

## Introducing the Special Issue on West African Cinema: Africa at the Movies

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Nollywood and Hollywood have a lot in common. They are also remarkably different from each other. Both began as pedestrian art forms and have remained somewhat in the province of the people. As vital visual industries in their respective societies, they sell dreams cheaply to people who are frightened to live without them. They began as the *art* of the people and were inaugurated by the desires of those who were lost in the welter of different stages of social and cultural changes and who sought to make sense of what was going on around them. The frightened immigrants from Europe who arrived in the United States at the turbulent turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century needed something tangible to weather the storm once they landed in the new world. Some of them found it in the movies. Some wanted to run away from the older artistic traditions that were heavily laced with the bourgeois trappings that enslaved their emotions in their original homelands. While these immigrants found solace in the world that the movies brought to them, it was more the sense of getting beyond the history of the artistic cultures that oppressed their basic human desire that drove these common people to the movies. Before long, the movie became a social and cultural force of cohesion; it became a way of *being* American. Perhaps most important to the immigrants was the fact that this was a medium that did not require a special kind of training or social inheritance to understand. It was, in a sense, a nobody's art since no one social group could lay absolute claim to its origin in the same way that bourgeois arts belonged to certain groups or classes of people in the pre-dispersal world of immigrant Europeans who made it to the (so-called) land of freedom.

The history of Nollywood has a similar social pattern except that there was no mass migration from one continent to another. There was, however, a migration of a sort. It was the migration from rural areas to the urban centres in the 1970s, which led to population explosion in the cities in the late 1970s. Lagos, the then-capital city of Nigeria, was hard hit. Ghettoized communities quickly emerged out of this rural and urban drift. When the first video film was made out of the social and cultural exigencies of the late 1970s, it was immediately accepted by the common people who were displaced and seeking some succor from the freedom which the city was thought to offer. The first video film also took for its

main theme the problems associated with this drift with a narrative focus that privileged the perspective of the poor and vulnerable in the city. Peace Feberesima<sup>1</sup> describes this army of the poor and vulnerable as those living on the \$1 a day mark. But not everyone embraced the new medium. It was scoffed at by University critics, some of whom described it as “fetish art” of the jobless youth of the city of Lagos. Emmanuel Akpan, a Professor of Communication<sup>2</sup> of the University of Uyo, referred to video films as “filmed theatres,” and called for producers to move beyond recording theatre performances on video cassettes. Those were indeed the crude days of Nollywood when its practice was deeply connected to the activities of popular Yoruba traveling theatre practices.

Before the emergence of the video film, there was a brief spell of what I have referred to elsewhere as “the Yoruba cinema.”<sup>3</sup> It was brief, and its demise was instigated by the downturn of the economy of Nigeria in the mid-1980s. It came directly out of the practice of the now-famous Yoruba theatre troupes whose directors felt the crunch of the difficult economic problems at the time. Ways of circumventing this economic downturn were experimented upon by these directors. Some of them turned to “canning” their theatre performances in VHS cassettes. They were the less-affluent of the theatre directors who felt the pain of the economic downturn that eventually led to the massive drop in outdoor activities in major Nigerian cities in the years after the Nigerian civil war. Turning to the video technology was for them the pragmatic way needed to continue this performance tradition. Faced with the same social and economic contingencies in the 1980s, this group of directors resorted to using the cheaper medium of the video cassette to check the spiraling turn of theatre patronage in the cities. Nollywood was born from this point on. But it was in 1992 that it was defined as an art form with a more serious social meaning and implication for Nigeria. The film that did that was *Living in Bondage 1 & 2*. It also started off the industry we now know as Nollywood. The script was written by a business man, Kenneth Nnebue. He also wrote the story. It is a simple city story, and it became an instant hit. The method of its telling was no less so. With the release of this video film, a common aesthetic point of reference was inaugurated. Blending the declamatory, wordy, the improvisational and extremely digressional format of the traditional storytelling style with the everyday, and incorporating the trivia of the soap opera, *Living in Bondage 1 & 2* tells the prophetic tale of the inordinate life and ambition of Andy Okeke, the new city dweller, whose life and happiness are announced in the “bloody wealth” that he seeks and finds in Lagos. In this classic Mephistophelian

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<sup>1</sup> Peace Feberesima made this comment in the documentary film, *This is Nollywood*.

<sup>2</sup> This comment came from my personal interview with students of this renowned Professor of Communication who taught at the Department of Communication at the University of Uyo until his death in the mid-1990s.

<sup>3</sup> See *Cinema and Social Change in West Africa*. Specific reference should be made to the chapter, “The Character of Popular Indigenous Cinema in Nigeria,” which was first published in the journal *Ufahamu* based at the University of California.

tale, in this two-part film running well over four hours, Andy Okeke transforms from the normal struggling city dweller into an active social actor whose source of wealth is anything but discernable to a mad man in the street in Lagos. This transformation, which is the first a major character of Nollywood undergoes, has become a paradigmatic icon in the storytelling style in the industry. Shakily connected to the city and not totally sequestered from the social and moral codes of the village, Andy Okeke represents the delusional personality that we often come across in much of postcolonial literature. For him, the city is new and inviting but he has very little knowledge of the postcolonial modernity which it promotes. As the new man of the city, he has not quite left the old ways behind, the tradition of his village. Drawn into the dark edges of this city, he is at once a modern man and a traditional person. He performs and lives both worlds, vacillating between them when it is convenient for him to do so. But it is also a difficult way to live as his story proves at the end. He suffers the debilities of that existence and the story makes this difficult existence obvious in the end.

*Living in Bondage* defines the pain of the new man in the postcolony outside the framework of the “us” versus “them” narratives of the consciously partisan postcolonial literature of that period. In some ways, Andy Okeke is like Okonkwo.<sup>4</sup> The social and ideological contexts in which they operate may differ but they are men experiencing a new world. Andy Okeke is the new man experiencing the brave new world but, unlike Okonkwo, he accepts the new world without even attempting to understand it. He gives away what he knows—the life he already knew for one that he is hardly familiar with. If Okonkwo has some social and cultural agency, Andy Okeke does not. In this sense, Andy Okeke is “the highlife man,” which is a common description of the modern man in the popular Onitsha market pamphlets. He is indeed the “highlife man” of the video film. He is carefully invested with the moral implant of the Onitsha market deployment of that phrase. The popularity of *Living in Bondage* may well be ascribed to a number of factors, including the fact that Andy Okeke, the quintessential character of the city/occult video film,<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The protagonist of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo is the quintessential character that represents resistance and cultural autonomy in the face of the rabid presence of the denial of local cultures during the early phases of the colonial encounter in Africa. He is the most quoted of all the characters in modern African literature in English that best exemplify the trope of resistance to colonialism. *Things Fall Apart* has since become *the* postcolonial text.

<sup>5</sup> The chief character of the city video film is the overwhelming presence of the city. The city is foregrounded in the narrative as an ordering system, which is inescapable and all the characters must sign into its system of apprehending reality that is at once dubious and indescribable. These existential inconsistencies form the modern character. While it is difficult to put a hard line between the video and occult video film mainly because the latter is expressed in the “modern freedom,” which the city allows, it is best to say that at this point in the development of genres in Nollywood, the “occult video” is a sub-type of the city video film. The primary motivation in the narrative of the occult video film is the dubious search for “blood wealth” through the alchemization of human body parts.

represents what has become of the local man whose interest is not to stay or remain local but to be part of a world that he describes and sees as “modern”. For Andy Okeke, this description comes with the incoherence of the life of the new city man, a personalized narrative with its undulating inconsistencies and incomprehensible notions of a decrepit social and economic vision, all of which are acutely played out in an equally incoherent cityscape festooned with grave consequences for the social actor. Since the release of *Living in Bondage*, the stories circulating in Nollywood have remained within these spheres of social and cultural concerns. They have also remained largely local and have been performed in social and religious spaces such as the church, the opaque but deadly world of the “occult,” and in the city streets where violence punctuates the daily routines of the poor and vulnerable.

Concerns relating to the moral degeneracy in Nigerian society and the need to address this moral drift by the church have given rise to a special kind of video film. It is the “hallelujah video.” Since it made its debut, the popularity of this category of the video film has soared mostly due to the depleting economic resources of the poor who now seek solace in the promise of a heavenly *polis* of bliss and eternal happiness. It has certainly added a boost to the number of video films churned out with unprecedented alacrity of video production in the last couple of years in Nigeria. In the second part of the story of Andy Okeke, this quintessential character of Nollywood goes back to the church for redemption after he has failed to reach his point of glory in the incompetent hand of the “fetish witch doctors.” In the church, he receives that glory. He is redeemed. His madness, which comes from the Mephistophelian visits of the murdered wife, stops. He is rehabilitated. He goes back into the very society that he denounced when he opted to be part of the world of the coven and witches. He is once again a humble man in a humble part of that society. It is the power of Jesus that made this act of redemption possible.

The recourse to the “occult” in the narrative of the hallelujah video is best interpreted from two posts of desires. Both are connected to questions of redemption and the quest for a better life. The latter is connected to the *earthly polis* and former with the quest for the *heavenly polis*, the life of the hereafter. *Living in Bondage* highlights both sites of inquiry but prefers the glorification of the *heavenly polis*, which is where the hallelujah video takes its narrative essence. However, the recourse to the “occult” is not simply a narrative item found only in the “hallelujah videos” that are made in family-run Pentecostal churches. Video films of

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Bloodletting is part of the ritual that is used in this process of wealth generation. The narrative essence of this sub-part of the city video film privileges the place of blood in the alchemy of wealth. This process generates violence but it is only one of the many expressions of the violence that the city video film promotes. The language and technology of blood ritual associated with this occult practice are a distinct vernacular of the economy in postcolonial Africa, a point that the anthropologists Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff have made time and time again.

the city also show a dedicated inclination to deploy this narrative item. *Living in Bondage* deploys this narrative item even though I would argue that it is definitely not a “hallelujah video film.” Certainly, its narrative and social markers are clearly defined by the uneasiness and incoherence of the city. Yet, the story still finds reasons to be securely invested in the “occult economy” of blood wealth. This economy is at the center of its social function. But this concern is instigated by the dictate of the city rather than the quest for spiritual freedom that drives the character of the hallelujah videos. It symbolically describes how wealth is made and dispensed in a city that is anything but a center of the exchange of manufactured goods and services. If the city video film, which combines the “bloody” sassiness of the upwardly mobile youth of the city with the corrupting influence linked to the “alchemization” of human body, is the most fascinating and favored by the audience of Nollywood, it is because it provides an explanation of how “quick wealth” is manufactured in the seedy occult economy of the city. On the other hand, the hallelujah video film provides the redemptive option for the errant city dweller who is repeatedly enjoined to turn away from the things of the flesh.

The mid-2000s brought in another category of video film: the comedy. This is one category of the emerging video film genre that *Living in Bondage* did not foretell. Its earliest forbear in Nollywood may well be *Holygan*, a video film that is consciously witty, critical and humorous. Later video films in this category have moved away from this critical position. But it is *Osuofia in London* that raised it to the status of a genre in Nollywood. *Osuofia* departs from *Holygan* because it imposes the production of laughter as its mode of entertainment rather than criticism of the social kind which the latter video film makes visible. Ludicrous, loud and projecting the everyday banal, the comic video film provokes a course in the purgation of socially pent-up emotions for the members of an audience whose lives are a constant reminder of the closeness of perdition. In the last couple of years, producers of this category of the video film have also laughed their way to the bank, “producing the ludicrous and the comically frightful” (Stephen Neale 23) everyday stories of the people and poking fun at their follies. It is *Holygan* and, to some extent, *Endtimes* that “work by specifying disruption in relation to the discourse” (24) of the everyday situation that the people recognize. *Holygan* disrupts many of the social stories it privileges. It is a way of calling attention to the devious social and cultural attitude, which is fast becoming a pattern in the modern culture promoted by Nollywood.

There is, of course, the less successful category of the epic video film. Undialectical in its projection of historical events that occurred in Africa before the meeting with the “white” people, and very much concerned with essentializing some historical past, the history which it projects in this category of the video film is nothing but the fantastic imagination of producers and directors who rely more on spectacle rather than common sense interpretation of history. It is little wonder therefore

that this category of the video film was roundly rejected when it made its loud debut with the release of the hyped *Battle of Musanga 1 & 2*. *Living in Bondage* did not forwarn the audience of Nollywood of the coming of the “epic video film.” It did with the city and the hallelujah videos, and it was Kenneth Nnebue, the producer and script writer of *Living in Bondage*, who inaugurated these Nollywood genres. He took one hard and critical look at his society and saw what Nollywood was to be down the road. He expressed this in the digressional bits and pieces of the quintessential story of the life of Andy Okeke in *Living in Bondage*. When he wrote, directed and released *Glamour Girls 1 & 2* shortly after the phenomenal success of *Living in Bondage 1 & 2*, he did not only reiterate the points in the earlier video film, he concretized the fact that as a narrative tool the video film will always stay with the poor of the city and in the city. Popular video film was, is and will remain *the* popular medium of the city. In *Glamour Girls*, Nnebue fleshed out the freedom which the video medium made possible for the video filmmaker to speak on behalf and about those things that matter to the common people of the city. In the first and second films, he takes his viewers to the seedy and vicious parts of the city, and warns of the lurking Mephistophelian presence that pervades the city streets. It is partly for this reason that Nollywood was embraced by the common people of Nigerian. Energized by the wishes of the people and propelled by their social and cultural desires, Nollywood, like Hollywood, realized the significance of manufacturing dreams that people want to hear and see. These visual media have stayed close to this primary aim but in different ways and from different perspectives.

This introduction to this collection of essays on Nollywood is not only about the similarities between the two visual cultures. It is also about the ways that Nollywood has re-defined contemporary cinema culture in Africa and about how it has enhanced the discussions of the social imaginary of the classes of people who patronize a peculiar form of this visual culture. From being a mere curiosity, Nollywood has become something of the most successful entrepreneurial business in the history of visual arts in Africa, and like its American counterpart (for that is exactly what it actually is), it has defined a new visual culture in Nigeria and indeed in Africa. This visual culture is now part of the cultural *beingness* in Africa and the African diasporas in Europe and North America. Indeed, some observers have argued that Nollywood is doing for the continent what African music had done in the 1960s. We do not need to look any further to acknowledge this point. Today, Nollywood is big cultural business. It is going everywhere. Its presence in black communities is obvious in Europe as well as in North America. Reports are coming in that indicate that Nollywood has also found a niche in many more communities in the Indian Ocean outside what Phillip

Cartelli<sup>6</sup> has found out. Its directors are dreaming big and, for the first time, there are conscious efforts to factor in the transnational equation in the operations of the industry. Nollywood directors are aware of this fact. Peace Feberesima makes this point forcefully when she declares, “we are impacting on our children living abroad who have no idea of what is going on at home, and whose parents cannot afford for them to come home abroad.”<sup>7</sup> This acknowledgement of the cultural impact of Nollywood is an open fact in the industry and in the country, and even those who think poorly of video films cannot but see this point. Bond Emerua, a reputable director in Nollywood, is emphatic when he declares, “I cannot tell the white man’s story...we tell our own stories in our own way, our Nigerian way, African way.”

Nollywood is very self-conscious of its uniqueness. It is in touch with its singularity in the global market place of the production and sale of images. It is the local “dream factory.”<sup>8</sup> Perhaps Nollywood’s most eloquent *presence* as a “local”<sup>9</sup> cinematic industry is in the way it codes the “condition of the postcolonial”. This is the concern of this special issue of *Postcolonial Text*. The essays deal with this major concern of “coding” in several ways and from different perspectives. Their methods of inquiry may be different but the goal is the same: they all dedicate their research perspectives and potentials to giving a rigorous attention to a medium that deserves that serious scholarly attention. In *This is Nollywood*, the assertion of the self consciousness of those who produce Nollywood’s popular video film is more than eloquent. The practice of this cinematic culture has no place for the postcolonial state of mind that is described as “colonial mentality.”<sup>10</sup> Actors, producers, crew men and women, aspiring artists, and video film buffs in the industry eloquently declare the *presence* and *autonomy* of Nollywood. According to Zeb Ejiro, Nollywood is all about rescuing the narrative of local life from the hands of filmmakers from the outside, meaning filmmakers who are not

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<sup>6</sup> Cartelli’s brief report on the consumption of Nollywood in the Caribbean, “Nollywood Comes to the Caribbean” will appear in *Film International* 5.3 (2007).

<sup>7</sup> See the documentary film, *This is Nollywood*.

<sup>8</sup> I have used the phrase much in the same way that it is deployed in *Hollywood: The Dream Factory*. Reference to the use of the word “dream” should be seen as the fictive deployment of social narrative that helps the cultural and political relocation of the people who need this social amendment to their collective psyche as was the case in America at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nathan Glick’s essay, “The Social History of American Cinema” offers another perspective to this position.

<sup>9</sup> I wish the reading of the word, “local,” in my text to be divested from the meaning that it has come to assume in the local/global debate which was explained away on the basis of the economic disparity divide between the industrial world and the so-called third world. To read it that way would instigate a superior/inferior discourse which is not the intention here. Rather, I have used the word to denote “specificity” of industrial layout and aesthetic format. In this sense, the “local” is not at the “outside” of the global. It is part of the global.

<sup>10</sup> This is phrase that was used to describe the “being-tos”-colonials who have been to European metropolises-who were unable to extricate themselves from the psychological brainwashing of colonialism.

local to Nigeria. He argues that rescuing the narratives of the local from the deleterious influences of “Mexican soap operas” after “the death of television programming” was high on the agenda of local artists in the late 1980s. He also describes the sociology that propelled the rise of Nollywood, pointing to how local artists determined that “something must be done . . . and we did.”<sup>11</sup> He emphasizes the place of the audience when he argues that “once [we] did what ought to be done,” “our people embraced it” because this is “our own thing.”<sup>12</sup> Peace Feberesima, who often acts like the unofficial spokesperson of Nollywood, adds her voice to the point that Zeb Ejiro makes: “We are making movies where (sic) people can identify. Of course, we could make films that people could only see at the Embassies.”<sup>13</sup> According to Feberesima, Nollywood video film makers elected to “make films about the people and for the people.” Lancelot Imasuen is unequivocal in this regard when he declares that Nollywood is all about “stories for the people and the people are glued to their screens.”<sup>14</sup> He is confident that the industry will go places and that this will only be a matter of time. He is overtly proud of the achievements of Nollywood. For Bond Emerua, who presumably made his debut as the assistant director of the video film, *Child of Destiny*, Nollywood has made it possible for us “to live with ourselves.” According to this director, “There was a time when it was all about going to America. It was all about trying to talk like an America. That was the era of American movies in Nigeria. But all that is no more there. The people are finding new heroes. They are beginning to find new heroes closer home. There is a sense of pride in being a Nigerian now.”<sup>15</sup> For a country whose sense of nationhood has been battered by the plague of advance fee fraud and by the massive corruption in government, the popular acceptance of Nollywood is music to the ears of Nollywood filmmakers and a fine propaganda for the industry.

There is little doubt that Nollywood is at the heart of the re-invention of the ingenuity of Nigerians as individuals and as communities but the declaration that “people are finding heroes closer to home” in the stories that Nollywood makes, provokes something more than just an acknowledgement of the entrepreneurial spirit of video filmmakers and producers. How do we understand the value of the “heroes” that Nollywood is putting out in its video films vis-à-vis existing social and political conditions? Are these “heroes” in touch with the social and cultural realities of the lives that the patrons of video films live? Are these heroes objective in their dealings with society? Is there a collective realism that these cinematic heroes bring to the sociality of their patrons?

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<sup>11</sup> See *This is Nollywood*.

<sup>12</sup> See *This is Nollywood*.

<sup>13</sup> See *This is Nollywood*.

<sup>14</sup> Imasuen is a very well known director in Nollywood. He is reputed to have made over 100 video films but he is mostly remembered for the four-part vigilante video film, *Isakaba*.

<sup>15</sup> See *This is Nollywood*.



As a cinematic practice that is defined in the actual and not the symbolic references of the “poverty” of the third world, do these heroes who are “close to home” come any closer to creating an alternative social or political consciousness for this audience? In other words, it is just good enough to create “our own images?” The scholarship of video studies has so far not gotten to this point of inquiry, yet the debate around the relevance of Nollywood has a lot to do with these questions. It is still highly debatable if the culture that Nollywood has created is politically attenuated in any ideological way. It is also highly debatable if it has constructed any alternative social and political direction for its regional community that is stuck in the unmanageable confusion of the stories that Nollywood presents. Indications are that it has not gotten out of this postcolonial miasma even if it has done well in maintaining an appreciable autonomy from dominant film cultures. Some of the essays in this present collection hint at these problems but not with any sense of concreteness or finality. Certainly, Nollywood does not come close to the ideological project expressed in the pan-African cinematic classic, *Heritage Africa*. Indeed, nowhere in the literature or in the utterances of workers in the industry has any worker in Nollywood laid any claim to being part of the political agenda of third cinema. Perhaps, the best way to see Nollywood would be to pay attention to its populist dimensions, a point that is not lost to scholars who work in the field of the production of popular culture in Africa. This point comes out clearly in the essay, “Evolving Popular Media: Nigerian Video Films.”

*This is Nollywood* also renders other expressions of the postcolonial condition in the industry. If workers in the industry stress the sense of community, the “ourness” of Nollywood, they also stress the awkwardness of the video technology in the world of cinematic representations that has gone completely digital. There is a tangible recognition in the industry that the medium itself is a borrowed form and its utilization is still not at an optimal level. What is stressed time and time again is not the magic of the technology but what it has done for the projection of local stories to local people about their local situations. The focus is always on the stories and their direct connection to the condition of abjectness of the vast majority of the patrons of the video film. For Zed Ejiro, in the face of a complete cessation of production of celluloid films in the 1970s, video technology came handy. It could have been any other technology. Video technology was only a means of actualizing the dream of keeping the narrative of the local activities on the cinematic agenda. In those early days of Nollywood, Tunde Kelani, one of the key players in the industry, noted that the use of this technology was only a stop-gap measure. He was optimistic that someday he would come back to working with the celluloid film again. By October 2003, when I met him in Barbados at the African and Caribbean Film Festival organized by the University of Barbados, he had changed his position somewhat and for

good reasons.<sup>16</sup> Although nostalgic for the touch of the celluloid film, he has come to realize that the era of the celluloid was well over even in the developed film cultures, and that the way was being prepared for the brilliance of the digital imaging of stories. Nollywood filmmakers are aware of these changes in technological trends. They are also aware of the gritty economic determinants that influence the way their films are made. Like Zeb Ejiro, Bond Emerua is clear on this matter. For him, the adoption of video technology was a way of “climbing the walls”<sup>17</sup> rather than bowing to the obstacles of filmmaking in Nigeria. In the last five years, video filmmakers have moved a step further in their drive to match economic means with technological desires. From recording and transmitting on video technology, they have adopted the more enduring and storable VCD technology, which came to them via Taiwan. In more recent years, video film jackets now announce the release of video films in DVD format, an advancement on the VCD format.

The essays collected here speak to the subject directly and are unencumbered. They are eloquent about some aspects of Nollywood that I have outlined earlier. My intention is not to summarize the essays and interviews in this special edition of *Postcolonial Text*. They do not need any form of lengthy introduction to make them any more meaningful than they already are. I will simply signpost the salencies that each of the essays come with and point out how they add to the emerging discipline of video studies in the context of the larger academic rubric of African Studies.

Some of the contributors are already well-known names in other disciplines. Others are not so well known. But all the contributors bring to this collection of essays fresh insights and from different disciplinary perspectives, which is a testimony to the diversity of the disciplinary interests that Nollywood has engendered in recent times. Tobias Wendl comes from the background of social anthropology. He is well known for his work on contemporary African arts, especially his interest in African photography. He has curated African arts in Europe and has done extensive studies in the video film in Ghana and Nigeria. His documentary film, *Ghanaian Video Film*, is a prize-winning document on the industry in Ghana. He contributes “Wicked Villagers and the Mysteries of Reproduction: An Exploration of Horror Movies From Ghana and Nigeria.” Initially presented at the first ever workshop<sup>18</sup> on the video film in Africa and hosted by Till Forster, Peter Probst and Onookome Okome, this paper presents an interesting argument that connects the critical reception of West African video films to more established genres of European and Hollywood cinemas. In this

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<sup>16</sup> This note is added from the unpublished interview which I had with Tunde Kelani in Barbados in October 2003 at the Blue Horizon Hotel.

<sup>17</sup> See *This is Nollywood*.

<sup>18</sup> See the website of Iwalewa Haus, the cultural home of the Institute of African Studies at the University of Bayreuth, Germany <<http://www.iwalewa.uni-bayreuth.de/Video%20in%20Africa.html>>

contribution, he argues that the practice of video film falls into three broad genres: “melodramas, comedies and horror films.” The paper discusses existing sub-genres in the horror video film, pointing out that the Italian *mondo cannibale* films of the 1970s and 1980s, which have had a huge influence on the horror genre, draw largely on the universal trope of savagery.

According to Wendl’s argument, the “horror genre” of the video film also relies on this universal trope. The denigration of the rural past in horror video films is an aspect of this universal trope of the arcane and the grotesque. The horror video does not rely on the moral frame of Christianity as we find in most other categories of the video film. Even when there are signs of this oral framework, the narrative puts it at the fringe of the discourse. It shuns this moral order. Wendl contends that *I Hate My Village*, which has the distinction of being one of the few banned Nigerian video films, is the prime example of this genre. The postcolonial city, which is hardly understood in any meaningful way, provides the new frontier of knowledge for the grotesque and the arcane in the horror video film and at the same time offers refuge to this universal trope of savagery. *Agbako: In the Land of A Thousand Demons* (Nigerian) and *Zainabu* (Ghanaian) represent another sub-genre in the taxonomy provided by Wendl. It belongs to the “witchcraft video films.” As in the “horror of tradition” video film, “. . . evil once more originates from the village”—fountain of blood shooting out of the river—but subsequently spreads into the city. There is also the sub-genre, “the jujuman video film,” which privileges the jujuman as the main actor of the narrative. Wendl compares the jujuman to the mad scientist in European fiction and cinematic tradition, someone who “attempts to transgress normalcy and manipulate the natural productive cycle.” Transgression, according to Wendl, is at the core of the African horror videos. *Haunted House* (Nigerian) and *Time* (a Nigerian/Ghanaian co-production) are some examples he provides to drive his point home. Although he lives outside the town, the jujuman, like the European scientist, knows all and sees all that goes in his community through the special use of his “third eye.” He is the priest/diviner/ healer. He is also a conjurer.

Wendl’s paper is interesting because, probably for the first time, it introduces genre criticism into the debate that is only beginning to form around the video film in West Africa. The theoretical position is also provocative. By linking the horror video film to traditions of literary and cinematic representations in the West, Wendl subordinates this decidedly local form of *seeing* to the hegemony of “contemporary world cinematic culture.” The implication is of course that critical attitude to the video film will remain confined to what is already defined in Western cinematic canons dealing with horror as genre. We are beginning to see this happen. Wendl’s main position seems to be that there are universal human tropes of the bizarre and horrific, which transcend time and space and that some Africa “horror videos” manifest the character of this universal savagery.

But do African audiences for whom these horror videos are made think of the “horrific” the same way? Does Dracula or the Frankenstein monster elicit the same psycho-social response as the witches and the “fetish priests” in video films in Africa? The significance of Wendl’s paper lies in the subtle ways in which it helps us to repose fundamental questions associated with understanding how images are interpreted and used by local people and for different purposes. His argument has its intellectual value though: it calls attention to a special kind of video film and its place in the sociology of meaning that local people in Africa assign to the visual image.

As pioneer in the field of video studies in West Africa, Jonathan Haynes’s sport is solid. He spent the two terms of his Fulbright stay in Nigeria digging up whatever he could find about the video phenomenon between 1991 and 1994. The result is a careful and very articulate presentation of the social and cultural meaning of the video industry in Nigeria and Ghana. In 1989, he co-authored one of the first essays to seriously deal with the emerging field of video studies, “Evolving Popular Media: Nigerian Video Films” which appeared in *Research in African Literatures*. Convinced that Nollywood was not just another flash in the pan in the production and consumption of popular arts in Africa, he came out with an American edition of a book of essays, *Nigerian Video Films*, which was initially published by the Nigerian Film Corporation, Jos, Nigeria. Since then, he has published many more essays on the subject of African cinema in general and on Nollywood in particular. He contributes two pieces to this special issue: the essay “Video Boom: Nigeria and Ghana,” and the interview, “TK in NYC: An Interview with Tunde Kelani.” “Video Boom: Nigeria and Ghana” highlights the history of the two video film industries in West Africa and points to names-‘fathers’- who helped define these national industries in the trying and teething points of their births. For those familiar with the scholarly literature in the field, this essay adds one significant bit. It draws attention to the production and consumption of the Hausa video film in the Northern part of Nigeria by referencing and giving due credit to the works of Brian Larkin and Abdallah Uba Adamu.<sup>19</sup> For those who have little knowledge of the subject, Haynes’s essay provides a one-stop route to the nitty-gritty of what the cultural product, video film, is all about and how it is perceived in the societies that produce and consume it. This essay sheds light on the “demographic center of the video film audience-women” and the ingenious “ways that marketers of video films sell their products in both countries. It also discusses what the author describes as ‘the bad lighting, and the minimal attention to set, costumes, and make-up,’ all of which point to the vagaries of video filmmaking in a postcolonial

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<sup>19</sup> I need to point out that Adamu’s efforts to make the scholarship on the Hausa video film visible are noteworthy. In November 4-7, 2003, he organized the first conference on the Hausa video film, which was held in the ancient city of Kano in Northern Nigeria. See the website <[www.kanoonline.com/chcs](http://www.kanoonline.com/chcs)> for details of this meeting of scholars.

environment. Even if the essay does not make any mention of the word, its discursive sagacity focuses on the post-coloniality of the texts of video films as well as the social contexts that produce these texts. This “post” is expressed as the “lack” as well as in the “crude” ingenuity that the industries in Ghana and Nigeria have invented to overcome these “lacks.”

Haynes’ interview with Tunde Kelani is unique. Conducted in New York and at the successful occasion of Kelani’s mid-career retrospective in April 2004, Kelani reveals all, detailing his early interests in the motion picture and the infusion of his Yoruba roots in his film and videomaking. A professional cameraman and keen admirer of his Yoruba roots, Kelani is not only home with the oral expression of his culture; he is deeply embedded in the literary expression of that culture also. In one of the responses to questions about his Yoruba roots, this video filmmaker has this to say: “I got really exposed to the Yoruba culture during my childhood, when my father asked me to go stay with my grandfather in the village. He wanted me to attend school in the village.” He saw the legendary performance of Kola Ogunmola’s *Palm Wine Drinkard* at this point in his life. It was an exhilarating experience; it was an experience he says he would “never forget.” I have read countless interviews by this filmmaker. None of them comes close to what is exposed about the background of this filmmaker. This interview is focused, revealing and very articulate. It truly represents the spirit of the video filmmaker’s idea of culture, society and cinema.

Onookome Okome is also one of the pioneers of video studies. He contributes an essay, “Nollywood: Spectatorship, Audience and the Sites of Consumption” and an interview with the controversial video film producer and evangelist, Helen Ukpabio. The essay states clearly the significance of viewing places in the art and practice of Nollywood. It demonstrates their unique sport of the viewing spaces in the formulation of what Nollywood is all about. Furthermore, the essay makes the point that these viewing places provide fresh insights into the ways that Nollywood operates as a medium of the people, arguing that “Perhaps the most enduring conclusion that I draw from my observation of these ‘street audiences’ is the way they force us to rethink the whole idea of spectatorship in Africa and the special uses of popular expressions such as the video film in Africa. Besides the remapping of the aural and physical landscape of the city, audiences of popular video films repeat for us the ways that the economics of spectatorship is defined as a strategic means of coming to terms with an abject status.” The interview, “The message is reaching a lot of people”: Proselytizing and Video Films of Helen Ukpabio,” deals with one of the most consistent producers of the category of video films that I have designated as the “hallelujah video.” This category of the video film designs a narrative of redemption through the intervention of Jesus Christ whose earthly agent is the thaumaturge. The church ground is an important locale in this narrative because it is here that the drama of the earthly polis is transported in the realm of the heaven polis and the final resolution of all earthly schism is given

meaningful ending after the timely intervention of the spiritual actor, who is, in most cases, the leader/preacher of the church. Helen Ukpabio is the torch-bearer of the category of the video film.

Paul Ugor's contribution comes clean with the chaos in the field of cultural production in Nigeria, which is aptly demonstrated in the different censorship regimes since the colonial time. The essay argues convincingly that what really determines what the patrons see in these video films is not what government cultural agencies legislate for Nollywood but what he describes as "the larger market forces." The "cultural economies around the video enterprise" is for this argument primary. This essay draws attention to the significant role that the video marketer plays in matters dealing with censorship in the industry and shows how the marketer is indirectly responsible for what producers in the industry have to deal with. An early version of this essay was also presented at the University of Bayreuth Video Workshop of 2001.

Moradewun Adejumbi's paper, "Nigerian Video Film as a Transnational Practice" is fascinating in the way that it connects the practice of Nollywood to a peculiar regional transnationality, which escapes the towering presence of global capital. Adejumbi is lucid and the arguments she presents are cogent. Building on the model of minor transnational cultural transaction, Adejumbi argues that the video film is indeed a fine example of a transnational cultural product and that for this reason it has assumed a regional rather than a national status. In her words, Nollywood has produced a cultural product that has now become transnational "in scope" and that is aware of "trends emanating from dominant centers in global production in significant respect." It is not only in the adoption of the video technology that "the distribution of Nigerian video film is incontestably transnational." Linguistic variety in the production of video film is one way that this product has been able to go beyond the spatial boundaries where it was initially invented. If the Yoruba language assured the video film producer of reaching a larger transnational Yoruba audience all over West Africa, she argues, the use of the English language and the Pidgin English has also given a wider appeal that reaches beyond the regional block marked by the Yoruba language. Adejumbi's essay also makes the distinction between the "ethnic global" and "regional cinema," which seems a useful way of beginning to rethink the idea of an African cinema practice outside what has been the common understanding of scholarly practice before the emergence of Nollywood. It allows us to move beyond just the critique of the content of the African film and to move into a more holistic appreciation of the other parts of the African cinematic complex. But this distinction can also be problematic in some ways. The formulation of the "ethnic global" challenges notions of the "ethnic" in both cultural and visual studies.

Babson Ajibade's essay, "From Lagos to Douala: the Video Film and Its Spaces of Seeing" joins in the debate of the transnational dimensions of the practice of Nollywood. Its main aim is to "put into fairly stable typology the categories of spaces for *seeing* video films from Lagos to

Douala.” Ajibade’s essay looks at some of the sites where video films are consumed in two major nations on the West coast of Africa-Lagos and Douala. The result of this ethnographic research is interesting. The paper identifies the private space of viewing, which is the domestic arena of consumption; the “dedicated space,” which include video parlors and video clubs; the “tie-in-spaces,” which are spaces that were not originally meant for the sole purpose of video viewing; and the “found spaces.” These “found spaces” are the “free spaces” found in the street where video patrons consume the cultural product in the open. Ajibade argues that these “creative video seeing spaces” “benefits the masses.” The essay points to both the poverty of these viewing venues and calls attention to the abjectness of the viewers across the whole of the West Coast of Africa. It also gestures to the democratization of the knowledge that these seeing spaces make available to the audience. In other words, this essay does not only demonstrate the popularity of the video film in West Africa, it shows the peculiar mode of a visual practice that has come to terms with its economic backwardness.

Chukwuma Okoye’s essay, “History and Nation Imagination: Igbo and the Videos of Nationalism” discusses the ambiguity in the writing of the Nigerian nation in two video films, *The Battle of Love* and *Laaraba*. Both video films are based on the Nigerian Civil war that engulfed that country between 1967 and 1970. A large section of this essay deals with the idea of the nation as a never-ending project. The significant contribution that this essay makes comes from the careful investigation of how this popular medium conceives of and debates this never-ending project of nation building, especially in the Nation-state riddle with social and political crisis. Okoye’s choice of the video films for this study comes from his desire to sort out the populist memory of the Nigerian nation at a crucial point in its history and to show how this sort of “memorizing” of a not-so-distant historical event is capable of the inconsistencies of recollected history. The essay argues that it is not only the idea of nation that dissolves in this crisis of remembering. Identities and loyalties also change and in the process trenches are erected that are formed around different readings of a single history. But the real contribution that this essay makes to the growing debate about how popular consciousness makes history is how history is fragmented and each part given meaning in time and in space. In the end, history is no longer the subject of objective interrogation but the accentuation and the *telling* of its parts. Okoye’s essay makes this point very vivid when he concludes that “These films do not directly engage re-writing of history in the manner recommended by Sullivan as “the way to draw a nation’s diverse people together. . . Rather than focus on imagined common identities and unifying experiences in the pool of individual disparities, these films orchestrate divisive ethnic affiliations and present it as the main factor that stymies the dream of a national identity.”

Wisdom Agorde’s essay, “The Triad of Men’s Violence in *Time: A Ghanaian Occult Video Film*” focuses on an aspect of social performance

in Ghanaian video film. The aim of the essay is to discuss an emerging category of the Ghanaian video film, the “occult video,” which is, according to Agorde, very popular among Ghanaians. The essay gestures towards a frightening typology that defines and seeks to explain the source of strange wealth in Ghanaian cities by investigating what Jean and John Comaroff refer to as vernacular technology. And in this case, this vernacular technology is expressed in the science of witchcraft and traditional African magic. Specifically, the magic comes from the old hunter who lives at the margins of society but whose powers are actually derived from being at the margin of the world in which he lives. This is the only essay in the volume that deals entirely with the Ghanaian video scene.

The essays selected for this special edition of *Postcolonial Text* report one incontestable fact, which is that the *presence* of the West African video film (Nollywood, if you will<sup>20</sup>), is a compelling testimony of the production of localities that have coalesced into the regional production of a popular cultural practice. As a regional social act, the West African video film is also a cultural reminder that points to the argument that global capital is far from taking over the narrative lives of those who are imagined to live at the “periphery.”

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<sup>20</sup> I have used the word, “Nollywood,” in a more general sense to denote a visual practice that is West African rather than Nigeria. I am aware of the problems that this usage brings to the scholarship, especially so since the word originated from the production post in Nigeria. Until a more embracing description is given to this fascinating regional cinematic practice, we may have to stay with this description.



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