKOTv is the home of Nigerian film with an unrivalled catalogue whereas Netflix provides vastly different content (Chibelushi par. 4). Njoku also pointed out that 55% of iROKOTv’s subscribers were located outside of Africa, with some of the top markets being the U.K. and the U.S. (also Netflix’s

primary markets). Thus, Njoku claimed that Netflix coming to Africa would not replace iROKOTv because his company was a niche market that had already been thriving in communities with access to Netflix (Kazeem par. 7). Additionally, most of the Nigerian film content on Netflix is licensed from iROKOTv (Matuloko par. 3). Therefore, iROKOTv is not the Netflix of Africa, but rather a dominant player in providing the African diaspora with Nigerian cultural content.

Moreover, iROKOTv adapted their business model to the Nigerian and African audience, straying from Netflix's approach to streaming content. Previously, iROKOTv streamed movies on its website with a monthly subscription of \$5 USD. However, electricity and Internet connection is unpredictable in Nigeria, making streaming almost impossible for local Nigerians. To resolve this problem, Njoku transitioned his company to offer digital movie downloads on an Android application. The company's decision was "based on how slow and expensive data is in many African countries" (Shu par. 9). The app is \$1.50 USD a month and caters to a predominantly African audience because the majority of Nigerians view content on mobile devices (Chibelushi par. 4). Though movies only take a few minutes to download, iROKOTv hopes to compress its films because many Android smartphones sold in Nigeria can only hold approximately three to four gigabytes of storage (Shu par. 11). iROKOTv is also expanding its audience by providing dubbed Nigerian films with voiceovers and subtitles for French-speaking African countries, with plans to translate into Swahili and Zulu in the future (Shu par. 19). Njoku said, "Language is the largest barrier to bringing content to people, so we are doing everything we can to localize it" (Shu par. 20). iROKOTv is also transitioning into producing original content, financing its own television shows and film productions. In 2015, iROKOTv created approximately 100 hours of content and plans to collaborate with up to 20 studios, utilizing data from iROKO's customers, to

decide which types of movies and shows to produce (Shu par. 15). By creating content based on consumer preferences, iROKOTv hopes to expand their business beyond distribution to producing television and film content specifically for an African audience. These adaptations with the African consumer in mind demonstrate how iROKOTv expands beyond allusions to Netflix.

Furthermore, this identification with Netflix takes place even after Njoku differentiated his company from the streaming empire. In Tambay Obenson's news article titled, "iROKOTv Chief: Netflix Being in Nigeria Has Zero Impact on the Company and Its Future," Obenson identified Njoku by aligning Njoku with Netflix, even against Njoku's preferred description. Obenson introduces Njoku as: "Jason Njoku, founder and CEO of iROKOTv.com, the self-proclaimed world's largest online distributor of African content (or the Netflix of Africa as some have labeled it)" (Obenson par. 1). This subtle connection back to Netflix undermines his own "self-proclaimed" title because it gives voice to a comparison that Njoku has already debunked. Thus, continuing to connect iROKOTv to Netflix is problematic because it eliminates the accomplishments and individual business elements of iROKOTv by comparing all streaming platforms to the standardization of Netflix. This is not to say that the two companies have not influenced one another – Njoku has openly declared that he admires Netflix and is frequently inspired by the company (Obenson par. 5). However, within Africa, iROKOTv is beating Netflix at their own game by providing services specific to African consumers. The transition to downloadable content and translations to popular languages in Africa exhibit how Njoku outmaneuvered the streaming media giant to adapt his product to an African audience.

## **SECOND WAVE CINEMA – “NEW NOLLYWOOD” AND FILM EXHIBITION**

A little over a decade after the explosion of Nigerian videos, the industry was beginning to feel a “generalized fatigue” among producers, directors, and audiences (Ryan 56). By 2007,

the Nigerian film industry was in a crisis of over-production with approximately 2,700 films released that year (Haynes, “Genres” 285). Piracy, lack of profit, and over-saturation of content led to a shift in the Nigerian film industry from low-budget rapid-fire productions to larger-budget cinematic experiences. This new format used a tiered distribution method beginning with a theatrical release and ending with a DVD release (Ryan 55). Whereas previous Nigerian film productions focused on the narrative, this second-wave cinema prioritized image and style (55). Shortly after these experiments began in 2010, the term “New Nollywood” was buzzing around Lagos (Haynes, “Genres” 285). “New Nollywood” is a term reminiscent of Hollywood’s transition in the 1970s to “New Hollywood.” Although arguably the term could simply mean “New Wave Nigerian Film,” there is still an association with the American term. This correlation is heightened because the model for “New Nollywood” resembles an American blockbuster strategy, with large budgets, wide releases, and star power. However, even with this terminology association, the structure, style, and content differ from Hollywood, suggesting the need for a more nuanced understanding of the movement rather than as a copycat of New Hollywood.

“New Nollywood” films look and feel drastically different from the early camcorder films shot through the 1990s. More directors were emerging from film schools and had experience with advanced film technology, reflected in the cinematography. The budgets for these new films were much larger – closer to \$100,000-\$400,000 USD – and ten times a mainstream production budget, allowing for producers to buy time and build sets (previous films used to be shot on location) (Ryan 67). Additionally, folks in the Nigerian film industry wanted to compete in the global market by altering film quality (technology and cinematography) and writing scripts. “New Nollywood” attempted to “standardize its trade and foster a glossy visual style,” and put considerable effort towards “mastery of cinematography and production design”

(65). Many hoped that the change in visual aesthetics would be “a mode of production more acceptable in the West” (McCain 32) and would allow for the Nigerian film industry to compete with other film industries on a global scale.

Another key strategy of “New Nollywood” is the tiered theatrical exhibition. This strategy depends on the multiplex theaters that have been opening around Nigeria since 2004 (Haynes, “Genres” 285). However, up until the later 2000s, people were not watching Nigerian films in theaters. A 2005 survey in Nigeria found that almost “nine out of ten had never even visited a cinema” (Mahajan 151). Part of this is because local films were rarely approved for cinema exhibition, with the NFVCB approving less than 1% of Nigerian films in 2011 (McCain 36). Alternatively, films were frequently screened in video parlors where people would pay pennies for entry (Lobato, “Creative Industries” 343). Thousands of these informal movie houses, located in restaurants or private homes with a television screen and VHS player, allowed for accessible viewing of content in times of economic distress (Mahajan 151). Exhibition accessibility is still a challenge today because there are too few cinemas to serve the entire population of Nigeria. As of early 2017, Nigeria only had twenty-eight cinemas for a population of nearly 180 million (Vourlias, “Wedding Party” par. 8). However, theater expansion in the future is likely because larger budget films are becoming increasingly popular. In 2016, 50 local films had a theatrical release – an all time high – revealing the continued trend to produce content for theatrical exhibition (Vourlias, “Wedding Party” par. 10). Even though this strategy may appear more profitable for the industry, it does not come without its downfalls.

Though filmmakers are theoretically able to make more profit on their films in theaters than from informal distribution circuits, they do not always receive the revenues. Federal and state taxes on exhibition venues can be as high as 20% of a film’s net box office earnings. The

producers split the revenue 50/50 on a sliding scale in favor of the cinema operator, and the final week 70% of the revenue goes to the exhibitor (Ryan 64). This means that “all but the highest performing films will fail to meet expected earnings and others will sustain colossal losses” (64). This strategy can also be harmful to the average Nigerian who might find viewing inaccessible. The commercial premise of “New Nollywood films” is that they must “appeal to the people who can afford the luxury of a ten dollar ticket in a country where 70% of the population lives on less than two dollars a day” (Haynes, “Genres” 289). This nuance helps explain why comparing Nigerian box office numbers with U.S. blockbuster revenues erases the economic and logistical difference in access to theater exhibition. Despite these challenges, the trend of exhibiting larger-budget films in theaters is charting new territory and experiencing increasing levels of economic success, as illustrated by the recent box office smash *The Wedding Party*.

### ***The Wedding Party***

Utilizing *The Wedding Party* as a case study, I will examine how the recent “New Nollywood” film has exemplified that Nigerian content can dominate at a box office and compete with international films, challenging the perception that Nigerian films are to be ridiculed in comparison to Hollywood movies. *The Wedding Party*, directed by Kemi Adetiba, is about how a Nigerian couple’s lavish wedding plans turn into a nightmare with exes, fighting parents, and uninvited guests. *The Wedding Party* was a collaborative production between EbonyLife Films, FilmOne, Koga Studios, and Inkblot Productions. Each of these four studios was behind four of the highest grossing films of 2015 (*Fifty*, *Taxi Driver*, *Out of Luck*, and *The Visit*). The four companies pooled their resources together for one large budget of 60 million Naira (approximately \$190,600 USD) (Okiche par. 9). One of the producers of the film was media mogul Mo Abudu. Abudu founded and launched the upscale entertainment and lifestyle

network EbonyLife TV in 2013. Before launching her network, Abudu was also a successful talk show host for almost a decade, interviewing guests such as Hillary Clinton (Vourlias, “Africa’s Oprah” par. 7). Abudu’s success was quickly compared to Oprah Winfrey, and she became nicknamed “Africa’s Opera” (Vourlias, “Africa’s Oprah” par. 7). This comparison, similar to “the Netflix of Africa,” is another example of how successful people and companies are quickly compared to in American figures. Although these comparisons are intended to be complimentary, they have the potential to belittle or undermine the individual’s success and, yet again, contextualize understanding of the industry in American-centric terms.

*The Wedding Party* first premiered on September 8, 2016 at the Toronto International Film Festival. Lagos, Nigeria’s capital, was featured as a spotlight for the ‘City to City’ program, which showcased the work from filmmakers working and living in Lagos (Parke and Adegoke par. 1). Eight Nigerian films were selected, including *The Arbitration*, *93 Days*, and *The Wedding Party*. Though *The Wedding Party* left Toronto without an international distributor, “the plan had always been the Nigerian market” (Okiche par. 27). After the Toronto International Film Festival the movie was screened at the Joburg Film Festival in South Africa, and eventually released in Nigeria on December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016. One Nigerian journalist reported, “If ever there was a Nigerian tent pole production, *The Wedding Party* is what such a concept looks like for now” (Okiche par. 6). Meaning that the production and release strategy of the film during the holiday period made the movie the closest thing to an American blockbuster model that Nigeria has produced and distributed to date. The film also became available on Netflix in early 2017, broadening the audience for Nigerian films and potentially creating an alliance that will popularize Nigerian films outside of the African diaspora.

The film was a massive success in Nigeria and quickly dominated the Nigerian box

office. On opening weekend, tickets for *The Wedding Party* were sold for 2,000 Naira a piece (\$6.17 USD) for an opening weekend gross of 36 million Naira (approximately \$111,100 USD). This broke the record for highest grossing opening weekend and “blew Hollywood champion, *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*’s opening weekend gross out of the water” (Okiche par. 32). The film went on to gross 3.5 billion Naira (around \$11.5 million USD), making it the highest grossing film in Nigeria to date (Vourlias, “Wedding Party” par. 4), and surpassing its closest rival *The Fast and the Furious 7* in the process. But what makes *The Wedding Party* so remarkable is the fact that in 2016, the Nigerian Naira collapsed against the U.S. Dollar by 85%. Nigeria fell into a deep recession with its GDP tumbling from a high of \$569 billion in 2015 to \$481 billion in 2016. Furthermore, this level of box office success is significant considering that there are only “135 screens, serving a population of nearly 190m people” compared to the “UK which has 3,947 screens serving a population of 65m” (“The Wedding Party Drives Nollywood” par. 3). Nigerian journalist Wilfred Okiche claimed that *The Wedding Party*’s unprecedented success is a result of several factors: “strategic collaboration between filmmakers, unbridled ambition, a finely assembled cast, a story that resonates, excellent marketing and publicity skills, a calculated release date, welcoming reviews, strong word of mouth and an audience that is open to be entertained” (Okiche par. 45). Regardless of the specific reasons for success, the film sent a strong message out to the world that Nigerian cinema can compete – and even win – in box office battles with international blockbusters.

Moreover, the immense popularity of this film demonstrates that audiences are starting to choose Nigerian films as their first choice in the theater, straying from Hollywood blockbusters such as *Rogue One* and *The Fast and the Furious 7*. One could argue that this film followed a Western format of a romantic comedy blockbuster, but on the other hand, *The Wedding Party* is

a uniquely Nigerian movie and cultural production. Many of the jokes are cultural references centered on the customs of a traditional Nigerian wedding (for example, the argument of which family should walk down the aisle first), as well as rivalries between classes and ethnicities. The film maintains its “Nigerianness” through language – English, Igbo, and Yoruba – frequently switching between languages in the same scene of dialogue. Additionally, the film includes a wide-variety of Nigerian produced music. In fact, the lead male is Olubankole Wellington, popularly known as “Banky W,” a popular musician hailed as the King of African R&B. Several of his songs, including the popular hit “Yes/No,” are featured throughout the film as well as other Nigerian chart toppers. Ultimately, this film was written by Nigerians, for Nigerians, about Nigerians – and not only Nigerians, but Nigerian women, no less. Therefore, perhaps Hollywood could learn from the Nigerian film industry because Nigeria’s highest grossing film of all time was written, directed, produced, and largely starred in by women.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Nigerian film industry has accomplished a significant amount of growth in a short period of time. Over the course of less than three decades, the industry has developed to dominate the African diaspora and much of the African continent. The industry’s influence is not just cultural though, economically Nigeria’s entertainment and media industry had an estimated total revenue of \$4.8 billion in 2015 and is likely to grow to approximately \$8.1 billion in 2019 (Akwagyriam 4). By shifting the focal point of Nigerian film industry scholarship to Nigeria and the African continent instead of the United States and the West, a more nuanced and complicated understanding of the industry emerges. While comparisons to the United States’ film industry are not inherently bad, the continuous associations from Western allusions perpetuate narratives of the Nigerian film industry as being inferior to the West, and undermine the achievements and

individual success stories of Nigerians in the industry. Moreover, the autonomy and success of the people-driven industry propels Nigeria out of the neo-colonial mindset and contests Western understanding of African industries. As Nigerian scholar Ezeonu writes:

The success of the Nollywood industry has challenged the assumption that Africans prefer foreign products (including popular culture) to domestic ones . . . Nollywood films are not only competing favourably with foreign ones in Africa, but in some cases, have won an even greater audience, especially among the less affluent of the population. (Ezeonu 192)

Thus, the Nigerian film industry shows no signs of slowing down to finally divorce the juxtaposition of African businesses to Western companies. As scholars and journalists, we must assist by reducing the use of over-simplified analogies and cheeky terminology that minimize the accomplishments of this powerhouse industry.

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