THE BLOSSOMING OF
NOLLYWOOD
THE NIGERIAN MOVIE INDUSTRY

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What do you know about Nigerian cinema? Did you know it is now the second largest film industry in the world in terms of film production with 800 to 1000 movies per year? Now, you do and you will learn even more.

Its other name, Nollywood, is derived from the word Hollywood which refers to the home of the U.S film industry. This nickname can remind you of Bollywood, the Hindi Cinema (a portmanteau of Bombay and Hollywood). However, the Nigerian Cinema is nothing like either of them and has a lot to offer in multiple ways. This reportage is meant to be a presentation and a way to discover and understand this Cinema. For the sake of clarity, it focuses first on the **history of the film production** in the country, second on **its themes**, then its famous people, its recognition, the criticisms it faces. The goal of this reportage is to make a clear and short presentation of this cinema, at this end of the reportage, you will find a long list of references about it.
Located in Western Africa, Nigeria is the most populated African country with more than 150 million people from around 250 tribes.

At the beginning of the colonial era (in the early 1900s), Nigeria was divided into the Northern and Southern Protectorates. However, the former was richer than the latter due to a faster economical development. In 1914, the British Empire joined the two entities under the name of Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria to offset the
unbalanced economy. However, the opposition between the North and the South is still the main division of the country.

The Protectorates were separated into three semi-autonomous areas with its own main ethnic group: the North (Hausa); The West (Yoruba) and the Southeast (Igbo). The three had different language, ethnicity, religious beliefs and cultural traditions. The British Empire encouraged this cultural division, partly explaining the ethnic tension of the country. It is also important to know that the North is mostly Muslim and that the terrorist organisation Boko Haram is based on North-eastern Nigeria. It results of interreligious tensions with the rest of the country and within the area itself.

Independent since the beginning of the 60s, Nigeria is now a Federal country with 36 federal states and 250 tribes.

If you want to understand its cinema, it is necessary to differentiate two tributes (the Yoruba and the Igbo).

Why? Because it is thanks to them that Nollywood exists.

The Yoruba and the Igbo are the biggest tribes and were those that contributed the most to the movie industry in multiple ways, both in terms of producing movies and making them popular with the Nigerian Diaspora. In fact, in Nigeria, the Yoruba tribe is composed of around 50 million people, which means the tribe's members are over 20 percent of Nigerian citizens, while the Igbo tribe makes up around 18 percent of the population with more than 27 million people. These numbers explain partly how the Nigerian movies became popular since they had a large audience for them and many contributors that helped it to blossom.
As it is common with African tribes, the Yoruba and the Igbo have different origins and religions. The former most likely immigrated from the East in the Middle Age. By contrast, the latter is probably from Sudan and Bantu-speaking areas of central Africa and East Africa, judge by their linguistics patterns. The Yoruba practice different religions, including Islam and their traditional religion while the Igbo are primarily Christian. These parts of their culture, of their identity shape the way the different groups produce movies and even, how they see them. According to Melita Zajc’s Nigerian Video Film Culture, Hausa cinema attempts to reflect Islamic beliefs while Yoruba cinema focuses more on popular audience themes, even if evangelists’ movies exist.

➢ A brief history of the Nigerian cinema

The history of the Nigerian cinema can be traced back to the colonial era, so, as expected, the movie industry was controlled by the British Empire, especially during World War II. At this time, the Colonial Film Unit (CFU) produced war-oriented propaganda movies to show Germany as the real enemy of the Nigerian people. There were also numerous religious-oriented movies of the missionaries whose goal was to unite their converts in their vision of Christianity.

Then, Nigeria became independent in 1960.

As stated by Tunde Onikoyi, in Nigerian Film Culture and the idea of culture, a lot of major factors influenced the film-making industry at the beginning of the sixties: nationalistic fervour, television and a travelling theatrical tradition associated with the Yoruba people.
So, released in 1962, *Bound for Lagos* was the first feature film made in Nigeria. Despite being British, Edric O’Connor was commissioned by the new government to direct it.

**In 1963, *Culture in Transition* was released. It is considered to be a docu-drama and follows closely the life of the Nigerian people.** By its structure and themes, *Culture in Transition* is "an abridged version" of a stage play, *The strong breed* directed by Bart Lawrence. The next films offer the depiction of one of the events of the History of Nigeria (*Death of a Black President* (1983) based on the assassination of the military head of state, General Murtala Muhammed by Ugboma) or of Nigerian society (*Adeyemi Afolayan, also known as Ade Love’s Taxi Driver* (1983) showing the life of taxi drivers).

**Films of this era are mostly based on urban life, politics and violence. *Ija Ominira* (1978) is one of the most successful films in this period. Directed by *Ade Love*, it focuses on the revolts against a tyrannical king of the Oyo Empire, an ancient state founded by the Yoruba tribe around the 15th century.

During this period, the travelling theatre of the Yoruba contributed to the cinema, first by projecting short films during the plays, then because of the adaption of the plays to television. Some were even serialised for the screen. Time after time, they are recorded in the manner of filmmaking, in various locations. Thanks to this, the theatre troupes increased the audience of television and popularity of Nigerian movies.

An adaptation of Wole Soyinka’s play, *Kongi’s Harvest* was produced in 1970 and is “the beginning of private film production” in Nigeria. It is a movie about a dictator trying to keep his power and authority over the population under his control; so again, you can see
The production of films in indigenous languages began in April 1975 with *Amadi* by Ola Balogun’s society Afrocult Foundation. It was shot in the Igbo language. This movie deals with social problems, it focuses on a young man returning home after an unsuccessful adventure in the city to become rich. It depicts modern agricultural technique, traditional cults and worships. Thanks to this movie, we can see the contrast between the modern Africa and the rural world. It was followed by other films, for example *Ajani Ogun* (1976) in Yoruba and *Sheu Umar* (1977) in Hausa.

Years later, by the middle of the 80s, theatre practitioners were fully involved in filmmaking. This development shows how important theatres are for the history of Nigerian cinema. It is especially true with limited foreign content on television which contributed to the diffusion of local theatre productions, recorded on video as well. Soon, the development of a video movie trade called “home videos” began. In parallel, during the 90s, an economic downturn made the conventional filmmaking equipment too expensive, so the cheaper formats (like VHS) and digital videos were preferred by the cinema industry. However, it affected the cinema industry, until... *Living in Bondage*.

Released in 1992, the drama thriller *Living in Bondage* by Chris Obi Rapu, was the first blockbuster of the Nigerian cinema. It is an Igbo film where a couple (Andy and Merrit) faces various difficulties, especially a lack of money. Andy discovers his friend Paul is a member of a satanic cult and is offered a choice: he can be successful and have as much money as offered, but only if he sacrifices the person he loves the most:
his wife, Merrit. As we can see, **religion is one of the main themes, as well as redemption.**

*Living in Bondage* was so successful that its release is considered as the beginning of a renewed popularity for the Nigerian cinema industry across English-speaking Africa. This cinema turned soon into a reference for its foreign counterparts, such as the Ghanan cinema industry for example. The African Diaspora did have a major role in the spreading of these movies outside the borders of the country. During the 2000s, the Nigerian cinema industry has become one of the largest
cinema industry with a quick movies productions and a lot of imagination and gifted film makers, actors and actresses. In a way, *Living in Bondage* opened the door for a lot of people to bring their passion on screen.

Here is an example of a recent Nollywood movie we talk about later:
THEMES AND FAMOUS PEOPLE OF THE NIGERIAN MOVIES

➢ Themes

As expected with a cinema that produces a huge number of movies, the Nigerian Cinema deals with a lot of themes. One of the main themes is witchcraft. *Living in bondage* is a good example of this theme, so is *Blood money*, released in 1997 and produced by Chico Ejiro. Like *Living in bondage*, a man must sacrifice another person in a ritual in order to become rich.

© YouTube
Like *Living in Bondage*, A lot of movies focus on the financial difficulties and people willing to do anything to become rich, even killing members of their family. Another way to write this theme is to focus on one family and to show the consequences of greediness for the characters. It is a popular theme, but criticized by many because it is considered as a negative vision of the Nigerian society.

As stated, Nigeria has many tributes with different traditions, values or vision of life. In the 90s, a lot of movies showed families broken by polygamy or portrayed some traditions such as the treatment of the Osu (an ancient practice in Igboland discourages social interaction and marriage with a group called Osus, considered as inferior beings). A lot of the themes are cultural, polygamy for example. It is a controversial tradition that is really discussed, even in movies. These days, the two main themes have become marriage and religion, as Nigerian is a deeply religious country. However, it is important to know that emigration, prostitution, drugs, addiction are also recurrent themes for this cinema.

We could say social topics and Nigerian society as a whole is one of the main themes of this cinema.

*The Rising sun* (2003) does is one example of the pressure of society, of its importance on everybody life but also, the importance of love. The main character interpreted by Genevieve Nnaji is a widow victimized by social custom and the expectation of her late husband's family (a theme we can find in Tade Ogida n's *Saving Alero* released in 2002). After a breakdown, she lives in an abandoned hut until her meeting a roaming hunter who falls in love with her. This movie is characterized by its depictions of uncontrollable emotion, its surprising twists, its depiction of the pressure of society and its stunning leads.
These themes (society issues, family dynamics, poverty, betrayal) can be found even in the historical movies where the society of Nigeria is depicted with huge of details.

Released in 2013, *Half of a Yellow Sun* is the story of two sisters discovering love and three other characters in the context of the Nigerian Civil War (a three year conflict (1967-70) between Nigeria and Biafra, one of the mostly Igbo state.)

This movie shows rituals, tradition and Nigerian culture in a historical context and again, you can find the theme of the pressure of the society. The interethnic cohabitation is also a huge topic in this movie as the tension between the Igbo and the Hausa people is shown throughout the movie. Of course, the war is also important as the movie takes place between the beginning and the end of the war.
➢ Famous people

Thanks to Nollywood, many people became famous. It would be fastidious to list all the current famous people, so you can discover two famous actors here. First, Pete Edochie.

Born in 1947, he is considered as one of the most talented African actors. He belongs to the G8, the eight more famous Nigerian actors. The others are Genevieve Nnaji, Omotola Jalade Ekeinde, Nkem Owoh, Ramsey Noah, Stella Damasus Aboderin, Richard Mofe Damijo He came in limelight after playing Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe’s classic novel turned-serial-movie *Things Falls Apart* (1971) revolving around an Igbo man and its community. He is a veteran actor, and one of Africa’s most talented actors, having featured in over 500 films. He is a well admired administrator and broadcaster in Nollywood. He commands respects in Nigeria and around the world as a big name of the Nigerian cinema industry. He was awarded an industry Merit by Africa Magic and Lifetime Achievement by Africa Film Academy in 2011.
Genevieve Nnaji is an actress and singer. She was born in Nigeria in 1979 and grew up in Lagos. After a bachelor’s degree in creative art, she applied to get a role in Nollywood, after a short career as a child actress at the age of eight. She appears in many famous films such as Last Party, Mark of the Beast, Games Women Play, Girls cot and so on.

Being one of the most famous actress, Genevieve plays an important role in Nollywood as a bringer of change. Thinking there was a sort of repetition of storylines and themes, she wanted something new, playing a new character, one who is not a mum, a sister, deaf or dumb. So, after a five year absence, she came back as a producer. In 2015, she released her first film entitled Road to Yesterday. She won an Africa Movie academy Award in 2005 and she is also the first actress to be awarded as Best Actress by the Census in 2003.
RECOGNITION OF NOLLYWOOD

Even if Nigerian and Ghanaian people always took pleasure in watching these movies, African universities first saw them as low-quality entertainment. The low-quality of the movies were mocked in 1999 during a lecture at Cambridge (UK).

Four years later, the theatre director, writer, actress and lecturer Foluke Ogunleye said they were wrong to deny the quality of these movies. On the contrary, she said it was worth studying them seriously in order to put the Nollywood cinema out of its pariah statute among the patronizing critics. The renewed popularity of this cinema at the beginning of the 2000 helped to make it interesting to study. Since then, there has been growing an academic interest. The sudden interest inspired a lot of projects for the production and the management of these movies. The Yoruba movies, their cultural roots, their development, the style were the topic of many theses, mostly from the University of Ibadan and American Universities. This academic interest is another proof of the success of Nollywood.

CRITICISMS OF NOLLYWOOD

As we stated, Nollywood has reached a high level of success and popularity. It has become a true source of inspiration for many African countries. However, the Nigerian film industry is also subject to criticism.

First, as the number two cinematographic industry in terms of productivity, just behind Bollywood, the Nigerian film industry budgets have become quite high in recent years. Some Nigerian personalities,
actors included, expressed their discontent with the matter. For example, in 2016 the famous Nigerian actor Emeka Ike gave an interview criticising the amount of money given to one of his fellow actors, Kunle Afolayan. The new generation of actors and actresses is criticized by Nigerian filmmakers like Charles Novia and Uzo Okpechi. For example they called the new Nollywood actors “Instagram stars”. This example shows their disdain towards them and how they think the actors are more interested in a superficial communication than doing their jobs.

Another argument is about the language of the movies: should it be the English language, so everyone can understand the movie and it can be sold outside the border of the country? Should it be the tribute language so the movie seems more natural? Nollywood movies exist in many languages, but the question is still here, especially because English was the language of the colonizer and that the audience do not seem to mind watching subtitled movies in which the actors talk their tribute languages.

However, one of the more important concerns of the Nigerian film industry is in its content itself, at least in the Northern Nigeria. Sexual scenes involving two female actresses for example have not been received very well by the Muslim community. Due to their religious beliefs, people from the Northern States and even other African Islamic-dominated countries strongly criticized these scenes. This example is very telling, because it shows a split between two groups: on a hand, the mostly Christian Southern Nigeria’s actors are not fazed by playing scenes that could shock religious values. On the other hand, we have the mostly Muslim Northern Nigeria condemns “offensive” contents from Nollywood. For example, Rahama Sadau was banished from Nigerian cinema by the radical Islamists. In a music video, the actress grabbed
the hand of a singer from the Southern Nigeria and that begins a scandal. At the start of the implementation of Charia law on the 12 states of the North, in 1999, movies supposed to be banned because they were not considered as “pure”.

After years of negotiations between different associations, the Islamists decided to accept the development of the Nigerian cinema industry but only if there is a strict respect of Islamic rules, such as an absence of physical contact between actors and actresses. In 2004, the 8 most famous actors were banned from Nollywood for a year due to the discontent of the conservatives, working in the music before coming back. Religious values are important in Nigeria and also, religious tension. Filmmakers oppose to Islamic people by trying to compromise first, then go to the Southern Nigeria. Some filmmakers try to denounce their fanaticism with their movies. It is worth to note that this problem is more present in the North.

THE POINT OF VIEW OF ONE OF THE WRITERS OF THE REPORTAGE ON NIGERIAN MOVIES

My favorite things about Nigerian movies are the accurate depictions of the everyday life of the Nigerian people and the moral dimensions of these, movies where evil always perishes at the end. One of my favorite movies is a good example of that, it is “Sister First Love” by [name], featuring [name] as lead. It is a story about sisterhood and jealousy revolving around two sisters: Gloria, and her youngest sister, Esta.
The latter poisoned Gloria by jealousy to marry her dead sister's husband as she wanted to. So she could take her sister's place and as a stepmother, she mistreated her sister's children. Due to her crime and cruelty, Gloria's ghost haunted her, resulting in a miscarriage, then the loss of her eyes.

Because of the haunting, Esta confessed her crime, but it did not stop Gloria from haunting her until she hung herself.

I know it is sad, but it is interesting to see how evil is punished in the Nigerian culture and life: you can see the meeting of the elders who solve arguments within the village community, the way of Christianity and spirituality are mixed and how beautiful Lagos, the Nigerian capital, is with stunning backgrounds and breathtaking landscapes.
Another favorite movie of mine is “The Road to Yesterday”, a movie written and directed by the famous actress Genevieve Nnaj. She wanted to give something new to the audience, a story that has never been told yet, without fetish, jealousy between friends or sisters, people becoming rich by using magic or any other of the usual themes. “The Road to Yesterday” is a slice of life story revolving around a husband and his wife facing troubles in their marriage with a twist that surprised even myself, a big amateur of this cinema.

I cannot tell you more to not spoil this story. I can only say I have never seen something like that before, it is proof that the Nigerian cinema changes. You can see these movies on Netflix or subscribe to Irokotv, a Nigerian movies platform, so you can enjoy it and so many new films available here (as well than on YouTube).

CONCLUSION

As Nollywood is developing, it is expected to face struggles or criticisms. However, whether it is negative reviews or blasts over the kind of content in the movies, Nollywood has grown big enough and is strong enough to deal with it and become stronger in the future.
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