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Nollywood: Rooted in Yoruba

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In 2006 Nigeria was said to be making about 2,000 movies each year and the industry was bringing in sales of $2-3 million ("Business: Nollywood…"). These incredible numbers have earned the industry the nickname "Nollywood," of course to associate it with both Hollywood and Bollywood. Considering the sheer quantity of Nigerian films, the country's absence on the world cinematic stage may seem puzzling. However, this mostly results from the industry's near total reliance on DVD sales. This is not the only unorthodox development in the diverse history of Nollywood; it is, in fact, a result of a very unorthodox cinematic heritage. Unlike other national cinemas rooted in post-colonialism, Nigerian cinema developed without much governmental or international support. Instead, it grew out of a more indigenous tradition.

Like every other West African film industry, Nigerian cinema was born into a postcolonial culture still stabilizing after acquiring independence in 1960 (Olayiwola, 183). The motion picture arrived in Nigeria as early as 1903 in the southern city of Lagos. These films were mostly short actualités of real life scenes, characteristic of the earliest films. As simple as they were these viewings often played to a packed house of Nigerians eager to see the modern magic that was cinema. During World War II, British colonialists established the Crown Film Unit, an endeavor that was not wholly—possibly not at all—for the benefit of the native population. The films produced through the CFU were often borderline propaganda films that either demonized Germany or canonized the British (Olayiwola, 184). This was also an opportunity to show the world the good work being done by British Christians to "civilize" the native Nigerians. One such activity would be to show films from Britain that exhibited the "highest" civility. This enculturation by the British would have an enduring influence on the Nigerian perception of outsiders.

Although there is some dispute over when the first truly Nigerian feature was produced, a Nigerian did not direct the first feature (Haynes, "structural" 102). In the

early 1970s, Americans such as Ossie Davis directed multiple films in Nigeria in order to help plant the seeds for a viable industry. Considered by Haynes to be the first Nigerian feature, Davis' *Kongi's Harvest* (Davis, 1970) was a politically motivated story about the dictator of an African country. The film portrays the extreme lengths that he takes to diminish the cultural divides among his people and unite them under a single banner. Unfortunately, this film and others made with American money did little to establish foundations for a serious Nigerian film industry. This thread of culturally aware films is, in fact, not considered much of an indicator of the history of Nigerian cinema. Haynes goes so far as to say that, "[t]his kind of cinema has failed almost completely to materialize" (Haynes "Structural" 99). He goes go on to mention Eddie Ugbomah who attempted to aim a little lower on the cultural scale. Through Ugbomah's work the all-permeating, omnipresent influence of the Hollywood popular film entered into the bloodline ofbudding Nigerian cinema. Haynes asserts that Ugbomah's *The Rise and Fall of Dr. Oyenusi* (1976), *The Mask* (1979) and *Oil Doom* (1981) all catered to the Nigerian populous and did little to contribute to an indigenous film tradition. It was not until 1979 that film in Nigeria began to take on an authentically Nigerian character.

By the late 1970s the Yoruba travelling theater was a very popular form of entertainment. According to Olayiwola's sources, "at its height of productivity and popularity in the 1970s and early 1980s, there were at least 100 troupes of the traveling theatre in Yoruba society" (186). A mixture of traditional Alarinjo theater and other forms of entertainment like the Ghanaian Concert Party, Yoruba Travelling theater had a dynamic form that caught the public's attention. Hubert Ogunde - who would go on to become a pioneering filmmaker as well - developed this theatrical form as a way of connecting with the working class without compromising cultural identity. Some have posited that the Yoruba traveling theater served the same function T.V. serves in more developed, industrialized cultures. A few of these functions are laid out in Olayiwola's article: "To articulate the main lines of the established cultural consensus about the nature of reality… [t]o assure the culture at large of its practical adequacy in the world by affirming and confirming its ideologies/mythologies in active engagement with the practical and potentially unpredictable world… [t]o convince the audience that their

status and identity as individuals is guaranteed by the culture as a whole; and To transmit, by these means a sense of cultural membership" (187). In general, the Yoruba theater was extremely nostalgic towards traditional Yoruba culture and tended to portray an idealized way of life that had been lost in the anxieties of modern urbanization.

The first Yoruba film was made by Ola Balogun in 1977, *Ajani Ogun*. This would be the first in a flood of Yoruba-based films, many of which would come directly from Yoruba plays that were adapted for the screen by Ogunde or Balogun (Haynes "Structural" 99). This Yoruba travelling theater would lay the groundwork for many of the aesthetic and narrative qualities of the film industry in Nigeria. Haynes observes that, "One can trace a line of descent from Ogundes films to the present" ("Structural" 103). And at this time in history, Olayiwola claims, "(p)ractitioners of the popular Yoruba travelling theatre were, undeniably, at the nerve-center of video production in Nigeria" (193). This traditional heritage has had an interesting effect on the way Nigerian film has developed and has taken its toll ideologically. Haynes goes on to quote Hyginus Ekwuaze speaking in reference to Ogunde's early films, "[t]he familiar clichés heap up until well nigh breaking point: The *joie de vivre* of the African, the comely beauty of African maidenhood, the idyll of village life…" (103). These are all elements of the classic Yoruba theater that have been translated to the screen, but the most significant and enduring element is the portrayal of spirituality and religion.

Haynes has claimed that the spiritual theme in Nigerian cinema is "arguably their crucial defining feature among the world's film cultures" ("Literature Review" 110). Yoruba plays and films are wrought with supernatural encounters and the use of "juju," an umbrella term for traditional witchcraft and spirituality (Haynes "Structural" 107). The consistency of this theme is partially due to the non-western ontology that is commonly understood among African peoples. Keyan Tomaselli et al. have written extensively on how the oral foundations of African culture have influenced the cinematic themes that are prevalent today. They explain that, "[o]ntologies shaped by orality assume that the world consists of interacting forces of

cosmological scale and significance rather than discrete secularized concrete objects" (Tomaselli et al. 18). The unique spiritual element that permeates Nigerian films and the great success of spiritual storylines in Nigeria is no doubt linked to this African ontology.

In addition to providing a stylistic heritage, the travelling theater also became a model for the business side of Nigerian film. Even before the first Yoruba feature premiered the travelling troupes were starting to use film as a theatrical device portraying dream sequences or spiritual events. Eventually these troupes became familiar with the technology and found that the motion picture was a real option for distributing their performances. The original Yoruba films were presented similarly to the theater performances. They would load a projector onto a truck and go around to school auditoriums, concert halls, hotels, wherever they could get a venue. The troop usually travelled with the film in order to ensure they would not be cheated out of ticket sales (Haynes "Structural" 101). Alain Ricard (via Haynes) points out that "the producer becomes his own distributor and realizes at a more or less artisanal level the vertical integration typical of capitalist successes in the cinema industry" ("Structural" 102). This stands in opposition to the traditional methods of distribution in other countries wherein production and exhibition are distinctly separated.

The Yoruba Theater also was able to leverage their popularity outside of film in order to develop something of a star system to advertise their movies. The strong character types that were developed in the travelling theater were often associated with particular actors whose presence at the showings of the film brought in even more of a crowd. An important factor that sets the early Yoruba films apart among other developing industries is that there was no financial support from the government. Olayiwola quotes Adedeji and Ekwuazi (1998): "Not earning any subsidies from the government or financial support from any foundations, the artists have progressively managed to survive in a very big

way. They draw their income not only from their stage shows but also from television shows, from waxing their music and plays on discs, by printing their plays as photoplays and as literature" (186). This financially independent stance was an important path for the Nigerian cinema to take. Haynes explains:

> From the beginning Nigerian films have been produced almost exclusively with Nigerian money… The positive side of the isolation of Nigerian cinema is that insofar as it exists, it is truly independent and autonomous; there are no questions about what effect foreign money may be having on the artistic imagination ("Structural" 98).

Across Africa, in both the academic and filmmaking world, there is great debate over what can be defined as "authentically African" (Zacks 15). However, this autonomy is a major indicator as to the indigenous nature of Nigerian cinema and its roots in the Yoruba style. One downside to this is that films were often made very cheaply. They were often thrown together quickly and acted more as a distribution tool for the theater plays. They incorporated very little film technique and made no effort to experiment with the new medium. The motto of the early Yoruba films was to make a fast profit on minimal investment (Haynes "Structural" 105). Often the aesthetic and production quality were looked down upon by the more academic film elites. This style of quick, cheap filmmaking and distribution would become the standard procedure through the 90's up to the present day and would define the industry we now know as Nollywood.

By the end of the 1980s, Nigeria's economic policy had ravaged the film industry and made it nearly impossible to sustain a viable film business (Olayiwalo 189). It was around this time video began to be seen as a more economical option. Though there is some contention, many scholars cite *Living in Bondage* (Nnebue 1992) as the first Nollywood video film. According to the legend, Kenneth Nnebue was an electronics dealer who found himself with a surplus of videocassettes. He had the idea that he could sell films on video instead of charging admission at a theater or auditorium. This method would be cheaper and require less work.

After doing a number of films with the Yoruba travelling theater Nnebue decided to write and produce his own feature film (Haynes "Video Boom" 2). *Living in Bondage* was a smash hit across Nigeria. The film sold more than 750,000 copies ("Business: Nollywood Dreams"). Ironically, Nnebue was not a Yoruban. He was from the Igbo tribe in the southeastern part of Nigeria. Suddenly, there was a rash of low-budget video films that spread throughout Nigeria, primarily in the Igbo region of the country. By the mid 191990s Nigeria was producing about 500 films every year (Haynes "Video Boom" 2).

This video-reliant system has allowed for directors to produce large bodies of work in very short periods of time. For example, Chico Ejiro, known as Mr. Prolific, is reported to have made 80 films in only eight eight years (Haynes "Video Boom" 2). Unfortunately, the video system also puts many of the directors and more artistically inclined members of the Nollywood community at the mercy of the marketers/distributers. Coming from a purely business background they are, "aiming only at quick returns on minimal investments by pandering to the lowest and most predictable tastes of their audiences" (Haynes "Video Boom" 3). On the other hand, this desire for volume has made Nollywood into an unstoppable force on the African continent. Haynes points out an interesting similarity to Hollywood in that Nollywood benefits from having a much larger population than other countries in Africa and can make a profit on domestic sales alone. This leads to higher budgets and higher production value than the film industries of other countries (Haynes "Video Boom"4).

The striking thing about Nollywood is the interplay between the indigenous tribal culture, and the modern medium of video. There are some that view this as a culturally beneficial force. In his article "Nollywood: Prisms and Paradigms" Akudinobi writes, "special effects merge with indigenous epistemological systems to map social realities and assert ostensible realities beyond the material, eliciting an intricate interplay of cultural, aesthetic, technological, and commercial discourses" (134). Through this

marriage of new technology and traditional culture, Nollywood energizes previously staid and stolid genre forms.

Nigerian cinema in unique in that it finds its roots in an indigenous art form—Yoruba traveling theater—and expands it into lively and diverse cinematic forms. Not only is Nigeria's film industry one of the largest in the world, but it also primarily serves its own people. Many scholars have counted this as a flaw that has dragged cinema down to the level of mere merchandise. Yet, despite the condemnations from the "culturally aware" sector some believe that Nollywood has now "entered a phase of critical self-consciousness" (Akudinobi 140) and is making changes towards becoming a more culturally transformative medium rather than a simple form of entertainment. Regardless of what is to come, today Nollywood is providing a form of entertainment that is primarily Nigerian and that is no small accomplishment.

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