

NEOLIBERALISM, NOLLYWOOD AND LAGOS

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The Nigerian film industry provides a dramatic example of Africa's long history of unequal and unstable insertion into the structures of global capitalism, and a dramatic example of the instabilities of platforms and technologies in contemporary global media environments. 'Nollywood'¹ arose in the early 1990s as a popular art based in the informal sector, which allowed it to flourish at a moment of full economic and social crisis in Nigeria; advances in video technology and the global liberalisation of media environments in this period were other conditions of its existence (Haynes 2000a, 2011). Rapid developments in the period from 2007 to 2015, tied to the global economy, are reshaping the industry and challenging its original popular, grassroots character as transnational corporations have come to dominate the international distribution of Nigerian films and have begun to produce their own original films and television serials. The direction or directions the film industry will take is unclear, but its whole cultural and ideological character is at stake. The same or parallel global and national developments are also reshaping Nigerian cities. This chapter focuses on how the representation of Lagos has changed as Nollywood explores the city's new neoliberal penumbra.

THE DISASTER

Postindustrialism did not arrive in Nigeria as an organic evolution in its own trajectory of capitalist development – it was the result of the structural adjustment programme (SAP) imposed from without by Nigeria's creditors in 1986. SAP collapsed Nigerian industry, along with the whole formal sector. The basic institutions

of modern society largely stopped functioning, crime and corruption blossomed, and many of the most educated and dynamic citizens left the country. SAP and the subsequent global wave of democratisation following the collapse of the Soviet Union were supposed to normalise Africa as part of the global economic and political system, but the opposite happened in Nigeria. Military dictators did not need democratic support because they controlled enormous oil revenues. Beyond oil, Nigeria's relationship with the world economy became defined by the brain drain and the country's new roles as transshipment point for the international drug trade, home of the fraud known as '419', and exporter of sex workers.

For about two decades, roughly 1985 to 2005, international capitalism lost interest in Africa. It had become too poor to provide decent profits and doing business there was too troublesome. When theories of globalisation emerged, they routinely failed even to mention Africa, as James Ferguson points out. He describes how neo-liberal globalisation appears in Africa not as an era but as a force that hops across the landscape, creating isolated nodes of global connection and integration (often related to extraction of minerals) that need to be carefully fenced off from the surrounding poverty (Ferguson 2006: 1–23).

What is special about Nigeria has been the lack of fencing. Successive governments have not been organised enough to run orderly systems of economic apartheid. Even the oil installations of the Niger Delta are spectacularly chaotic: a quarter of Nigerian oil production disappears into an enormous parallel system of illicit refineries and storage facilities, while criminal gangs and impoverished villagers punch holes in petrol pipelines and help themselves. The military regimes of the 1990s did not bother to maintain social order in the cities, either. Even in the wealthiest neighbourhoods violent criminals ranged freely, electricity and water were scarce, and garbage piled up. A lack of effective urban planning meant rich and poor were not rigorously segregated. And deep structures and values of Nigerian society militated against the neat fencing off of classes: these include an incomplete process of class formation; a nearly universal aspiration to become wealthy (at least in the dynamic cultures of southern Nigeria); and extended family structures and patron-client relationships that inherently cut across class lines. Always fundamental, such relationships became crucial for survival when modern formal structures collapsed.

A POPULAR ART

Nollywood was born out of this situation and expressed it. The leading theme of the first video films was 'get-rich-quick' – the scramble for wealth in an anomic environment, shadowed by terror of being thrown out of one's position in the crumbling social order. Prostitution, armed robbery, 419 fraud and drug dealing were prominently featured avenues to quick riches, but the signature instance was the 'money ritual': an occult practice through which wealth is magically produced by sacrificing

a human being. Usually a group of cultists is involved. Such rituals, which have a long history in Nigerian cultures, gained new force as a representation of the predatory cabals that were running Nigeria, and – because in Nollywood’s version, the cabal frequently requires the sacrifice of the person whom the candidate loves the most – they also represented (in the manner of television soap operas) the strain put on marriages and other intimate relationships by economic hardship and greed. The lurid representation of the attractive fruits of wickedness was coupled with a strong moral reaction that had multiple bases, including the values of village social organisation and indigenous religious traditions, the Manichaeic spiritual world of Pentecostalism, and the ideal of companionate Christian marriage introduced by missionaries.

Unlike the American and Latin American soap operas that it in some ways resembles, Nollywood is not mass culture, created by corporations to sell products and train viewers as consumers in a capitalist economy (Haynes 2000b). Nollywood grew as a popular art for and about a heterogeneous urban audience; the Igbo marketers who have mostly controlled distribution and financing are the same in culture and educational level as their core audience. (The classic essay defining the African popular arts is Barber 1987.) The industry lives through its sensitive commercial relationship with the desires of its audience, and that audience has supported a film tradition given to exploring social problems rather than hiding them (Barrot 2008). Nollywood began with outraged moral inquiry into the sources of wealth under military rule and continued to be suspicious of wealth as well as fascinated by it, prying under the attractive surfaces for dark secrets and hidden crimes. Like film and television industries everywhere, Nollywood likes showing lifestyles far wealthier than its audience’s; but ideologically, the films spoke to and for ordinary Nigerians and tended to keep the larger society in mind if not always in view. The ‘family films’ of the 1990s often featured upper middle class Lagos families ensconced behind their high compound walls and were dedicated to defending the nuclear family, but even these films often addressed challenges to the family from without. Village relatives with their social, cultural and financial demands, occult forces that might also be linked to the village, and everything that came with the severely depressed economy of the structural adjustment era all impinged on the imagination of this genre (Haynes forthcoming).

LAGOS, CITY OF DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES

The natural setting for Nollywood’s stories was Lagos – natural because the film industry was based and sold most of its films there, and because for Nigerians Lagos symbolises central Nollywood themes and attractions: ambition, glamour, danger and modernity. With a population of about twenty million, Lagos imposes itself on the national imagination. It was never the exclusive setting, though, and from the

beginning films often oscillated between Lagos and a village or town from which the characters come, reflecting the mobility of the Nigerian population.

As I pointed out in a previous essay, 'Nollywood in Lagos, Lagos in Nollywood Films' (2007), the representation of Lagos was shaped by basic structures of the industry. Nollywood is a huge industry composed of many small producers working on very small budgets (the first great hit, *Living in Bondage* (1992), was made for \$12,000; by 2015 budgets typically ran from \$20,000 to \$80,000). A consequence of this is that Nollywood has very little infrastructure – no studios or warehouses full of props and costumes. Shooting almost always takes place in borrowed locations over which the filmmakers have very little control. This reinforces the strong tendency (inherited from Nigerian television serials, on which most of the first generation of Nollywood filmmakers had worked) for films to be composed mainly of conversations taking place inside rooms, captured with one camera in simple shot/reverse shot patterns. It also reinforces what I called 'inadvertent realism': even when movies are intent on conveying glamorous lifestyles, the ambient chaos often obtrudes into the images. Because of the social diversity of its audience and personnel, Nollywood was always comfortable in all sorts of neighbourhoods.

Most early Nollywood films were shot in or around Lagos, but Lagos is a difficult, distracting and expensive place to shoot, and beginning in the late 1990s film production shifted towards south-eastern Nigeria (not coincidentally, the home of the powerful Igbo marketers). Onitsha became a strong secondary centre for financing and organising productions. By 2012, about half of all Nollywood films were being shot in and around Asaba, a quiet city across the Niger River from Onitsha. Asaba is good at providing settings for the kind of middle class life the Nollywood audience generally aspires to: urban but pleasant and relaxed, with abundant greenery and good infrastructure.

But Asaba remains an anonymous location, almost never named and without easily identifiable landmarks. Films made there or in other cities often have establishing shots of Lagos spliced into them. In Nollywood film culture, only Lagos and (to a much lesser extent) Abuja, the political capital, are iconic urban landscapes. The establishing shots that signify Lagos are heavily stereotyped and have changed little over the years. In fact, the same shots are often used in different films. One set of these iconic images are of the imposing modern structures built during the oil boom of the 1970s: the skyline of the Lagos Island business district with its small cluster of tall buildings, and the freeways, especially the elevated one sweeping over the downtown Marina. Another set is high-angle shots (taken from those downtown tall buildings) of the exclusive residential neighbourhoods of Ikoyi (on Lagos Island) and Victoria Island; these also exploit the dramatic and distinctive natural setting of the islands, separated by narrow bodies of water and linked with bridges. A third set features the upscale shopping and entertainment streets of the Lagos mainland neighbourhoods of Ikeja and Surulere.

AFRICA RISING

The title of Vijay Mahajan's 2009 book *Africa Rising: How 900 Million African Consumers Offer More than You Think* became shorthand for a new moment in international capitalism's view of Africa. Suddenly Africa was back on their map. The international business press trumpeted the fact that six of the world's ten fastest-growing economies were in sub-Saharan Africa. Foreign direct investment poured in. For a decade, Nigeria's growth rate averaged seven percent, and in 2014 its economy was declared to have surpassed South Africa's as the largest in Africa.

Many people observed that this announcement did not change the lives of the majority of Nigerians who live on less than two dollars a day. The deep structural problems in Nigeria, stemming from bad governance and insufficient, crumbling infrastructure, were on spectacular display in 2015 as the Goodluck Jonathan administration handed over to the new president Muhammadu Buhari: the treasury was so empty that the government could not pay its employees, electricity generation reached a nadir, and a shortage of petrol left the country largely paralysed. The supply of electricity was so inadequate and undependable at the best of times that all businesses and citizens who could afford it had their own generators, but there was no petrol to run the generators. Radio and television stations had to curtail broadcasting, and cell phone networks – the heart and pride of contemporary Nigeria, which has had the most rapidly-growing telecoms market in the world – threatened to go down.

Still, some things had changed dramatically for the better: the middle class had reappeared, ready to consume, and the number of millionaires rapidly expanded. These changes were displayed most dramatically in Lagos. Successive governors of Lagos State had undertaken to make Lagos a major hub of African development

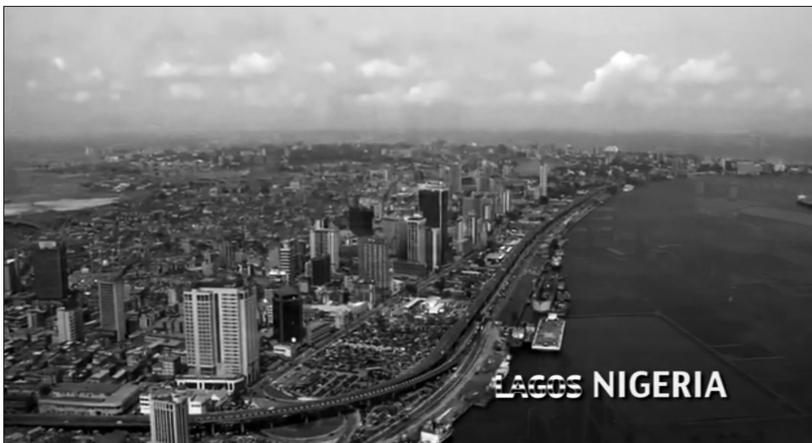


Fig. 1 Lagos as world capital: Establishing shot from *Lagos Cougars*

and a node of the global economy. To this end the city's reputation as urban apocalypse had to be overcome, and they did what had never been done before: planning to address the infrastructure needs of the whole city (Gandy 2005, 2006; Haynes 2007). The vast slums had not yet seen much change, but downtown traffic moved better, crime had been radically reduced, and generally the city had become much more liveable. An ambitious project was underway to build a whole new district of business and residential towers on landfill offshore, in the manner of the Persian Gulf Emirates. Large gated residential developments had been built on the outskirts of the city, and fashionable new residential neighbourhoods had sprung up along parts of the waterfront. The Lekki Peninsula, stretching east from exclusive Victoria Island, had become an enormous enclave for the prosperous.

These transformations are informed by other developments. Estimates of the number of Nigerians living outside of Nigeria run up to twenty or even thirty million. This diaspora is largely a product of the brain drain and is very well educated and well off. The expatriates never lost touch with Nigeria and began moving back or shuttling back and forth, making investments, and encouraging their foreign-born children to make careers in the newly booming economy. They are having a strong and highly visible impact. The Lagos waterfront residential developments are associated with them, and a striking number of the younger generation of television announcers, talk show hosts and other media personalities have British or American accents.

And class formation is taking hold. In the first couple of generations after Independence in 1960, it was common, even normal, for professionals to have parents who were illiterate farmers, and the vast majority of the population either lived in a village or had strong connections to one. This is much less true now. People comment on the deculturation of children who grow up hardly speaking the language of their ancestors because they live in a multiethnic city and spend their time in school or plugged into digital media – all environments dominated by English or Pidgin.

Nollywood, in response to these and other influences, has begun to segment. Nollywood was always complex and the segmentation is far from complete, but several distinct kinds of markets and of filmmaking have emerged. 'Asaba films', as they are often called, are the low end of the market and are under the direct control of the marketers in nearby Onitsha. They are cranked out quickly on very low budgets (the average in 2013 was about \$25,000) and are sold as video compact discs by small shops and street hawkers with little publicity besides word of mouth.

At the high end of the market is so-called 'New Nollywood' (the name became current around 2010), consisting of independent producer/directors who aspire to make films with larger budgets and of high enough artistic and technical quality to be screened in cinemas and at international film festivals (Haynes 2014; Adejunmobi 2014). This initiative continues the long-standing desire of the more ambitious Lagos directors to escape from the conditions of the market for discs run by the Igbo traders. These films eventually end up in that market (where they are usually quickly

pirated), but first they will have made back most of their budgets from other sources. The new multiplex cinemas that have been built in Nigerian cities since 2004 are a key element. These cinemas are almost all inside new upscale shopping malls and charge what are by Nigerian standards very high prices, restricting their clientele to the elite. Expatriate Nigerian audiences are another indispensable element, reached through cinemas in London, ad hoc screenings in the United States and elsewhere, the sale of foreign DVD rights and the Internet. Broadcast rights are sold to terrestrial, satellite and cable television broadcasters in Nigeria and around the world.

CORPORATE INTERESTS IN NOLLYWOOD

The newest element in the situation is the role now played by transnational corporations. Nollywood grew around networks set up by market traders operating out of tiny shops. Their jealous control of distribution and the opaque, informal character of the industry – little or nothing is written down and piracy and cheating are endemic – kept formal capitalist companies and banks out of the picture, though the industry's huge revenues and potential caught their interest. John C. McCall argues Nollywood's commercial economy is not properly capitalist at all (McCall 2012). An attempt in 2007 by the National Film and Video Censors Board to formalise the industry was bitterly (and successfully) opposed by the marketers (Obiaya 2012; Bud 2014).

This character of the industry, coupled with the ease of pirating video, meant that Nollywood has never controlled the foreign distribution of its films, even as Nollywood became immensely popular in most countries across the African continent, the Caribbean, and in African expatriate communities everywhere. The films were reproduced and distributed abroad by small-scale entrepreneurs, usually African but often not Nigerian. At first they were almost all pirated (Jedlowski 2013).

The first important corporate intervention was in 2004 when the South African media conglomerate MultiChoice launched its first Africa Magic satellite channel, broadcasting Nollywood films to forty-one countries in Africa. Africa Magic has a huge audience in Nigeria, where many other television channels also show Nollywood films. The sale of discs plummeted: why buy films when they were on TV, 24/7? The derisory payments producers got for television rights did not begin to compensate for the decline in disc sales, leading to a prolonged crisis of profitability in the industry.

Nigeria has a high rate of Internet connectivity, but as of 2015 the Internet was too slow to allow streaming of feature films. But abroad, the Internet became decisive as a distribution platform. At first the situation was anarchic, with fans putting up thousands of films on YouTube for free viewing. Then iROKO Partners, an Internet startup created by a young Londoner of Nigerian parentage, Jason Njoku, set itself up as 'the Netflix of Africa'. Launched in 2011, it quickly dominated the business of

streaming Nollywood films. It acquired the backing of international venture capital and by 2015 had a catalogue of five thousand Nollywood films and subscribers in 178 countries.

Both MultiChoice and iROKO Partners have begun producing original films and serial dramas in Nigeria. MultiChoice began in 2008 with *Tinsel*, a serial about the entertainment industry. The most expensively produced programme on Nigerian television, it is produced in Lagos under close supervision by South African executives. In 2013 MultiChoice launched into a novel form of low-budget production that blurs the distinction between film and television.² MultiChoice's affiliates Africa Magic and EbonyLife TV commissioned large batches of one-hour films with budgets that were extremely low even by Nigerian standards: about \$8,000. The results resemble reality television, the cheapest kind of television programming.

The point of these films is the style, the look. The producers who contracted to make them were given strict instructions that the locations must be glamorous and the actors young and beautiful, speaking clear English (Kenneth Gyang, personal communication). Mo Abudu, the founder and CEO of EbonyLife TV, is explicit about her cultural intentions: she aspires to become the African Oprah and has told her staff their model should be *Real Housewives of Atlanta* (Tsika 2015).

NOLLYWOOD'S NEW LAGOS: APPARENT AUTONOMY

Lagos Cougars (Desmond Elliot, 2013) is a more substantial Nollywood movie that illustrates parallel cultural tendencies. In March 2015, it was among the first batch of Nollywood films to be streamed by Netflix. Emem Isong wrote, cast, produced and executive produced the film. Isong has been making romantic comedies about young Lagosian urban professionals, strongly influenced by American and British models,



Fig. 2 *Lagos Cougars*: at home in fashionable luxury.

since the late 1990s; at first she had this genre nearly to herself, but now it claims a large share of the market. As the film's title indicates, the professional women at its centre are no longer young, and all three have relationships with younger men. The three friends are differentiated in the manner of *Sex and the City*. One is brazenly cynical in her pursuit of toy boys. Another, innocent and sincere, gets rid of her cheating fiancé in favour of true love with an employee at her fashion house. The third is persuaded to have a fling with a young man who turns out to be her son's best friend; she resolves the resulting dilemma by sacrificing her feelings and desires for the sake of propriety and her relationship with her son. The movie divides its time between Lekki, the posh Lagos neighbourhood described above, and Houston, Texas, home to a large and prosperous Nigerian community. It is remarkably difficult to tell Houston and Lekki apart, especially once we get off the well-manicured streets into the interiors of homes, clubs and restaurants – everything has the same quietly opulent suburban style.

One might compare this film with a genre stemming from Kenneth Nnebue's *Glamour Girls* (1994), the first English-language Nollywood film, which is also about independent women, no longer young, on the hunt for money and sexual pleasure. *Glamour Girls*, embodying a popular perspective, is simultaneously scandalised by women who do not obey conservative social norms and interested in what such women can show about a ruthless and mercenary Lagos where the men are no better than the women. *Lagos Cougars* has no such hard edges or exploratory interest; it is entirely dedicated to sympathetic engagement with the emotional lives of the women and is tightly framed around their comfortable environment.

A striking number of films and television serials deploy a new formula: yuppie women sharing a flat have contrasting personalities, romantic lives and different professions, all of them fashionable and many of them typical of Saskia Sassen's global city of outsourced professionals (1992) or Richard Florida's city of creative communities (2005). The fashion design shop and boutique of *Lagos Cougars* is an example. iROKO's serial *Poisoned Bait* centres on a literary agent and her best friend, a struggling writer. The serial *Classique* (from veteran producer Zeb Ejiro) is about friends who start a talent agency, contrasting one's strict professionalism with another's readiness to try anything that promises money.

Last Flight to Abuja (2012), by the leading 'New Nollywood' director Obi Emelonye, glamorises corporate culture itself rather than capitalism's creative penumbra. A title follows an opening sequence of terror aboard a smoke-filled airplane: 'In 2006, a series of air mishaps rocked Nigeria's aviation industry. This is the story of one of them.' In standard disaster movie fashion, the film then backtracks to give us the stories of various passengers. First we see a staff meeting of an IT company in Lagos. The Chairman, happy with the latest sales report, hands out tickets to Abuja for an all-expenses-paid retreat for relaxation and company team building. The premonitory terror of one employee's daughter keeps him off the plane, and the pilot's wife's nightmares cause him to change his schedule though, ironically, this puts him



Fig. 3 From the credits of *Last Flight to Abuja*

onto the doomed aircraft. These premonitions and the general attention to the twists of fate leading up to boarding the plane introduce a characteristically Nollywood fascination with the workings of destiny into the slick international surfaces of air travel.

David (Jim Iyke), a sales manager at the company, boards and sits next to Suzie (Omotola Jalade-Ekeinde). She is an Abuja-based executive in a commuting relationship with her fiancé, with whom we saw her talk on the phone as she drove through Abuja's sleek corporate cityscape. He wants her to quit her job, but she is proud of her MBA and doesn't want to be a housewife. She flew to Lagos on the spur of the moment because he sounded unhappy, but there she finds another woman in his bed. So she catches the last flight back to Abuja. She shares all this with David in the next seat. He reveals that he is also a lovelorn workaholic. When the plane fills with smoke, he asks her for a date so they'll have something to live for.

Adesola (Hakeem Kae-Kazim), the company's chief sales manager, is also on board. Flashbacks tell his story. An intern with whom he once had an affair knows he has been shaving money off the company's contracts and is blackmailing him. He accidentally kills her as they fight in a hotel room. He realises on the plane that his company ID fell out of his pocket into a pool of her blood. Auditors are on the trail of his professional malfeasance, and the police are waiting in Abuja to arrest him for murder. In the crash his leg gets caught under a seat (with fatalistic cynicism, he had refused to brace himself as instructed), so he alone is unable to escape before the plane explodes in flames. On the TV news, Suzie's faithless fiancé sees her embracing David in front of the inferno as an emergency rescue crew efficiently goes about its business.

We are shown why the plane goes down: a passenger checked a car battery as luggage and it shorted out, bursting into flames. We also see a mechanic completing a pre-flight inspection, suggesting the blameless competence of the airline. The glamour of air travel is emphasised by a sequence of the pilot sweeping through the terminal with a flight attendant on each arm while people watch admiringly. A



Fig. 4 *Last Flight to Abuja*: the romance of air travel.

woman comments, 'There's something damn crazy about a pilot in uniform.' In the cockpit, before the trouble starts the pilot and female co-pilot carry on a conversation that continues the film's preoccupations with love relationships, fidelity and the gender double standard in the context of demanding careers. If being a pilot makes him sexually glamorous, it seems to destroy her desirability, even though she is beautiful – men find her intimidating, or perhaps suspect she is a lesbian. The whole conversation, especially the male pilot's responsible management of his sexual power (he flirts but keeps to his marriage vows), reinforces the film's adulation of the airlines and its conservative values: competent professionals are in control as they should be, the virtuous natural leaders of society.

Hollywood hasn't felt this way about air travel in decades, and in Hollywood disaster movies there is usually a villain: a terrorist on board, an avaricious corporate executive risking lives by cutting corners, or an elaborate conspiracy of some kind that may express dark suspicions about the nature of the American economy and polity. In *Last Flight*, there is only the battery and the principle of an inherent justice that underlies Nollywood's melodramatic plots. Adesola's misdeeds will be punished by fate before the authorities get to him. Obscure promptings springing from the love of a wife or daughter may save a man. The true lovers Suzie and David, battered by a society of philanderers and gold-diggers, find one another and have their union broadcast.

The film's opening title reminds the audience of the series of 'air mishaps' in 2006, and ends with a dedication 'to the victims of the June 3rd disasters' – a 2012 event in which a plane crashed while approaching the Lagos airport, killing everyone on board and setting a neighbourhood on fire. In the film, the air traffic controller in Lagos wishes he'd gone home before the crisis, but otherwise the film gives no hint, and actually works hard to avoid any suspicion that there might be anything systemic about the crashes.

The facts are otherwise. The film is clearly modelled on an October 2005 crash, which killed not one sinner but all 117 people on board. The authorities did not respond with rapid, competent authority. When the plane disappeared from radar

it took hours to locate the crash site, though it was less than twenty miles north of Lagos and a fireball had lit up the night sky. Because the passenger manifest was inaccurate, as they commonly were given chaotic boarding procedures, it took time to determine who had died (Polgreen 2005). By the time the authorities arrived on the scene, villagers from the area had pillaged the wreck, apparently making off with the black box voice and data recorders. Absent the black boxes and any survivors, the official commission of inquiry could not establish the cause of the crash. It did find that the plane had technical defects and was not following an adequate maintenance regime and so should not have been flying, and that the undertrained and overworked pilot also should not have been flying (Anon. 2014). Three other spectacular crashes within the next eighteen months killed hundreds more. Outraged protests brought real reforms and dramatic improvement; Nigerian airspace ceased to be considered the most dangerous in the world, though challenges remain.

Why this weirdly complete and elaborate misrepresentation of the event, even as *Last Flight* explicitly refers to it, exploiting the power of the public's memory?

The film feels like corporate propaganda though it was not financed by an airline or other corporation. The credits and the bonus 'Making of' documentary on the DVD illustrate the resourceful exploitation of personal networks typical of New Nollywood productions. The money came from Emelonye's brother, a businessman, and other 'friends and family'. Emelonye lives in Britain and recruited young Britons as editor, director of photography, co-producer and composer. Emelonye boasts of the film's high budget; they shot in the airport for fourteen days, a conspicuously expensive thing to do. High-end equipment was rented from Hollywood. The casting is a tribute to the drawing power of the Nollywood brand, including Hakeem Kae-Kazim (Adesola), a British Hollywood actor, and major stars from the Hausa and Yoruba film industries as well as Nollywood.

The film perhaps veers towards corporate propaganda and whitewashes the realities of the crash out of pride in the new shiny corporate dimension of Nigeria – an expatriate's pride (shared with the African diasporic audiences indispensable to New Nollywood projects), concerned to counter racist stereotypes about African backwardness. Perhaps the production was also carried away by its own Hollywood-like ability to simulate the world of air travel and the crash of a jetliner – an unprecedented technical accomplishment for Nollywood.

Last Flight is not the product of Nollywood's integration with corporate capitalism, then, but it demonstrates eligibility for such integration. Emelonye's 2015 film *Thy Will Be Done* was financed by ROC Studios, iROKO Partner's production and financing division, and it premiered at the Southbank IMAX theatre in London amidst publicity about Nollywood taking over the largest, most iconic screen in Britain.

Revering in the culture of business and success is nothing new for Nollywood, which always catered to its audience's aspirations. Near the beginning of *Last Flight* we hear a radio DJ saying, 'be optimistic and embrace change' – a peppy dose of official ideology for transnational capitalist strivers, but the phrase would have

resonated with the young careerists' great-grandparents, market women or farmers turning entrepreneurially to cocoa cultivation for the cash to educate their children. In Lagos, two-thirds of jobs are in the informal sector, but the 600,000 people who move to the city each year are dreaming of something better (Brown 2015), and they like entertainment that shows that improve upon real life.

But Nollywood mostly did not present wealth in isolation from a bigger picture. What is new is the consolidation of a Potemkin Village version of the country in which the private lives of the privileged fill the screen, their apparently autonomous reality obscuring much of what the old Nollywood knew. Historically, Nollywood has taken the perspective of the nation, not of a class fraction.

IT'S COMPLICATED: OTHER TENDENCIES AND AN UNDECIDED FUTURE

This tendency to move upscale is strong but not dominant. Both the television broadcasters and the Internet companies are, after all, in the business of providing huge amounts of content to suit viewers of various tastes, classes, cultures and nationalities, which should temper the desire to brand themselves in an exclusively glamorous mould. Films from the Yoruba and Hausa branches of the Nigerian film industry do well on these platforms even with audiences not from those ethnic groups (Ekwuazi 2014), partly (it seems) because the films are more deeply embedded in African culture and less dedicated to chasing after Western lifestyles.

iROKO Partners' first foray into producing an original series was *Festac Town* (2014–), named after a Lagos neighbourhood and created by Mary Remmy Njoku. She is a Nollywood actress, now the chief executive of ROC Studios and the wife of Jason Njoku, iROKO's founder. At that London IMAX premiere, the couple was photographed on the red carpet looking like movie moguls.



Fig. 5 Establishing shot in opening credits of *Festac Town*



Fig. 5 *Festac Town*: Mary Remmy Njoku as Justina

But the character she plays in *Festac Town* is the opposite of glamorous. Justina is unemployed and extremely poor, living with her young twin daughters in a single room, pregnant with another child. The show takes a level view of her life, toning down Nollywood's usual sentimentality and melodrama. In early episodes we watch her losing her struggles to find a job, provide for her children, and deal with her depression. *Festac Town* captures the human costs of life in Lagos, the constriction of living in small, dilapidated spaces, the desperate strict parenting meant to keep children from being swept away into the ambient wastage of human life, the hope of giving them the education she never had, the brutal demands for overdue rent by a landlord who spews accusations about her sexuality, the failing attempt to keep body and soul together through selling vegetables to her neighbours, the trudging around looking for wage labour, the fervent prayers as her last resort. But her story also shows what keeps people going in these conditions: a warm, open disposition that gives her a place in the fabric of the neighbourhood and secures relationships with benefactors.

Festac Town has a wide social range, firmly anchored at the lower end. The opening credit sequence explores Festac's streets from a moving vehicle, ending at a banged-up apartment building. Inside, a group of prostitutes recurrently quarrel in Pidgin. Nearly the whole show is in Pidgin, the lingua franca of southern Nigeria – the pungent popular speech carefully excluded from EbonyLife TV. Outside on the streets, young men take drugs and drink, the fruits of criminal activities organised by a crime boss who has connections to wealthy men who are themselves linked to powerful politicians. It is through these connections that we work our way up the social scale.

The show picks up the mantle of the enormously popular Nigerian television series of the 1960s and '70s such as *Village Headmaster* and *Masquerade*, which deliberately created an image of the Nigerian nation as an expansive family or

neighbourhood with characters of various ethnicities, ages, classes and educational levels, all contributing to a rich comic play of perspectives and the linguistic stew of the dialogue. *Festac Town's* astringent realism is much darker; like Nollywood (and like HBO's panoramic urban dramas, a possible model), ROC Studios can take advantage of a freedom never possible on government-controlled broadcast television. The description of the series on the iROKOTv website reads, 'The secret lives of the upper, middle, and lower class living in Festac. Their fears, tears, pains and victories.' This might serve as a thematic summary of all the thousands of Nollywood films: the wide social range, the emphasis on unveiling what is hidden, the primacy of florid emotionality, the deep interest in tribulation and the congenial optimism that promises final victory.

The future direction of Nigerian film and television is profoundly uncertain, then, and their social nature is at stake. The social and cultural stratification of Nigerian society (and Nigerian cities) will clearly continue, and transnational corporations will clearly continue to play a major role in Nigerian media. In one scenario, the corporations quickly become dominant and Nollywood turns into another mass culture industry. In another scenario, Nollywood finds an entirely new platform and economic basis: thousands of small community cinemas in popular neighbourhoods, supplementing the proliferating upscale multiplexes. As of 2015, there was much talk of such community theatres but they did not yet exist (Haynes 2014). The revenues they generated would restore the clear hegemony of the tastes and desires of a broad popular audience over film production, while New Nollywood directors reached more elite audiences and the corporations controlled international distribution and provided the stability and deep financing for television serials. Nollywood's whole history is of managing to survive in the face of rapidly shifting and apparently impossible circumstances, and of maintaining a vision of a broad social cohesion in spite of all the provocations of recent Nigerian history. So there are reasons for optimism about its future.

NOTES

- 1 'Nollywood' is sometimes used to mean the whole Nigerian video film industry, which has three main branches making films in English, Hausa and Yoruba; 'Nollywood' is also used to refer exclusively to the English-language branch located in southern Nigeria, which is how I use it, though much of the following applies to the other branches as well.
- 2 That distinction has always been exceptionally narrow and permeable in the case of Nollywood, which largely grew out of Nigerian television (Obaseki 2009). Nollywood films are almost always viewed on television screens, and their aesthetics resemble televisual forms (Adejumobi 2003). Many producers and directors move back and forth between film and television.

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