

Nollywood

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“Nollywood” – the Nigerian direct-to-video film industry – has become the third largest film industry in the world, producing a staggering 1,500 titles per year. It began during the Nigerian political, social, and economic crisis of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the collapsing national currency made celluloid film production prohibitively expensive and when rampant crime made people hesitate to go out to cinemas at night. Widespread ownership of video cassette recorders, an infrastructure developed to sell pirated cassettes of foreign films, numerous personnel who had been working in film, television, or theatre, and a huge potential market allowed the creation of a novel film industry based entirely on video (→ Video; Africa: Media Systems).

The pivotal figure in the creation of the Nigerian video film industry is Kenneth Nnebue, an Igbo dealer in electronic goods who in 1992 produced *Living in Bondage*, the first film in Igbo, followed by *Glamour Girls* in 1993, the first film in English. The industry is still dominated by Igbo businessmen, who often finance films as well as control their marketing and distribution. In some cases, marketers such as Nnebue and Ojiofor Ezeanyaeche have evolved into writing and directing roles, shaping the creative vision of films (→ Cinema).

The business model is to make films very cheaply and very quickly: the average budget is about \$20,000, and films are normally shot in a week or two and released a couple of weeks later. The Nigerian penchant for quick returns on investments informs this model, but it is also determined by the need to stay ahead of pirates, who copy any successful film. Profits leak away in other ways besides piracy. There is no mechanism for producers to receive revenues from the thousands of video rental shops. The lucrative foreign export market for Nigerian films is dominated by pirates, and → television stations that broadcast Nigerian films in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa pay little or nothing to filmmakers (→ Globalization of the Media). All this, coupled with the glut of films in the market, makes heavy investment in a single film risky. Budgets over \$60,000 are rare. The result is visible deficiencies in everything from script development to rehearsals and lighting. Many films are now shot with good digital cameras, but sound recording is a particular problem due to lack of equipment and trained personnel (→ Film Production).

The term “Nollywood” is of recent coinage and is not universally accepted. It refers primarily to films made in English and therefore obscures the important Yoruba and Hausa branches of Nigerian video film production. Yoruba films stem from the Yoruba traveling → theatre tradition, which flourished for half a century on stage, on television, and on celluloid film. Deeply rooted in the Yoruba artistic and cultural heritage as well as responding to contemporary urban life, the Yoruba filmmakers are noted for their clannish social organization and their loyal ethnic audience. Hausa filmmaking is heavily influenced by → Bollywood rather than → Hollywood and responds to a very different moral, religious, and cultural climate. Kano State, the heart of the Hausa film industry, established its own → censorship board after it introduced Islamic Sharia law in 2000, enforcing a ban on any on-screen touching between the sexes.

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Nollywood films, on the other hand, are notoriously freewheeling and sensationalistic. Melodrama pervades the acting, directing, and writing. Their convoluted plots normally sprawl across sequels. In keeping with African cultural values, family relationships tend to be the focus of attention, though there are also plenty of love stories and a gallery of heart-throb actors (Richard Mofe-Damijo, Genevieve Nnaji, Ramsey Noah, Omotola Jalade-Ekeinde). A star system is highly developed: the publicity posters and jackets of the films are invariably covered with the faces of actors who the producers hope will be familiar to the perhaps illiterate consumers (→ Stars). Actors like Pete Edochie and Zach Orji have appeared in literally hundreds of films. Directors like Chico Ejiro, Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen, and Andy Amenechi have shot well over a hundred films each.

Most films register the anxiety that besets contemporary Nigeria, where violence is endemic, corruption is pervasive, economic life is precarious, the social fabric is fraying, and spiritual warfare rages. The films are full of supernatural elements: witchcraft attacks by family members, consultations with diviners about fertility problems, guardian spirits enforcing the traditional morality of communities, businessmen and politicians seeking wealth and power through human sacrifice, and Bible-wielding pastors combating the forces of darkness.

Because video technology is so cheap and easy to use (→ Technology and Communication), Nollywood has arisen as a grassroots phenomenon of petty producers and as an expression of urban popular culture (→ Popular Culture; Film as Popular Culture). In these respects, as in its spectacularly successful conquest of Nigeria's screens, it contrasts with African celluloid filmmaking, which has had minimal distribution in Africa and so has had to rely on external, mostly European funding and foreign festival, art-house, and school audiences.

Nollywood films have flooded the African continent. They are shown on television in Namibia and Congo, imitated in Ghana and Kenya, sold wherever there are Africans in Europe and North America, and can be bought or downloaded from the → Internet. Tunde Kelani, the most respected of Nollywood filmmakers, has shown *Thunderbolt*, *Saworoide*, and *Agogo Eewo* at many international film festivals. Nollywood has truly revolutionized the African media environment.

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