

# Global Nollywood

THE TRANSNATIONAL DIMENSIONS  
OF AN AFRICAN VIDEO FILM INDUSTRY



EDITED BY **Matthias Krings** AND **Onookome Okome**

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## Preface and Acknowledgments

THE ORIGINAL INSPIRATION FOR THIS BOOK GOES BACK TO the “African Film” conference that took place at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, in 2007. The conveners of this remarkable conference, Mahir Şaul and Ralph A. Austen, had brought together not only film scholars and social scientists but also – for the first time in such scholarly meetings – researchers, critics, and even practitioners of the two dominant and very different filmmaking practices of the African continent: the Nollywood video film and art house cinema (of largely Francophone provenance). Both of us took part in this conference and also contributed to the collection of published essays titled *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century* that came out of it. Inspired by the success of this transdisciplinary approach, we convened our own conference in May 2009 at the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany. Focusing on the engagement of the Nigerian video film industry with the world beyond Nigeria, the “Nollywood and Beyond” conference expanded on yet another aspect – the de facto “pan-Africanism” of Nigerian video film (to quote John McCall) and the emergence of its audiences beyond the borders of Nigeria.

Encouraged by Indiana University Press to edit a collection of essays that focuses entirely on the diasporic dimension of Nollywood, we decided to call in four additional contributors whose research proved highly relevant to our topic. Thus, Jane Bryce, Alessandro Jedlowski, Sophie Samyn, and Giovanna Santanera provide us with fascinating chapters on the spread of Nollywood in Europe and the Caribbean. We are also extremely happy that three brilliant essays, which were presented at the “Nollywood and Beyond” conference by Lindsey Green-Simms,

John C. McCall, and Carmen McCain, and whose topics lay beyond the scope of the present volume, were published in 2012 in a special edition of the *Journal of African Cinemas*, edited by Jonathan Haynes.

For the generous financial support of our conference and the present book of essays, we express our gratitude to Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, especially the Research Center of Social and Cultural Studies at Mainz (SoCuM), the Center for Intercultural Studies (ZIS), the Department of Anthropology and African Studies, and the Friends of the University. We also owe thanks to the student assistants who helped organize the conference, namely, Andres Carvajal, Annalena Fetzner, Sandra Groß, Juliane Hebig, Janika Herz, Andrea Noll, and Elke Rössler.

We express our intellectual gratitude to those conference participants who are not represented in this volume, including Adedayo L. Abah, Gbemisola Adeoti, Maureen N. Eke, Till Förster, Lindsey Green-Simms, Biodun Jeyifo, Daniel Künzler, Brian Larkin, Carmen McCain, John C. McCall, Birgit Meyer, Sarah Nsigaye, Kayode Omoniyi Ogunfolabi, Kaia N. Shivers, Francoise Ugochukwu, and N. Frank Ukadike. Saartje Geerts screened her film *Nollywood Abroad*, a documentary about Nollywood-style filmmaking by Nigerian immigrants in Belgium. Discussions at the conference were also enriched by the presence of a delegation of the Nigerian Film Corporation, headed by its managing director, Afolabi S. K. Adesanya, and the president of the Directors Guild of Nigeria, Bond E. Emeruwa. We thank them both. We also extend our profuse thanks and gratitude to Dee Mortensen and Sarah Jacobi of Indiana University Press, who provided wonderful editorial support at the initial stages of this project, as did Pauline Bugler, Marie Brüggemann, and Annette Wenda during the final stages of our project.

# Global Nollywood

# Contents

*Preface and Acknowledgments* · vii

Nollywood and Its Diaspora: An Introduction

*Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome* · 1

## PART 1. MAPPING THE TERRAIN

1. From Nollywood to Nollywood: Processes of Transnationalization  
in the Nigerian Video Film Industry · *Alessandro Jedlowski* · 25

2. Nollywood's Transportability: The Politics and  
Economics of Video Films as Cultural Products

*Jyoti Mistry and Jordache A. Ellapen* · 46

## PART 2. TRANSNATIONAL NOLLYWOOD

3. The Nollywood Diaspora: A Nigerian Video Genre

*Jonathan Haynes* · 73

4. Nollywood Made in Europe · *Sophie Samyn* · 100

5. Made in America: Urban Immigrant Spaces in Transnational  
Nollywood Films · *Claudia Hoffmann* · 121

6. Reversing the Filmic Gaze: Comedy and the Critique of the  
Postcolony in *Osuofia in London* · *Onookome Okome* · 139

7. Nollywood and Postcolonial Predicaments:  
Transnationalism, Gender, and the Commoditization  
of Desire in *Glamour Girls* · Paul Ugor · 158

PART 3. NOLLYWOOD AND ITS AUDIENCES

8. Nollywood in Urban Southern Africa: Nigerian  
Video Films and Their Audiences in Cape Town  
and Windhoek · Heike Becker · 179
9. Religion, Migration, and Media Aesthetics: Notes on the  
Circulation and Reception of Nigerian Films in Kinshasa  
Katrien Pype · 199
10. "African Movies" in Barbados: Proximate Experiences  
of Fear and Desire · Jane Bryce · 223
11. Consuming Nollywood in Turin, Italy  
Giovanna Santanera · 245
12. Nigerian Videos and Their Imagined Western Audiences:  
The Limits of Nollywood's Transnationality · Babson Ajibade · 264

PART 4. APPROPRIATIONS OF NOLLYWOOD

13. Transgressing Boundaries: Reinterpretation of Nollywood Films  
in Muslim Northern Nigeria · Abdalla Uba Adamu · 287
14. *Karishika* with Kiswahili Flavor: A Nollywood Film  
Retold by a Tanzanian Video Narrator · Matthias Krings · 306
15. Bloody Bricolages: Traces of Nollywood in  
Tanzanian Video Films · Claudia Böhme · 327

*List of Contributors* · 347

*General Index* · 353

*Film Title Index* · 369



# Nollywood and Its Diaspora: An Introduction

MATTHIAS KRINGS AND ONOOKOME OKOME

NOLLYWOOD, THE NIGERIAN VIDEO FILM INDUSTRY, HAS BECOME the most visible form of cultural machine on the African continent. It emerged before our very eyes, in our time. Beginning life in an uncharacteristic manner in Nigeria about twenty years ago, Nollywood has become a truly pan-African affair, as the essays in this volume show. Shot on video, edited on personal computers, and copied onto cassettes and discs, Nigerian video films travel the length and breadth of the continent connecting Africa, particularly Nigeria, to its diverse and far-flung diasporas elsewhere. Satellite television, the Internet, and piracy – at once Nollywood's boon and bane – facilitate the spread of its films across linguistic, cultural, and national boundaries. At the level of the individual spectator, Nollywood stirs the imagination, provoking its viewers to compare their own daily lives with what is presented on-screen as they explore the similarities and differences between the pro-filmic and the filmic world. The continent-wide influence of Nollywood, however, does not stop at this level. In Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa, for example, Nollywood has served as a model of film production and inspired the growth of local film industries, which in the case of Tanzania have already begun capturing a regional market. In these countries and elsewhere, Nigerian video films are appropriated and reworked into local forms of filmmaking and other cultural models of narrativization with local inflections that borrow and copy heavily from Nollywood. This diasporic influence of Nollywood – its spread across the continent and the fostering of localized versions of this mode of filmmaking – constitutes two dimensions of Nollywood's transnationality, which we focus on in this book. Our allusion to the concept of diaspora, which we

find compelling in addressing the transnational in Nollywood, covers equally the use Nigerian and other African immigrants in Europe and the United States make of Nollywood – both as consumers of Nigerian video films and as producers of Nollywood-style films.

Although all this indicates that Nollywood has since become a de facto transnational practice in the broad sense of the word, if not a pan-African affair, calling Nollywood an “African popular cinema” is still provocative. At the least, this is how those studying Nollywood’s *other*, the African auteur cinema, feel. The latter was the only cinema produced on the continent until Nollywood emerged. African celluloid filmmaking of this kind is centered in French-speaking West Africa and is identified by the biennial festival FESPACO (Festival Panafricain du Cinéma et de Télévision de Ouagadougou). Less commercially oriented than Nollywood, this tradition of filmmaking has been conceptualized by its practitioners and their scholarly proponents as a tool to decolonize the minds of African audiences. Often overtly political, it was, and still is, meant to counter the hegemonic Western gaze on Africa with emancipatory self-representational images. Nollywood challenges this older form of African cinema not only in terms of its far greater accessibility and therefore popularity with “the African masses” but especially through its representational regime, including lengthy depictions of witchcraft and magic, which in the eyes of Nollywood’s critics constitutes a clear setback to the emancipatory politics of African auteur cinema. In two previously published essays, John McCall (“The Pan-Africanism We Have”) and Onookome Okome (“Nollywood and Its Critics”) have reflected on the tensions of this debate from the viewpoint of Nollywood studies. In this present volume, scholars and filmmakers Jyoti Mistry and Jordache A. Ellapen are cautious of our enthusiasm about Nollywood’s popularity, questioning the political stakes in naming Nollywood African cinema. The main reference upon which this critical engagement draws comes from framing African cinema as part of postcolonial studies, which seek to reverse the Western hegemonic gaze of the continent.

Rather than reiterating the history and constitutive facts about Nollywood again, all of which has been documented in a number of publications and documentary films,<sup>1</sup> we wish to use the larger part of this introduction to focus on questions arising from Nollywood’s pan-

African appeal and draw out some overall conclusions from the essays presented in this volume. Designating Nollywood “an African popular cinema” means taking into account the diversity and sometimes wholly contradictory perceptions of Nigerian video films in Africa and the African diaspora. Local contexts of consumption reveal that these films are full of modes of modernity, which Africans and people of African origin desire and copy, and contain forms of tradition that they find both frightening and contemptuous. Accounting for Nollywood’s popularity thus also means discussing the nature of the controversy it stirs up. Why is Nollywood so popular in Nigeria and beyond, and why is it so controversial at the same time? What causes this odd sense of popularity and controversy? What significance does this have for the study of Nollywood, African cinema, and African culture more generally?

#### NOLLYWOOD’S APPEAL IN NIGERIA, AFRICA, AND BEYOND

As many observers have argued, accounting for Nollywood’s appeal in Africa and beyond means examining the cultural affinity between what is represented on-screen and the immediate social world of Nollywood’s African and other diasporic audiences. In a study about Nollywood viewership in Uganda, Monica Dipio argues, “Nigerian film is popular in the sense that it traverses the immediate culture in which it is set as people beyond the borders of the immediate community can identify with it” (53). The continental value of the Nollywood film, Dipio asserts, is that “the films are about the archetypal principles of good and evil” (*ibid.*), with which many African communities will readily identify. In a similar vein, Ngoloma Katsuva explains the popularity of Nigerian video films in the Democratic Republic of the Congo by referring to “the similarities between Nigerian culture and other black African culture” (96). The cultural proximity referred to in this and similar statements is, of course, subjectively relational. Measured against the reified culture of American films and television series broadcast by African TV stations, the culture on display in Nigerian video films may indeed look familiar to many viewers in Africa. Not surprisingly, therefore, across the continent Nigerian video films are first and foremost hailed for their Africanity, a point that Katrien Pype reports from Kinshasa in her contribu-

tion to this volume. This point is also commonly and tellingly expressed by audiences in Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, and Barbados quoted in the contributions by Heike Becker, Claudia Böhme, and Jane Bryce, respectively. On the level of visual appearance, Africanity may refer to an all-African cast – something many viewers across the continent and its diasporas who are accustomed mainly to Western (and Eastern) movies experienced as a novelty. Barbadians, for example, cherish the voluptuous image of the female body depicted in Nigerian video films, one that values plumpness and thus differs from the Western concepts of beauty shown in Hollywood films (Bryce, this volume). A Ugandan viewer interviewed by Dipio adds that Nigerian video films are able to move their African viewers away “from struggling to fit into Western stereotypes of beauty as slimness” (67). In this way, this audience sees the Nigerian films as fostering the “acceptance of one’s self, one’s situations and circumstances, acceptance of one’s body,” as one of Heike Becker’s South African interviewees concludes, and thus implicitly refers to what Hollywood movies lack for African audiences. Likewise, the settings of Nigerian video films, urban and rural, have a high degree of familiarity for many African viewers outside Nigeria.

Despite these superficial resemblances, however, there is also some difficulty in arguing for the cultural proximity between these films and their transnational African audiences, at least “in the sense of shared cultural heritage, shared cultural patrimony or devotion to a common store of values,” as Moradewun Adejunmobi makes clear in her illuminating essay “Charting Nollywood’s Appeal Locally & Globally.” She argues instead that what matters is the films’ “phenomenological proximity” and that they travel so well “because the conflicts they represent and the resolutions they offer are perceived to be experientially proximate for postcolonial subjects” (108–11). It is safe to say, therefore, that Nollywood matters to its audiences because it is concerned with contemporary topics that constitute the “thickness of which the African present is made,” to quote Achille Mbembe (273).

But the culture of Nollywood films is loved not only for its perceived similarity to local cultural formations but equally for its alterity, so that copying patterns of behavior, fashion, and speech style from Nigerian video films becomes a playful means for individual viewers to distinguish themselves from the cultural patterns and social norms of their

own societies. There are references across the continent to the fact that the aesthetics of Nigerian video films influence public culture elsewhere. Kenyan politicians have been spotted wearing Nigerian gowns (Ondego 116), Congolese seamstresses receive requests to sew dresses and skirts in Nigerian styles, new buildings in Kinshasa are inspired by architecture seen in Nigerian video films (Pype, this volume), names of Nigerian actors and film characters have become templates for nicknames in Kenya (Ondego 116), and South African students even consciously mimic the Nigerian English accent to set themselves apart from their fellow countrymen (Becker, this volume). It seems reasonable, then, to accept Becker's observation that the consumption of Nollywood films provides viewers in South Africa and Namibia "with the opportunity to claim, reinvent, and debate their Africanity." What this suggests is that the idea of Africanity that Nigerian video films elicit is never straightforward or always positive as a way of defining "Africanness." It all depends on the particular social context of consumption. Elsewhere, though, Nigerian video films are not cherished as much out of nostalgia for a lost "African" traditional past that seems to be specific to post-apartheid countries. Yet they certainly allow their viewers to imagine what it means to be modern in an African way. In that sense, Nigerian video films function similarly to Indian films for Muslim youths in northern Nigeria, as Brian Larkin argues in his essay "Indian Films and Nigerian Lovers." As Bollywood movies allowed their Muslim Hausa viewers to perceive a "parallel modernity" coming "without the political and ideological significance of that of the West" (407), Nollywood films offer their audiences in Nigeria and beyond a particular brand of "Afromodernity." As John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, who coined this term, point out, Afromodernity is not "a response to European modernity, or a creature derived from it," but "a complex formation" that is "actively forged, in the ongoing present, from endogenous and exogenous elements of a variety of sorts" (202). The Afromodernity presented in Nigerian video films is forged equally out of a belief in magic and witchcraft, as of belief in Christian deliverance; out of village life and traditional custom, as of city life with all its modern items such as luxurious cars, fantastic mansions, and global technologies; out of opulent African attire, as of European designer clothes. Key to the Africa-wide appeal is the fact that the "vernacular modernity" (200) Nollywood forges is perceived as the

same but different enough from African contemporary life elsewhere on the continent to allow for both identification and fascination prompted by alterity.

However, apart from such general observations, it is worth paying close attention to specific contexts of consumption, as several of the essays in this volume do. This reveals that Nollywood films may have different functions for specific audiences. A few examples will suffice to substantiate this point. Writing about Kinshasa, where charismatic Christianity permeates public culture and in particular its broadcast media, Katrien Pype discusses how pastors show Nigerian video films in churches and on their television channels. Interpreted by bilingual Evangelists, Nollywood films thus serve Congolese Christians as audiovisual parables. This is unlike the function they perform for young academics in Cape Town and Windhoek, which Heike Becker describes as triggering nostalgia for a lost African past, epitomized in Nollywood's depictions of village life, a sociocultural reality that these viewers have no actual experience of, but meets their yearnings "for a home of their own, as Africans, in the contemporary world." Regarding the diasporic Nigerian viewers in Italy, Giovanna Santanera's chapter focuses on Nollywood films serving as a means to reconnect to a cultural home in a more literal sense. For immigrant viewers who are new to Italy, the films provide a "map of experience" (Barber 5), a familiar, symbolic, and discursive order against which they measure themselves to cope with the "semantic void" of cultural dislocation.<sup>2</sup> Those who have lived in Italy for decades use Nigerian video films to critically reflect upon the culture of their former homeland, thus distancing themselves from certain cultural traits "while reaffirming the validity of others still considered appropriate in the new environment." And for the other diasporic viewers who no longer have any direct ties to this homeland, as is the case with Barbados in Bryce's example, the allure of Nollywood is somewhat different. Bryce's chapter speaks to a different kind of "semantic void," one that has been conditioned over three centuries of colonial history. Africa, the ancestral home of the majority of Barbadians, "remains a contested figure in the popular imagination, as often negative as it is nostalgic and heroic." Yet, as Bryce clarifies, in Barbados the transnational consumption of the world of the Nollywood film is experienced and culturally interpreted, not as a return to the "homeland," which is in

this respect quixotic, but a symbolic return to a disputed past. According to a Nollywood fan quoted in a local newspaper, "We are accustomed to seeing Africans living in huts and dirt poor; but now we know that some also live in some really big houses with exquisite furniture." This quote is interesting because it shows a desire to see that past, which is connected to the cultural self-definition of the interviewee, as redeemable.

Other chapters of this book signpost the use of Nollywood as a transactional cultural anchor, that is, as a site where migrant subjects meet the homeland in different ways. Jonathan Haynes's chapter, which focuses on the genre of films shot partially or entirely in the diaspora, is interesting in this regard. Based on scripts that are often written by Nigerian expatriates, these films reflect diasporic life, diegetically and socially. Marketed both in the diaspora and in Nigeria, they have become a means to communicate the diasporic experience, including the hardship, which may be part of it, to those who stay behind. They also allow the filmmakers to address the tensions between the diasporic communities and Nigerians back home. Claudia Hoffmann, who discusses three such films set in New York, argues that they are overtly critical of the deplorable state in the Nigerian homeland itself and the circumstances of immigrant life in America. They "are not primarily made to entertain, but made to inform and educate a Nigerian and African community from within." The Nigerian immigrant filmmakers that Sophie Samyn interviewed in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany express a similar intention.<sup>3</sup> Her contribution is even more direct in the way that Nollywood films are mobilized to create a diasporic Nollywood film culture with a clear cultural translation, which is at the heart of the transaction between both worlds. The filmmakers also told her of the desire to "celebrate Nigeria's popular culture," and even though the relationship with the homeland is problematic, they do create cultural bridges between the new home and the homeland. Since many of the diaspora films are also produced in conjunction with Nigerian producers who also bring Nigerian actors overseas, these productions actually establish contact between individuals from Nigeria and Nigerian expatriates in more than just a symbolic sense. Face-to-face contact between Nollywood actors and their expatriate fans also occurs during the road shows, galas, and premieres organized by Nigerians living in Europe, which is briefly touched upon in Alessandro Jedlowski's chapter in this volume.

Though Nigerian video films have assumed a transnational existence, depending on the context, their accessibility in cultural and linguistic terms may still be limited, and the films therefore warrant one form of mediation or the other. This is the case in Tanzania, where professional video narrators (re)mediate Nollywood films. These narrators do live translations in Kiswahili so local audiences can follow the story. Ad-libbing and adding observations with local inflections and personal commentary to “spice up” the movies, they are adapting the stories to a local hermeneutic framework (Krings, this volume). Since they also sell their work on cassettes and discs with Kiswahili voice-over, they are comparable to the Congolese dubbers Katrien Pype mentions in her chapter. Over and above the translation and commentary, Kinshasa’s dubbers also insert a local praise genre of “name-dropping” into their performances, thus weaving the films even deeper into the social world of this city. Togolese pastor Luc Russel Adjaho, who runs his own television station, TV Zion, on which he broadcasts his highly original interpretations of Nigerian video films in Ewé, performs another similar form of mediation through voice-over. Unlike his Tanzanian and Congolese colleagues, Adjaho is keen on teasing out a critical surplus value for his audiences by inserting comparisons to local cultural phenomena and even politics and political personae in his voice-over commentaries. One of the contributors to this volume, Babson Ajibade, recounts his experiences of mediating Nigerian video films to European audiences. This experiment is to get European viewers, who are even further removed from the culture of Nigerian video films, into the thick and thin of Nollywood stories. During private screenings, he gave running commentaries – thus performing more or less like his African counterparts – and then later embarked on a project of recutting these films for a public screening. Surprisingly, with the recut versions of these films, the European audiences had far fewer problems following the story. Taking this into consideration, he argues that it is not so much a lack of cultural knowledge that limits the accessibility of Nollywood films for European audiences but their formal properties, which diverge from conventional filmmaking standards.

In certain social contexts, Nollywood films have to be mediated even more substantially to adapt their stories for audiences who might oppose or be offended by some of the cultural content. A notable exam-



ple is the Christian imagery in some of these films. One way of achieving this is to embark on remakes, as exemplified by Muslim filmmakers in northern Nigeria and Tanzania. In his contribution, Abdalla Uba Adamu focuses on one such appropriation across cultural boundaries within Nigeria – the Muslim Hausa remake of Tade Ogidan's *Dangerous Twins* (one of the trailblazers of Nollywood's diaspora genre). Scrutinizing the producers' changes to the story, Adamu argues that the film is not just remade but culturally "redirected" to make it more suitable for a Muslim Hausa audience. While true remakes are rare in Tanzania, where filmmakers adopt a technique of borrowing and mixing foreign and local ideas, a cinematic phenomenon which Claudia Böhme refers to as bricolage, local Muslim filmmakers no less exorcize the Christian imagery of Nollywood films. Unlike Hausa remakes in which Christian pastors are exchanged for Muslim clerics (Krings, "Muslim Martyrs" 195), traditional healers take over the former's part in Tanzanian horror movies. In this genre, traditional healers fight epic battles with witches, vampires, and other uncanny creatures. Böhme explains this difference to the Nollywood template by referring to the high esteem in which "tradition" is held in Tanzania, and by the fact that topics touching upon Islam – such as depictions of Muslim clerics battling with demons – are considered taboo. These two examples support the need for the cultural adaptation of Nollywood films under certain conditions and point toward possible limitations of Nollywood's popularity. We will now turn to the discussion of the controversy that Nigerian video films engender as they travel.

#### CONTROVERSY

Critical debate about Nollywood film starts at home, where large segments of the Nigerian intelligentsia are up in arms over the movies' popularity. "Some of the so-called movies that portray the African past do no more than confirm the western concept of African primitivism," says John A. Afolabi as he mulls the images of Africa portrayed in Nollywood's epic genre (170). He sees *The Battle of Musanga* as a literal "confirmation of the jaundiced, Euro-centric views and European hegemonic myths about the underdevelopment of Africans. It portrays the African as underdeveloped, wild and beastly" (171). By and large, such criticism