



VIEWING AFRICAN CINEMA IN ART FILMS AND THE NOLLYWOOD VIDEO REVOLUTION THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

EDITED BY
**Mahir Şaul and
Ralph A. Austen**

VIEWING AFRICAN CINEMA IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Art Films and the Nollywood Video Revolution

EDITED BY MAHMOUD SAUL AND RALPH A. AUSTEN



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Preface and Acknowledgments

The original inspiration for this book came from the International Film and History Conference at the University of Cape Town in 2002, which resulted in a collection of published essays to which both of us contributed.¹ With the hope of furthering dialogue on African cinema between film scholars and social scientists, we convened our own conference in November 2007 at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. The responses to our invitation and a serendipitous collaboration with the Global Media Research Center of Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, produced a different outcome than we anticipated: a conference and the present volume, which focuses on comparison of the two dominant and very different African film industries.

For generous financial and administrative support of our conference we owe thanks to the University of Illinois generally and most particularly the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences State-of-the-Art Conference program, the Center for African Studies, the George A. Miller Committee of the Center for Advanced Study, the Department of Anthropology, the School of Music, the Office of International Programs and Studies, the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory, and the Unit for Cinema Studies.

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Note

1. Vivian Bickford-Smith and Richard Mendelsohn, eds., *Black and White in Colour: African History on Screen* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006).

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Introduction

RALPH A. AUSTEN AND MAHIR ŞAUL

Compared to other film industries in the world, African cinema is

a quite recent phenomenon, dating only from the last half of the twentieth century. However, as indicated by the references in the chapters that follow, there is no shortage of books and articles devoted to its works, its producers, and its audiences. The great change in the twenty-first century (one that actually began in the 1990s) is the coexistence of two distinct African cinemas: a (relatively) long established tradition of celluloid art films centered in French-speaking West Africa and identified with its biennial FESPACO (Festival Panafricain du Cinéma et de la Télévision de Ouagadougou) and a newer, more commercial video film industry based in English-speaking Africa and labeled, after its major Nigerian source, Nollywood. The present book is the first extended effort to combine studies of both these cinemas.

African filmmaking first took off in the early 1960s, during the euphoric years of decolonization. The very diverse works of this new industry are difficult to define as either a national or an aesthetic school. The films do, however, share four important characteristics: first, they more closely resemble the "art cinema" of contemporary Europe than commercially dominant Hollywood (or Egyptian and Indian) models; second, they were made overwhelmingly in francophone countries; third, their production depended heavily on support of various kinds from the French film establishment and the French state; finally (and this did not require comment until recently), they used celluloid film (usually 16mm), very cheap for their time but still requiring costly processing

in Europe. From 1969 onward FESPACO, held in French-speaking Burkina Faso, became not only the major showcase for such cinema but also a shorthand term for its identity.

Since the early 1990s, in the less optimistic era of “structural adjustment,” a new phenomenon has come to dominate the African cinema world: mass-marketed films, shot on less expensive video cameras (initially tape, but now digital compact disc).¹ The disc format adopted by African filmmakers is not the DVD used in Europe and America but rather VCD, a lower-cost (but also lesser quality and run-time) system prevalent in most of Asia. The term Nollywood applies most accurately only to films from southern Nigeria, and even here there are disputes about whether it should be allowed to cover productions in various languages: English, Igbo, and Yoruba.² Ghana was actually the earliest center of African video films and continues to have a robust industry but has never settled on a “-wood” label of its own.³ By contrast the slightly later but equally autonomous northern Nigerian videos are known as Kannywood (after their base in the city of Kano) and Tanzanian cineastes, who openly recognize their inspiration from southern Nigeria, have created a local term, Bongowood.⁴

All these video industries receive their inspiration from previously imported or state-sponsored commercial films, most notably action and horror movies and television serials (on which some video practitioners had worked) and (for northern Nigeria) Indian Bollywood musicals. The video filmmakers, with little or no foreign support and training or international festival aspirations, also make very direct use of local performance genres, such as the Yoruba traveling theater,⁵ and draw their content from popular urban narratives of romance, wealth gained through witchcraft, and Christian redemption. However labeled, African video is very much an anglophone phenomenon, although its audience is continentwide and now extends well into the African diaspora of the New World and Europe.

The obvious differences between FESPACO and Nollywood film extend beyond the production conditions, content, and form into the realm of cinema scholarship. Students of francophone African art films have largely been humanists, concerned with cinema aesthetics but also very attentive to the ideological issues that many of these works (and certainly their most vocal producers) address very explicitly. Videos, on the other hand, have been perceived as an apolitical emanation of popular culture, subject to the scrutiny of social scientists (mainly anthropologists) or, in humanities faculties, of “media studies” and “cultural studies” specialists. A common denominator in all these research efforts has been an attention to the economics of film production, but such considerations only emphasize the divergent paths of the two cinema forms.

The 2007 conference at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, from which the present collection of essays is drawn brought together—to

our knowledge, for the first time—a large number of scholars working in both FESPACO and Nollywood film. The conference also benefited from the presence of several African video practitioners who, for the most part, did not present papers but added a great deal to our discussions.⁶ The resulting book has two overlapping goals: to give readers a good introduction into what has been happening in African cinema over the last forty-plus years and to analyze specific FESPACO and Nollywood films from a fresh comparative perspective. The analysis, while produced to some degree by film scholars, is directed more at students of general African culture, history, and society than at film studies specialists.

The term Africa, in this volume, means mainly anglophone and francophone countries in the tropical portions of the continent, thus giving little attention to Egypt, the Maghreb, or any Portuguese-speaking countries.⁷ Another issue that we could not explore at length but have at least recognized is the next shift in both the location and media of African film. South Africa is fast becoming a dominant force in the entire continental industry, and technologies of broadband distribution will very likely replace DVDs within a few years. Viewing African cinema in the later twenty-first century will thus require still newer paradigms.

For the purposes of presenting what we could observe in the present decade, we have divided the chapters into three sections: a discussion of Nollywood (in this case not restricted to southern Nigeria) and the issues it raises for African filmmaking and film studies; a look back at film viewing in Africa, both before and immediately after independence (a topic largely separate from local film production); and reflections on FESPACO films in the context of, or in direct comparison with, Nollywood productions.

We begin with Nollywood, because it is these videos that set new tasks (or “problems”) for any account of African film. Jonathan Haynes, perhaps the dean of African video scholars, opens the conversation by outlining an agenda for the study of these films. His work is not only an excellent guide to what has already been done in the field but also an indication of how social science and humanistic methods can be brought together to offer new paradigms for our understanding of productions that combine commercial appeal with artistic achievement.

The “culture wars” within Africa between Nollywood (or its Ghanaian counterpart) and an establishment of intellectual and celluloid filmmakers are traced, respectively, by Onookome Okome and Birgit Meyer. Okome, a Nigerian film scholar who breaks the stereotype of his field by embracing Nollywood, delivers an impassioned defense of this choice and sharply attacks the formally credentialed African “cultural mediators” (including a number of internationally respected figures), who take an opposite position. Meyer, an expatriate

anthropologist, also provides a very sympathetic view of Ghanaian video but seeks to situate the controversy around it in the specific history of earlier local film production (or lack of it) as well as issues of distribution, audience preferences, and broader shifts from a state-directed to a neoliberal political economy. One of Meyer's many valuable insights is the tracing within the thinking and practices of video filmmakers themselves of a shift from seeing their work as a cheaper form of celluloid film to recognizing its distinctive characteristics as both an aesthetic medium and a market commodity.

Abdalla Uba Adamu and Matthias Krings follow African video film production from its acknowledged centers on the anglophone West African coast to the less charted areas of northern Nigeria and Tanzania. The Hausa-language movies and television dramas analyzed by Adamu parallel the rise of Ghanaian and southern Nigerian video but follow a separate trajectory of development and encounter a different set of debates and attempted censorship. Adamu traces the models for these films in local folktales and Bollywood films featuring domestic melodrama and a considerable amount of singing and dancing. The more critical questions raised by the vibrant video industry in this region is less its conformity to the ideological or aesthetic standards of "serious" film but rather violations of both Hausa and Islamic values of privacy and sexual morality. Krings deals with a video culture imported into East Africa directly from southern Nigeria. He notes how films made in English in Nigeria were eventually displaced by local Kiswahili productions and traces the roots of this new industry through both its Nollywood models and earlier Tanzanian experiments with popular visual media.

The issue of audiences—a somewhat neglected aspect of Africanist film studies—is taken up by Vincent Bouchard and Laura Fair in a section devoted to the productions that dominated African movie theaters before the Nollywood revolution: foreign imports and government or missionary propaganda. Bouchard deals with both commercial films (including postcolonial videos, but still imported ones) and locally produced colonial cinema.⁸ His point about the latter is that it succeeded (under missionary rather than government auspices) only when accompanied by "harmless" commercial fare (much of it also created in the Congo by missionaries). At the center of Bouchard's analysis is a different kind of "cultural mediator" than the ones chastised by Onookome, namely individuals present at the screenings (whether appointed by colonial exhibitors or—in the postcolonial era—emerging from local audiences) who provide translations or spoken commentaries (or both) on the films.

Fair presents a social history of film viewing in Zanzibar and mainland Tanzania that again demonstrates the failure of government documentaries (whether colonial or postcolonial) to attract audiences and also, somewhat

more surprisingly, reveals the far greater popularity of Bollywood (followed by Italian spaghetti westerns and Hong Kong kung fu films) over U.S. Hollywood products. Fair's conclusions are based on not only statistics of film attendance and demand-based prices but also memories by filmgoers of how the content of films and the experience of viewing them affected their lives.⁹

The discussion of FESPACO films begins with an essay by Mahir Şaul that reconsiders the entire history of this cinema in its relationship to French support, Pan-African and Third World ideology, African audiences, and the surprisingly important role of Upper Volta/Burkina Faso, the site of the festival. Şaul both challenges the accepted view of a highly political and elitist cinema and also considers how such an orientation was at least propagated in the past and has become perhaps a greater reality in contemporary African celluloid film. This chapter also explores the growing role of South Africa as a new center for the management, financing, and distribution of both FESPACO and Nollywood cinema.

Jane Bryce's chapter examines current efforts to produce 35mm feature films in Tanzania, where the equivalent of FESPACO has been the Zanzibar International Film Festival (ZIFF). Initiated in 1998 and officially open "to all African films and films from the Dhow Countries region—South Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, the Persian Gulf, Iran, Pakistan, and the Indian Ocean Islands," ZIFF effectively provides a critical platform for art films from anglophone East Africa. Bryce reveals the great difficulties in actually making such movies, both in competition with the local video industry described in the chapter by Matthias Krings and also under new conditions of foreign sponsorship. The "machine" of her title includes not only ZIFF but also charitable NGOs (nongovernmental organizations), who bring, along with much-needed funds, their own global moral agendas to the projects of local cineastes.

Three of the essays in this section conform, at least in part, to the classic cinema-studies method of closely analyzing art films as finished texts; but all of them look, directly or indirectly, at the Nollywood alternative. Peter Rist's reexamination of Ousmane Sembene's classic *Émitai* (1971) represents the indirect and most thoroughly cinematic approach. Expanding a method of statistical shot and camera movement analysis he developed long before the Nollywood revolution (but recently expanded with the use of DVDs), Rist gives new nuance to a long-standing characterization of African art films: their slow pace, which supposedly links them to African "oracy" and separates them, along with their current video competition, from other contemporaneous cinema.

The chapters by Stefan Sereda and Lindsey Green-Simms draw direct comparisons between FESPACO and Nollywood films. Both authors take into account the very different political economies of these two industries

and the resulting argument that Nollywood has abandoned politics and ideology for market appeal. Drawing on different aspects of the same 35mm film, *Xala* (1974), by the unquestionably ideological Ousmane Sembene, Sereda and Green-Simms concur that the critical target here is a political one: the structures of a postcolonial regime that declares itself socialist while collaborating with Western capitalism and systematically exploiting its own people. Nollywood films, or at least the major genres within them examined in these chapters, also embody social criticism ("cautionary pedagogy" for Sereda; "edutainment," in a phrase borrowed by Green-Simms from the filmmakers themselves, by Green-Simms). But now the focus is on individual behavior rather than neocolonial institutions of oppression. Sereda concentrates on the broader moral and cultural canvas of these films, demonstrating how Nollywood has problematized prior equations of exploitation with Westernization, perceiving instead a complex landscape of choices in which adherence to egotistical materialism or uninformed assertions of "tradition" are equally reprehensible. Green-Simms focuses on the figure of the automobile (more specifically the Mercedes-Benz) in both sets of films, arguing that in *Xala* it represents an entirely alien and elitist technology, while in the Nollywood classic *Living in Bondage* (1992) it is acquired through a modernized and murderous form of African witchcraft practices.

The volume concludes with a brief account by Cornelius Moore of the major vehicle through which FESPACO cinema (preceded by antiapartheid South African films not discussed elsewhere here) reached the American public. Although Moore does not explicitly discuss Nollywood, the video revolution that made this new African industry possible is also credited with California Newsreel's success in distributing films originally made in 16mm or 35mm celluloid to universities, schools, and public libraries throughout the United States.¹⁰

Moore's article also points to the technology that is likely to define the future of African film distribution both within and outside the continent: broadband digital delivery (already being undertaken by South Africa's M-Net).¹¹ What such a change will mean for California Newsreel—to say nothing of African film production—remains an open question.¹²

We conclude this introduction with some reflections on the links between film and other forms of imported technology suggested by Green-Simms in her chapter on automobiles. As she points out, cars and movie cameras both arrived in Africa as colonial impositions, designed "to highlight the colonizer's position of supremacy and to solidify European hegemony." What her essay necessarily leaves out is the economic history of automobile use in West Africa, involving indigenous entrepreneurs both complementing and competing with heavy investment by colonial governments in railroads.¹³ The parallel to the transition from colonial educational films, through FESPACO, to Nollywood

is more than metaphorical. In both realms colonial projects simultaneously introduced new media to Africa and stifled their fullest development.

The ambiguity of postcolonial African succession to such developmentalism is particularly evident in the work of Ousmane Sembene. His greatest novel, *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* (God's bits of wood, 1960) addresses the train as the dynamo of industrial intrusion into the African landscape ("the smoke of the savanna") and sees in striking railroad workers the future of a world integrated by triumphant class struggle. Given the changes that actually occurred after 1960, it is not surprising that Sembene never managed to film this book and shifted from an optimistic socialist realism to what Stefan Sereda calls "cautionary pedagogy," in which the automobile takes a central and very negative role.

Like the automobile (also increasingly imported from Asia), the video camera has given African entrepreneurs an entrée into domestic markets and a personal autonomy not possible with "lumpier" early film technologies. But to note this opportunity and the creativity of those who have seized it is not the same as embracing Nollywood with all the enthusiasm of an Onookome Okome. What we learned about the travails of the Nollywood industry at our conference again parallels many of the woes of traffic congestion, road mayhem, and grossly unequal access to transport in contemporary African cities.¹⁴ Private luxury automobiles may not actually, as urban legends and Nollywood films tell us, be purchased and fueled by the blood of murdered humans, but they cause deaths far out of proportion to their numbers on African roads and continue to function as signs of a parasitic, zero-sum economy. Nollywood embodies—and consciously reflects on—the paradoxical liberties and horrors of a neoliberal world in which Africa has suffered greatly, but many Africans have found avenues for both achieving personal success and providing their continent and its diaspora with new modes of collective expression.

Notes

1. FESPACO films continue to be made, usually in 35mm and of better technical quality than their "classical" predecessors, but also under conditions still more dependent on European support. See Mahir Şaul, chap. 8 of this volume.

2. "What's Happening to Igollywood?" *Punch* (Lagos), October 23, 2008, <http://www.punchng.com/Articl.aspx?theartic=Art200810230121631>.

3. One term sometimes used, Gollywood, causes confusion because it has also been applied in India to films from Gujarat, as opposed to the subcontinent's dominant Bollywood (Bombay/Mumbai) industry; likewise, the label Lollywood, used in Africa for the burgeoning Liberian video film industry, directs Web browsers to the sites of the Pakistan film center in Lahore.

4. Another video film industry represented at our conference is that of Cameroon—in this case the southwestern anglophone part of the country, with close

ties to southeastern Nigeria. The majority francophone regions of Cameroon have, quite separately and continuously, produced important contributions to African celluloid cinema.

5. From the late 1970s through the 1980s, Yoruba theater also inspired a dynamic, if short-lived, Nigerian celluloid film industry, which never achieved much international exposure. See Jonathan Haynes, "Nigerian Cinema: Structural Adjustments," *Research in African Literatures* 26, no. 3 (1995): 97–119. On the limited but by no means insignificant Nigerian and Ghanaian contributions to the African art film canon, see Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike, *Black African Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 126–65.

6. These included Nigerians Francis Onwochei (director and actor), Joke Silva (actress), and Madu Chikwendu (producer and now a regional secretary of the Pan-African Federation of Filmmakers); Ghanaian filmmaker Socrate Safo; and Cameroonian actress and director Joyce Ashuntantang.

7. For efforts to deal with the entire continent in film studies terms (but omitting video productions), see David Murphy and Patrick Williams, *Postcolonial African Cinema: Ten Directors* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Roy Armes, *Dictionary of African Filmmakers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

8. For an excellent account of this phenomenon in Nigeria and elsewhere, see Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 73–122.

9. Fair's account of the personal role of film viewing was omitted from the version of her conference paper published here, but see Laura Fair, "Making Love in the Indian Ocean: Hindi Films, Zanzibari Audiences, and the Construction of Romance in the 1950s and 1960s," in *Love in Africa*, ed. Jennifer Cole and Lynn M. Thomas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 58–82.

10. California Newsreel is the distributor of a very fine documentary, Robert Caputo and Franco Sacchi, *This Is Nollywood*, dir. Sacchi (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 2007).

11. Film piracy, an already existing mode of distribution closely linked to video and neoliberal economics, was discussed at our conference but not in any of the papers. For a valuable account and analysis, see Larkin, *Signal and Noise*, 217–41.

12. For some indication of the impact of M-Net's acquisition of rights to Nigerian videos for its pay-for-view Africa Magic Channel, see Pierre Barrot, ed., *Nollywood: The Video Phenomenon in Nigeria*, trans. Lynn Taylor (London: James Currey, 2008), 55; Michael Mukwuzi, "Nollywood Meltdown," *News* (Lagos), March 23, 2009, <http://thenewsng.com/news/nollywood-meltdown/2009/03>.

13. Green-Simms provides an excellent account of these competing processes in "The Hum of Progress: Motorcars and the Modernization of West Africa," a chapter in "Postcolonial Automobility: West Africa and the Road to Globalization" (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2009), 36–78.

14. This also included a reminder of the other great electronic revolution in Africa, the cell phone, as some of the filmmakers continued to direct their projects at home while temporarily residing in southern Illinois.

PART I

The “Problem” of Nollywood

What Is to Be Done?

Film Studies and Nigerian and Ghanaian Videos

JONATHAN HAYNES

A specter is haunting African film studies—the specter of the West

African video revolution. The production of low-budget feature films on video, which began some twenty years ago in both Ghana and Nigeria, has transformed the audiovisual environment in Africa. The Nigerian video film industry has reached colossal proportions, its films and its example spreading across the African continent and far beyond. Arising as a popular art, the video films at first attracted little attention and less respect from the educated classes, but as their significance has become undeniable, a considerable academic literature about them has come into being. They are the subject of a number of books,¹ and a major focus of others,² with several more books in the works. Special issues of four journals have been wholly or partly devoted to them,³ as well as over three hundred articles in scholarly journals.⁴

In spite of the Leninist title of this chapter, I am not trying to establish a party line—my purpose is to make a few comments on the shape and state of this field of study,⁵ suggest some tasks, and deliver some warnings. The academic literature has been produced on three continents and out of a number of academic disciplines. This double dispersion is responsible for a certain lack of cohesion, a scattering that has impeded its constitution as a field of study with the normal specialization, internal debates, and sharpening of purposes; most of the published articles, for instance, contain only two or three references to other works on the videos. (In the case of studies carried out in West Africa,