

Producing Cheaply, Selling Quickly: the Un-Hollywood Production Paradigm of Nollywood Video Films

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Abstract

In April 2007 Nigeria's Bob TV invited Hollywood's Kisha Imani Cameron as resource person for its Skill Factory Workshop on Film Producing. No sooner had the first session begun that she declared: "There is so much to learn here". Global (and therefore western) techniques of film production were completely incompatible with – and in some ways, even thwarted by – the local popular video methodologies. Thus, having to learn anew film techniques previously taken for granted as 'global' and 'given', a western 'trainer' became a 'trainee' in the visual cultural space of Nigeria's Nollywood. Exploring an instance in 2007 where Hollywood's Cameron confronted the production paradigm of Nigerian video films at Abuja, and using empirical understandings of Nigeria's film industry, this paper interrogates how the visual cultural production paradigm of Nollywood departs from Western notions typified by Hollywood. In this paper, we interrogate how the visual culture of the popular videos departs from Western notions economically and paradigmatically.

Keywords: Nollywood, Hollywood, film, production, differences

1. Introduction

There is a certain sense of vibrancy that trails African visual arts generally. The vibrancy in visual artistic production in Africa stems from the volume and diversity of what is produced, the range of media and the specific social and cultural functions of art in African life. Much has been written about the functions and social contexts of African arts like baskets, beads, masks, pots and textiles generally (Duerden 1974, Barley 1994, Morris et al 1994, Renne 1995, Locke 1995). Achebe (1975), for instance, notes that art has always been in man's service because African ancestors made myths, legends, stories and sculptures in diverse media to serve their society's pressing needs. Through an investigation of African paintings and sculptures between 1920 and 1965, research has shown that African visual arts provide an understanding and appreciation of how the societies on the continent function as cultural entities because everyday lives are rooted in all forms of art (Mount 1973). Kennedy (1992) underscores the importance of visual arts in Africa when she remarks that art permeates African societies in a manner that one word cannot describe art because all forms of art are interwoven with themselves and with life altogether.

There are visual arts that are 'traditional' to Africa in the sense that they were formulated, produced and consumed by Africans in pre-colonial times before contacts with the West; and without the impetus of materials, and what Appadurai (1996) terms technologies and techniques that globalisation does afford to today's societies. But African arts are not static because they are very eclectic and ambiguous in terms of the materials they can appropriate unto themselves (Barber 1997). Thus, with the decoupling of space that globalisation affords, and the possibilities for the transfer of knowledge, African visual arts have responded by appropriating media and technologies in new and exciting ways. One of the new visual art forms ubiquitous in Africa today is the video film shot and distributed in cheap video format across the post colony and among its diasporas around the world. As a new visual art form, what is *new* about the video film is not the technology itself but the fact of its use outside of its original broadcast context for the production and release of motion pictures.

In other words, African visual culture has appropriated video format and is using it in the same way western cinema uses celluloid or digital formats in distributing motion pictures to audiences. It is not just the video medium that is used in a *new* way but the spaces of *seeing* video films are also *new* to global/western cinema paradigms. Such spaces include private spaces, dedicated spaces, tie-in spaces and found spaces (Ajibade 2007), within which popular audiences see video films either very cheaply or freely in Anglophone and Francophone Africa (Ajibade 2009). Exploring an instance in 2007 where Hollywood's Kisha Imani Cameron confronted the production paradigm of Nigerian video films at Abuja, and using empirical understandings of Nigeria's film industry, this paper interrogates how the visual cultural production paradigm of Nollywood departs from Western notions typified by Hollywood. In this paper, we interrogate how the visual culture of the popular videos departs from Western notions economically and paradigmatically.

2. Hollywood Meets Nollywood: Kisha Imani Cameron in Abuja

At the close of the 80s when video films debuted in Nigeria, they were shot and distributed mainly through videocassettes (Okome and Haynes 1997, Okome 1999). With the availability of more technologies the video film is now distributed on printed Video Compact Disk (VCD) and shot with DV cams and steady cams – either strapped to the body of the cameraman or hand-held. Editing with mass production was initially done using multiple VCRs and packs of videotapes. Now video makers use computer software to edit and do special effects in the features. In that beginning, it was the national economy – through the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) (Haynes 1997, Maier 2000) – that compelled video makers to abandon celluloid and use VHS cameras to shoot 'films'. By abandoning celluloid, Nigerian filmmakers also abandoned theatre houses since the new medium was more suited for playback within audience's domestic and personal spaces. In contrast to the few people who previously attended cinemas video films took the motion picture experience literally to a much broader audience (house wives, children and low-income men etc). With this wide audience base and with surplus social materials as themes, the video film has boomed not only in Nigeria but also in several parts of Africa. Nigerian video films also play to diaspora audiences in Europe, America and other places where Africans are.

Anticipating Hollywood's motion picture tradition, Nigeria's video industry is also called *Nollywood* – with its own star-system and local glamour. However, name and cheap glitz may be where similarities end between Hollywood and Nollywood. For, a critical analysis of Nollywood indicates motion picture practices far removed from textbook principles established by Hollywood. Quite often in the Nigerian video industry, cultural materials are either appropriated from or fashioned after America's Hollywood. Sometimes these materials may be successful Hollywood flicks, remade by Nigerian Nollywood. These remakes are usually referred to as "bestseller" films among local producers and consumers. Examples are *24 Hours* (2004) and *Osuofia in London 1&2* (2003/2004), which substitute key narrative elements with simple local materials. Nollywood's *24 Hours* is a remake of the TV thriller serial, *24* (2001-2010), made by Imagine Entertainment, 20th Century Fox and Real Time Productions; while *Osuofia in London* is Nollywood's remake of the then popular comedy romance, *Coming to America* (1988) made by Todd-AO and Panavision. In Nollywood, there are also clear instances of emerging cultural events fashioned directly after Hollywood. In this category are several music/video awards like the yearly African Academy Movie Awards, which attempts to replicate Hollywood's Red Carpet glamour. Perhaps the most resourceful of these emerging events has been the *African Film and Television Programmes Expo* also known as BOBTV (Best of the Best TV). Instituted in 2004, BOBTV is a festival that seeks to celebrate, promote and market Nigerian video films to broader local and global audiences.

BOBTV is different from other Nollywood events because it emphasizes training in which participants run streams of courses that prepare them for careers in the video industry. Quite a number of young Nigerians have trained in these yearly BOBTV events. By its fourth year in March 2007, organisers of BOBTV festival made an attempt at bridging *local* videos with *global* cinema. The event organizers invited Hollywood's Kisha Imani Cameron as resource person for its *Skill Factory Workshop on Film Producing*. This workshop was part of the scheduled events of the 4th African Film and Television Programmes Expo, held at the Ladi Kwali Halls, Sheraton Hotel and Towers, Abuja, Nigeria, from 11-15 March 2007. Kisha is one of Hollywood's independent producers. She has worked on such films as Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (2000) and *Sometimes in April* (2005). By inviting Kisha, BOBTV sort to energise the local by infusing Nollywood with Hollywood's cinematic techniques. And, Nigerian filmmakers who registered for Kisha's sessions assumed that her extensive experience in Hollywood was going to be beneficial to the local video industry.

In no way did the organisers consider the possibility that Nollywood's visual cultural methodologies may not be very compatible with Hollywood technicalities, in which case, there may be difficulties with transposing film techniques. Kisha's audience was a mixture of Nigerian video producers and younger generations of people aspiring for careers in Nollywood. No sooner had Kisha's first session begun that she discovered that her vast expertise in Hollywood and all the technical notes she had prepared for this training exercise did not amount to much. Familiar shoot schedules, crew portfolios, timing, budgeting etc that she was conversant with were in no way compatible with what she confronted at Abuja.

3. Producing Nigerian Videos

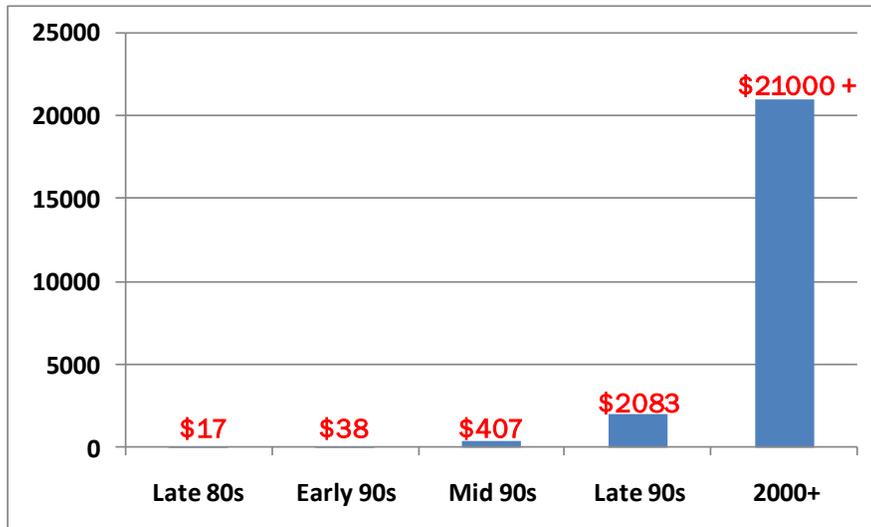
Two things that catch one's attention at Nigerian video film sets is that shoot time and budgets are highly compressed. For instance, on the set of Edisua Offoboche's *Because I am a Woman* (2004) in Calabar, the director, Emma Oguguah made the remark that he can shoot a video in 2 days (Personal Communication). The experience at video locations differs remarkably from the so-called 'African time' which, in social practice, is said to run very slowly. On video film sets there is no African time. Every one of the cast and crew is in a great hurry and things happen very quickly. Rehearsals are not overly stringent. At some instances there may be no rehearsals at all. Scripts are loose and actors simply improvise dialogues in-between. Besides the high degree of improvisation, the most spectacular aspect of Nollywood is the time it takes to shoot a film. At all the film locations the authors attended, the shoot processes were always very speedy. Cameras roll quickly through multiple scenes. To save precious time, a good many scenes are shot only once. Retakes are kept to the barest minimum. Amidst the screaming of directors, tempos and tempers stand very high as cast and crew scamper to meet deadlines. These deadlines are set not by directors but by video marketers. As bankrollers of the films, marketers literally wait at film locations with video jackets in hand – ready to sell.

They are in a hurry to make and sell the next film. In this way, there are more than one thousand video films produced annually in Nigeria (Barrot 2000). And, in the competitive market, marketers have a mere two weeks to rake-in profits. Owing to efficient piracy mechanisms and competition several video releases, Nigerian videos need to be sold very quickly for producers to make profits. On the average it takes between 4 days and one week to shoot a video – that is, from start to finish. In the course of the shoot, scenes of new social happenings may be added and actors changed. By the second week, consumers are purchasing shelf copies from video shops at N400 (about \$3.3). Others, too poor to own videos, have the option of either renting films for N50 (about 40 cents) or paying N30 (about 25 cents) to see features in video parlours. Most audiences see videos free at a neighbour's (or borrow from them) and in front of video shops where sellers are screening videos to advertise their goods. Other free tie-in spaces (Ajibade 2007) are restaurants, hair dressing saloons and long distance commuter buses in which proprietors play videos free for their clients.

In terms of video film budgets, the dynamics are also very interesting (see Fig. 1). To start with, the budgets for some of the earliest successful videos were ₦2000 (about \$17) for Kenneth Nnebue's *Aje ni Iya Mi* and ₦4500 (about \$38) for Okechukwu Ogunjiofor's *Circle of Doom* (Haynes and Okome 1997). Within a short while budgets rose to the region of ₦50,000 (about \$407) and above ₦250,000 (about \$2083) (Adesanya 1997). Today, some producers claim to have spent upwards of ₦10, 000,000 (about \$83,000) on their videos. However, these very high figures need be taken with caution. For, neither the humble technicians and equipment rented, nor the simple production processes fit to bloated budgets. Crew members like scriptwriters, for instance, may be paid as little as N10000 or about \$83 (Okome 2007). A lot of producers employ their own children, family, friends and acquaintances as cast, which significantly reduces overhead costs.

As yet, there is no evidence to suggest that enough profit can accrue from a single video feature shot on a huge budget. For each video release, marketers find it hard to sell a benchmark of 5000 - 15000 VCDs. At the shelf price of N400 per VCD, that will mean a gross of N2 – N6 million - (about \$17,000 - \$50,000). These figures are far above Meyer's (2004) estimate of \$5,000 to \$15,000 for Ghanaian videos. This might be understandable since Nigeria is a much larger market than Ghana. Profit margin is also small, since average video budget today is about ₦2.5million (about \$21,000). With high-end total sales of \$50000, Nigerian videos clearly do not have the same level of financial investment as Hollywood (Adejumobi 2007). And, this divergence in financial investments directly determines the quality of technology, technical manpower and creativity that Nigerian producers can invest in the video film. Even what might be very cheap-budget for a film in Hollywood is actually far in excess of a Nollywood blockbuster budget.

Figure 1: Video Film Budgets in Nigeria



Coming from the background of Hollywood studios, Kisha Cameron is familiar with blockbusting films made from huge budgets, voluminous cast and crew, painstaking efforts and lengthy production times. Kisha’s *Razorwire* (2009), for instance, started in 2007 and is about three years and millions of Dollars of expensive creative effort spread painstakingly to ensure a quality that is ‘normal’. ‘Normal’ in the sense that the film conforms with laid-down principles and qualities acceptable for distribution by mainstream studios, cinemas and international film marketers/promoters. This quality is, in essence, *global*. And, it is the logical processes linked with this global cinematic standard that Kisha hoped to impart at her film producing workshop in Nigeria. Alas, right from the very beginning of her workshop, it became clear to her that what is *global* is not necessarily *local*. And, that Hollywood production processes that her career takes for granted, are not so ‘normal’ in the postcolonial visual cultural practices of Nigerian video films. In answer to one of her start-off questions on film production, a participant answered that it is the Production Manager that determines video shooting schedules and sequences. Kisha was completely taken aback. For, in Hollywood, it is the Assistant Director rather than the Production Manager that determines shoot schedules and sequences. In a quick succession of further expositions, Kisha screamed: “There is so much to learn here”. This trainer had brought along a baggage of rich (but western) film ‘expertise’ into the cultural space of a postcolonial visual culture. Her expertise crumbled and she braced-up to learn afresh filmmaking techniques she thought she already knew. From the foregoing, it is clear that between Hollywood and Nollywood, differences in visual cultural methodologies are very outstanding (see Table 1).

Table 1: Critical Differences between Hollywood and Nollywood

Hollywood	Nollywood
Shoot takes several months/years	Shoot completed in a few days
Script is very important	Script is not important
Storyboard is important	Storyboards are absent altogether
Picture composition is important	Narrative is primarily based on dialogue
Assistant Director prepares shoot schedules	Production Manager prepares shoot schedules
Casting is done by specific experts	Cast is often decided by maketers
Track and crane shots are important	Track and crane shots are mostly absent
Rehearsals are given stringent attention	Rehearsals and dry runs overlap in the few days of shoot
Extensive attention to audiovisual quality	Little attention to picture and sound qualities
Strict attention to principles of visual design	No attention to principls of visual design
Rigorous postproduction of several months	Postproduction concluded in a few hours
Cuts are fast with less dialogue	Cuta are slow and based on dialogue

4. Videoing the National Experience

The preceding table bears testimony to the divergence between the visual practices of Hollywood and those of Nollywood. As it were, the divergences may not necessarily be mitigated by differences in technology. For, as audiovisual technologies, celluloid and video are of Western cultural paternity – from the point-of-view of the postcolony into which both media are inserted. Furthermore, when the video technology was appropriated by local film producers, it was taken as a direct alternative to celluloid (Haynes 1997). In other words, as far as local know-how and popular imagination is concerned, there is no relevant difference between celluloid and video: both are motion picture technologies. Both media are called ‘film’ by Nollywood producers and consumers. In essence, it is not the technologies themselves that are important, but the images they mediate. Thus if, as Meyer suggests, popular “video-films are inspired by and woven into the texture of everyday life” (93), then we may expect that the texture of Nigerian social life and history has given direction to the form and content of Nollywood’s video culture.

Wole Soyinka has compared Nigeria to a faulty automobile engine that needs serious refurbishing to start working once again (*The Punch* 2007). At several levels, scholars have traced this fault to the 80’s economic downturn and subsequent leadership crises that have dogged Nigeria (Achebe 1983; Asobie 1998; Machungo 2001; Machungo 2002). As vital texturizers of social life the dynamic forces of financial decline and social insecurity have inspired and woven into video film culture in fundamental ways. To start with, when the video films debuted in Nigeria, it was clearly an event negotiated by economic collapse and social incapacitation (Haynes 2007). Nigerian filmmakers quickly came to terms with the fact that a feature on video could be produced for one-tenth the cost of a celluloid film (Haynes 1997). In essence Nigerian producers turned to video not for creative exploration but as a cheaper medium than celluloid. Economic expedience was the keyword, rather than creativity.

The shift from celluloid to video also restructured production processes, eliminating to the barest minimum time, human and material resources required to make ‘films’. Thus, the very large cast and specialised crew that should normally be found on film sets restructured drastically to only a few individuals performing multiple functions. A director may, for instance write his own script and act in the video while, at the same time, drafting family, friends and dependants for little or no fees at all. Even where video features are trilogies or quadrilogies, all parts are shot as one film in one time, one space and one budget. More or less, actors and crew are paid for just one film. It is only during postproduction that the footage is split in as many ‘parts’ as producers desire. Nollywood’s profound strategy is to make and sell video films as cheaply and quickly as can possibly be done (Haynes 2007). However, if video budgets are kept at the barest minimum, it is also because life itself is marginal in this African postcolony. Most people live on less than \$1 a day – about the barest minimum on which life can be sustained.

While hardships of the economy give direction to the poverty of Nollywood materials, techniques and strategies, it is the near-absence of institutional control over the industry – a symptom of social insecurity – that makes it resourceful. It is not that government has no machinery to monitor the video industry. It is more that video producers can bypass – with impunity – the censorship organ of government. For example, in 1999 the National Film and Video Censorship Board banned Helen Ukpabio’s *End of the Wicked*. The video was banned because it had a scene showing a woman with a large penis. In defiance, Ukpabio sold her films and there have been no litigations or sanctions to this day (Okome 2007). Several other films get into the market without the knowledge of the Censorship Board. In essence the videos provide media spaces different from state-controlled forms and allow for imaginations that run contrary to institutional opinions.

With the video-film’s emergence, the Nigerian state lost its control over public imagination and its unique sense of community (Larkin 2000). However, with the loss of the state’s hegemony over imagination, imagination itself became public property, that is, it began to “run counter to a state politics of identity” (Meyer 93). In the video spaces, people could now put into visual discourse, news, rumours, opinions and ideas about national life – with disregard to constituted authority. While institutional non-involvement allows popular imagination to run wild, it also provides the necessary environment for opinions to circulate, quickly, to diverse social categories in a market ruled by piracy and uncensored materials. The imaginative community of the video film is not ruled by state laws or global media standards but by the ambivalent whims of producers and consumers. The video film not only takes onto itself materials from *local* and *global* spheres but, more specifically, it gives new directions and fresh meanings to them. And, the directions that popular imagination gives to the video film is clearly not obliged to conform to overbearing local legislations or strict global media principles.

Other times, social and political materials that may seem treasonous on national dailies tend to appear, defiantly, in the videos. Such was the case with Tunde Kelani's *Saworoide* (1999) – released in the Abacha years. Right in the face of the Nigerian dictatorship, this video graphitised a suggestion that Abacha will die. The military junta could not stop the video from projecting the wishes of the common man. Not long after, the common man's wishes were fulfilled. And, Abacha truly died. This is an example of how popular imagination's wild dreams may sometime come true, in an unexpected fashion that thwarts status quos.

The social and visual environments of Nollywood's videos depart remarkably from Hollywood's western notion. Though the Nigerian videos deploy what Appadurai (1999) terms global technologies and techniques, this deployment is squarely on local terms. Kisha Cameron's experience at Abuja indicates that techniques and visual terms of the Nigerian video culture are so radically removed as to seem to antagonise global frameworks. It is this anti-local and very un-global ability of the videos that Meyer highlights when she says that the films occur "behind the backs of both global media industries and the state" (93). Nigerian video culture represents "the newly constituted public realm" (Meyer 92). In this public realm the cinema space is transformed into an 'occult economy' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000) where video culture approximates the decadent, the fears, the failings and the rich but seemingly unattainable potentials of a postcolony. It is clear that Nollywood has evolved without the far-sightedness or instinct for talent that may have built Hollywood. It is also true, as Haynes (2007) has suggested that Nollywood videos aim only at quick returns on minimal investments by pandering to the lowest tastes of their audiences. However, it is the videos' ability to pander very cheaply and very quickly to audiences that make them vital links between visual culture and national experience.

The videos are produced and consumed in untidy, quick and cheap processes. The untidy processes of Nollywood video culture are subtle barometers of the tentative and messy nature of postcolonial change (Fairclough 1995). In their own untidy ways the video's urban spaces provide a public realm – unaccredited by the state – in which producers and consumers can reflect and cast opinions on the nation's socio-political landscapes. More than anything else, perhaps, it is this ability of the video film to operate behind the establishment and allow the voice, dreams, fears and other nuanced predicaments of everyday people that makes Nollywood's videos fruitful for understanding social change in Africa's biggest postcolony. Therefore, whereas Figure 1 and Table 1 clearly indicate the differences between Nollywood and Hollywood, being un-Hollywood has enabled Nollywood to retain potentials that are positive to social change in Nigeria.

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