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John C. McCall

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, jmccall@siu.edu

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The capital gap: Nollywood and the limits of informal trade

John C. McCall, Southern Illinois University

Abstract

This article examines Nollywood as a creative industry based in Africa's informal sector. By definition, the informal sector produces no financial records, so no quantitative economic data are presented. This research utilizes ethnographic methods and anthropological analysis to highlight the importance of the video movie industry to Nigerian people, its place in their economic life and its integral role in their culture. Nollywood's intimacy with Nigerians has been achieved by way of the industry's distinctive informal system of production and distribution. This same informality prevents the video industry from establishing financial legitimacy. Without the ability to generate capital, the industry is straining against its economic limits. Thus, the cultural success of Nollywood pushes it towards inevitable formalization and uncertain consequences.

Keywords: Nigeria, Nollywood, video industry, pan-African, popular production

Capital, the most essential component of Western economic advance is the one that has received the least attention. Neglect has shrouded it in mystery. (De Soto 2000)

The other global economy

After two decades of scholarship on Nollywood, a substantial literature exists supporting the contention that the thriving popular movie industry in West Africa is a complex and significant cultural development that deserves serious scholarly consideration. To date, however,

the commercial dimension of the Nollywood phenomenon has largely been glossed over. In this article I want to turn from analysis of Nollywood movies as cultural discourse, to examine them as products of labour and exchange. Nollywood's grassroots origins in Africa's informal economy are an essential part of what the movie industry is, and why it remains isolated from the global economic channels that circulate movies from Hollywood and Bollywood.

The world has two economies. The first is the one we read about on the financial page. It includes the extent of world's financial transactions as tracked by the records of modern state bureaucracies, banks and corporations. Every paycheck, each stock trade, every product inventory and each home mortgage, has a place in that *formal* economy. The other economy consists of everything else – all of the unrecorded or *informal* transactions, exchanges of labour, and untitled properties that are not accounted for by the formal system of financial records and the bureaucracies that track and regulate them. Such *undocumented* transactions are the foundation of the financial lives of most people living in the so-called 'third world'. The 'undeveloped world' is mostly an 'undocumented world' where labour is contracted, homes are purchased and debts are paid, without leaving any official record behind. In this context, the concepts 'undeveloped' and 'undocumented' refer to a parallel set of social conditions. The extent, nature, and quality of the wealth and productivity of this unrecorded sector are poorly understood, because they exist beyond the horizon of economists' data sets. One might think that a blind spot in our economic knowledge that obscures the labour of millions of workers and the exchange of billions of dollars would catch the attention of young scholars looking for an original research topic. There seems, however, to be an unspoken agreement that if economic activities are not 'accounted for', then they do not count. It is easier to imagine that the poor

have nothing, than to think they simply lack the institutional mechanisms and official documentation to transform the wealth they have into capital.

As an abstraction, the term ‘third world’ seduces us to imagine that the world’s disenfranchised live far away. But the informal economy is everywhere. It always has been. The so-called ‘formal economy’ is bounded by the extent to which the world’s economic activities are documented. The informal economy is also a global economy. Separate but equally ubiquitous, informal modes of global distribution make Nollywood movies available all over the world from shops and kiosk vendors in major cities who rely on informal exchange ties that lead directly back to Alaba market in Lagos.

To understand the significance of Nollywood’s informal production and distribution infrastructure, it is vital to emphasize that capitalism can only be mobilized under conditions of economic formality – official records and documentation make capitalism possible. A business owner cannot generate collateral without records documenting ownership of property, corporate inventory, equipment, payroll, etc. These records make it possible to transform property into equity, equity into credit. Informal markets lack the bureaucratic oversight required to fully mobilize modern capital creation. Thus, the informal markets that predominate in the southern hemisphere occupy a middle ground between the informal mercantile markets of the past, and the high capitalist exchanges of modern global finance.

The Nigerian video industry originated in the informal economy. Informal markets have been the key to Nollywood’s spectacular success, because they make it possible to get video movies to every remote corner of Africa. While the ‘of and for the masses’ quality of Nollywood’s mode-of-production is extremely important, it is also the video industry’s greatest obstacle. The electronics marketers at Alaba market in Lagos drive Nollywood’s system of

production and distribution. But they operate in an economic sector that generates no formal records. They operate without the institutional mechanisms to create capital.

To put it bluntly, Nollywood is not capitalist. The video industry is a network of scattered informal economic activities and interactions held back from capitalization because the system depends on informal practices to produce and distribute its products. I use the term ‘capitalist’ in a strict economic sense. It is necessary to make this clear because the term is now used with increasingly more generalized connotations. Concepts like ‘social capital’ or ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu 1977) are useful metaphors when theorizing about the dynamics of social practice. But these usages transform a concise financial concept into a generalized notion of the accumulation of social authority or power. In other words, you may be a big man in your community, but you cannot take social capital to the bank. Nollywood producer Afam Okoreke explained the situation to me when recalling a time in the late 1990s when Nollywood producers: ‘started looking for alternative markets, referring to our marketers here who are also the sponsors, as illiterate’.

Marketers picked offense when they went ahead looking for sponsorship from the banks. But no bank has agreed to give them money because the collateral they are asking for is much. Most of the banks will not give you... a suitable amount of money to do a movie without a befitting collateral. So if you don’t balance the money they will enjoy your property.

The distinction between the formalized mechanisms of capitalism and the informal commerce that predominates in Africa has been a crucial one for researchers concerned with

understanding the economic lives of Africans. Keith Hart (1973), the anthropologist who coined the term ‘informal economy’ in the 1970s, devoted his early work to making the informal economy visible to professionals concerned with economic development in Africa. Hart argued vigorously that development specialists must find ways to take informal labour and modes of production into account. He pointed to the absurdity of statistics that categorized millions of Africans as ‘unemployed’, even as they laboured daily to support themselves and their families.

Naming something, however, does not always make it visible. While Hart’s observations were duly noted in development circles four decades ago, the world’s undocumented economies have only become increasingly invisible. Two years ago, Hart reflected on the limits of theoretical insights when it comes to bringing Africa’s informal economic activities to light:

It is gratifying to be famous as the author of an idea; but I know, and so should everyone else, that the idea of an ‘informal economy’ was a way of turning what is defiantly external to bureaucracy into something internal to it, incorporating the autonomous life of the people into the abstracted universe of their rulers. (Hart 2007)

Most commerce in Nigeria, as in most of Africa, continues to take place on the sidelines of the world’s economy. The actual wealth of Nigerians is substantial, but most of it is largely invisible, tied up in what Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto (2000) calls, ‘dead capital’, i.e. property and forms of wealth lacking official documentation. Desoto makes the case that ‘the mystery of capital’ is formalization of wealth and property. He argues that the world’s poor are capable, hardworking folk who remain poor primarily because they are locked out of the formal economy, unable to access the capital potential of their existing wealth.

The poor inhabitants of these nations – the overwhelming majority – do have things, but they lack the process to represent their property and create capital. They have houses but not titles; crops but not deeds; businesses but not statutes of incorporation. It is the unavailability of these essential representations that explains why people who have adapted every other Western invention, from the paper clip to the nuclear reactor, have not been able to produce sufficient capital to make their domestic capitalism work. (Desoto 2000: 3)

Nigerians do not cling to informal commerce because they are conservative traditionalists. They cling to it because of it is the most reliable option they have available. As the promise and hope of postcolonial independence gave way to neo-colonial corruption and civil neglect, Nigerian's affirmed their faith in the tried-and-true self-sufficiency of their ancestors – community-based production and informal networks of exchange. Nollywood developed following the structural logic of this decentralized network of indigenous production and trade. The video industry has little vertical integration of operations, and is not organized in a Hollywood style studio system. Instead, professional guilds formed by actors, writers, directors, technicians and producers are Nollywood's primary organizational units. Nollywood's position in the informal economy means that the industry is not yet able to be as capitalist as it aspires to be. Those who confuse the capitalist aspirations of entrepreneurs with the economic realities on the ground in Africa will fail to recognize the challenges that Nollywood faces before its entrepreneurs can generate significant capital. One might also miss Nollywood's participation in commerce, development and quality of life on the ground in Nigeria. Nollywood's informal

structure places it within traditional social networks in a way that positions producers to interact and engage in exchange with Nigerian communities on their own terms.

The ‘Self-Organizing’ economy

The ubiquitous traffic jam: lulled in congestion, captive to the road's breadth, and thriving with entrepreneurial activity. (Koolhaas 2000)

As the informal trade in what Nigerians called ‘home videos’ became established in the 1990s, the primary vendors set up shop in an undocumented market in the Idumota District of Lagos Island. Idumota Market rose from the ashes of Nigeria’s post-oil-boom economic collapse. Petty marketers and small-time operators of various sorts set up shop as squatters in the abandoned buildings where bankers, oil executives and architects once had offices. Hope had been high for Nigeria’s future in the 1970s when a booming petroleum market buoyed Nigeria’s initial embrace of political independence and economic autonomy. Back then, the Idumota District of Lagos Island was planned as a centre for commerce and high finance. Lagos’ gleaming new financial district was intended to be the commercial nexus of the continent. The high-rise buildings now stand as faded monuments to the hopes and dreams of a newly independent African nation with a wealth of resources – both human and natural. As the oil boom waned and official corruption became endemic, Nigerians learned how transitory prosperity could be. The military coup that ensued met with little public disapproval, which the coup-plotters claimed to be an affirmation of the nation’s rejection of electoral democracy.

It was around this time that Chinua Achebe famously wrote that: ‘The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership’ (1984:1) and indeed, it was the failure of

Nigeria's leaders to foster the future of the nation, rather than their own self-interest, that allowed multinational oil companies (Chevron, Shell, Mobil, ELF, etc.), ancillary contractors (such as Halliburton's KRB) and rogue financiers (such as Marc Rich) to suborn the rise of a kleptocratic state in Nigeria in the 1980s (Nwangwu 2001; Adebawale and Ali 2009). The petroleum wealth that was supposed to capitalize the commercial development of Nigeria, found its way into private bank accounts, foreign real estate, and other destinations far from the persistent poverty, endemic corruption and socio-economic stagnation that plagued Nigeria. The Idumota district, once the crown jewel of Nigerian hope, fell into disrepair. Rather than maintain the crumbling business district, the surviving corporate residents fled to neighbouring Victoria Island – a swank neighbourhood designed for residential and retail uses. This departure from the original vision of Lagos's planners had two significant results. One consequence was the infamous Lagos 'go-slow' – a perpetual state of traffic gridlock because Victoria Island was not designed to handle the increased influx of traffic. The second consequence was Idumota Market.

The Idumota district is still a commercial centre, but not the one that it was intended to be. As such, it is a case study of what happens when optimistically modernist urban planning collides with the brutal realities of the global economy. The failed plans for the Idumota district, however, are not as relevant to our concerns as the media distribution centre that Idumota became in the 1990s – a case study of how Nigerians managed to subsist in Lagos in spite of everything. The creative resilience of Lagosians in the face of hardship caught the attention of Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas (2000), who took a group of Harvard architecture students to Lagos to study what he called the 'self-organizing' tendencies of Nigeria's vibrant informal sector. For Koolhaas, Lagos represented the city of the future. The petty entrepreneurs who turn

traffic jams into points-of-sale were among Koolhaas' heroes because these *bricoleurs* had crafted a functioning way-of-life from rubble of a failed exercise in modernist urban planning.

As his 'postmodern' city of the future, Koolhaas seems a little too taken with the city's utility for demonstrating his theories, while remaining largely indifferent to the daily hardships faced by the residents of Lagos. In the end, his frame of reference is too narrowly focused on a critique of modernist urban planning to enlighten us much about the personal struggles and oppressive conditions that catalyse the cities 'self-organizing' tendencies, and drive Africa's informal economy. Koolhaas is convinced that there is something very 'postmodern' going on in Lagos today. This is true to the extent that 'postmodern' includes the resolute persistence of precolonial structures and the thinning of the postcolonial modernist facade – though I think the term has exhausted any analytical utility it may have had.

There is certainly nothing new or unusual about the entrepreneurial vitality of Lagos. What is important to understand is that the 'flight of capital' from Nigeria that escalated in the 1980s sustained and strengthened Nigerians' dependence upon the informal economic practices that have served them for generations. Over the past decade, the video wholesalers have migrated from Idumota to the more legitimate (though no more formal) spaces in the Alaba Market district. Moving from the squatters' stalls in Idumota's abandoned buildings to the tidy shops and modest storefronts in Alaba was one more sign of Nollywood's gradual climb towards legitimization. But Nollywood's placement in the informal sector remains the biggest obstacle to the movie industry's future growth.

Pan-African popular culture

African film criticism and the Nigerian videos are not well suited to one another: the videos are not what is wanted by the criticism, and the criticism lacks many of the tools necessary to make sense of the videos (Haynes 2000:13).

Ousmane Sembène is often identified as the father of African cinema. Much like Achebe's famous statement that he began writing to provide an alternative to Eurocentric representations of Africa, Sembene believed in the power of literature and film to overcome the dehumanizing colonial image of Africans. He rejected the images of Africa produced by ethnographic documentarians such as Jean Rouch, of whom Sembène famously declared: 'you look at us as if we were insects!' (Cervoni 1965:1). In addition to correcting misrepresentations of Africans, Sembène also saw a crucial role for film in African society, and described it as 'night school' for the African public (Bakari and Cham 1996: 2).

Early in his career, an optimistic Sembène declared that African filmmakers were going to: 'hold up a mirror to their people' (Bakupa-Kanyinda 1995: 25). Sembène's saw film as a means to provoke critical reflection and discourse among Africans. This role for film was considered a crucial step in reinventing an African culture for Africans, thus overcoming the cultural alienation that was the legacy of colonialism. The idea that film had important cultural work to do in Africa was not unique. In 1986 Souleymane Cissé, one of the best of the pioneering francophone African auteurs, argued that making films for the African audience should be the primary concern of African filmmakers:

I have first of all to have my films accepted by my people, then by the whole African continent, Only after that can I begin to think about Europe and about the possible access of non-African spectators to African films made for Africans. (Barlet 2000: 21).

The film theory that obtained in European academies when the first generation of African film-makers went there to study film-making, made a sharp analytical distinction between the use of film for entertainment, which was considered socially regressive; and film intended to provoke critical political awareness, which was considered progressive. Bakari and Cham (1996: 2) summarized the political thrust of early African film as follows:

These filmmakers deny conventional and received notions of cinema as harmless innocent entertainment, and insist on the ideological nature of film. They posit film as a crucial site of the battle to decolonise minds, to develop radical consciousness, to reflect and engage critically with African cultures and traditions, and to make desirable the meaningful transformation of society for the benefit of the majority. (Bakari and Cham 1996: 2)

The ‘majority’ however, never saw the films. A decade after Cissé made his bold commitment to the African audience, he spoke with less resolve: ‘I don’t think I can say that I aim to reach any specific group... As it is, African films are more widely seen in metropolitan capitals of Europe, the U. S., and Asia than in African cities. That needs to change’ (Sama 1996).

Manthia Diawara cited the failure of African states to protect the African film market from ‘ruthless and monopolistic exploitation’ by foreign competitors (1992: viii). Foreign companies owned most of the movie theatres in Africa and they had little interest in the creative,

political or financial aspirations of African film-makers. African theatres continued to show foreign titles while the works of African auteurs became commonly referred to as ‘embassy films’ because, as Mwezi Ngangua noted: ‘...many African filmmakers sell the noncommercial rights to the Ministry of Cooperation in France, which sends those films to the cultural centers in Africa’ (Ukadike 2002: 135). Emmanuel Sama (1996) detailed many impediments to African film distribution, foremost being the foreign monopolies that control most of the continent’s cinema houses. The rhetoric of political provocation and social transformation that enlivened scholarly discourse about African cinema was coming up against social economic arrangements over which the film-makers had little control.

Olivier Barlet (2000: 232) echoed Sama’s conclusions when he wrote: ‘African film and its audience have difficulty coming together: the conditions for this to happen do not exist’. Barlet went on to list a number of causes: the distribution monopoly, the poor condition of auditoriums and projection equipment, and the ‘pluralistic’ nature of the African audience. Barlet noted that ‘Like any other audience, [Africans] generally favor action and entertainment films over more thought-provoking productions’ (2000: 243). Up to this point, Barlet’s list of impediments reiterated the basic elements of Sama’s analysis, but Barlet added another problem to the list. After detailing the sorry state of cinema in Africa he wrote: ‘In such conditions, how can film hope seriously to stem the rise of television and video?’ (2000: 38). Barlet followed this lament with a brief section provocatively called, ‘the video monster’. He never however, explained why he finds video monstrous. Apparently the need to stem the rise of video in Africa was supposed to be self-evident.

While Barlet appears to conceive of video technology as yet another impediment to film-makers who want to reach an African audience, Nollywood’s videographers saw it as the

solution to the vexing distribution problem. The proof of Nollywood's success is now evident. By the time Barlet wrote that the 'conditions do not exist' for film-makers to reach their African audience; Nollywood had already reached them by way of Africa's informal markets. Africa's auteur films could not reach their African audience commercially or culturally because they were part and parcel of a mode-of-production and mode-of-consumption that was administered from abroad, and to which few Africans had access. Nollywood's storytellers neither complain about foreign monopolies, nor tailor their work to appeal to agencies in Paris, because they are not dependent on foreign funding or media delivery infrastructures. They do not have to worry about how to 'reach' the African audience, because they are already there, with that audience, telling their stories.

Nollywood's radically indigenous movies are a much greater interpretive challenge to scholars used to film festival award winners. Video movie creators are oblivious to the interests of film theorists. They borrow film conventions from Hollywood, Bollywood and elsewhere in an opportunistic manner. Overall, however, the storytelling conventions deployed in Nollywood movies are distinctive, and they require a certain amount of cultural contextualization to be intelligible to the uninitiated. While film scholars may be confused by and dismissive of Nollywood movies, Nollywood's artists are likewise sceptical about this 'other' African cinema that is so well known abroad and so inaccessible to Africans.

An African cinema for Africans

This is the African cinema we've all been waiting for! (Kabat Esosa Egbon, interviewed in 2002)

A slender, energetic young man in wire-rimmed glasses, Kabat Esosa Egbon expressed his ideas and opinions about movies with enthusiasm. Kabat began working in the video industry as a scriptwriter, and has now become a director with many titles to his name. In addition to his work in the movie industry, Kabat was a graduate student of cinema studies at the University of Ibadan. Though critical of many aspects of Nollywood, he was enthusiastic about its potential. We were on the veranda of his bungalow apartment at the Macdavos Hotel seeking shelter from a sudden thunderstorm. We decided to use the break to discuss Nollywood in relation to the canonical francophone African films.

Despite his success in Nollywood, Kabat was continuing to pursue his academic career. He spoke highly of his professors at the University, but he explained that the students were forced to work with an extraordinary handicap:

They taught us about filmmaking, of film in Africa, [we] learned a lot about filmmakers, Sembene Ousmane and the likes of them. But all we hear is just theory. I have never seen any Sembene Ousmane films, not even the popular Xala. I have not seen it. All we hear, or what we see is in a book. If I, with my kind of experience have not seen things like that, then you can imagine those people in the villages.

Film scholars are often shocked when I convey Kabat's revelation. One virtually accused me of making it up. It is indeed difficult to realize the extent of the economic apartheid that

isolates Africans from the rest of the world. As goes the flow of global capital, so goes the global flow of knowledge. ‘African film’ thrives in Paris and New York, but stalls at the boundaries of the formal economy – unable to find its way home.

Based on his studies of a cinematic form that he had never actually seen in practice, Kabat went on to elucidate what he felt distinguished Nollywood movies from the auteur cinema of francophone Africa:

The question one asks is that: is there something in these Nigerian films that we don’t find in a lot of these Francophone films, which we have known to be the decimal of African filmmaking? I believe that the difference is this: the Nigerian filmmakers have been able to touch a sort of sensibility of the people, their life, their aspirations, their family values, their worldview, their cosmology, spiritual and otherwise. I think that was what the Francophone films or earlier films in Africa were unable to really touch.

Those ‘people in the villages’ that Kabat refers to, have embraced Nollywood movies with a passion because for the first time, they have movies about their world, their lives and their problems. Sembène wanted his films to ‘hold up a mirror’ to the African people. But it was a mirror few Africans could see. Nollywood is now holding up a mirror, and across the continent Africans are gazing into it. Not everyone likes what they see, but many recognize themselves and their world in the mirror of Nollywood.

In West African cosmology, mirrors are associated with Mami Wata, her priestesses wear clothes studded with mirrors, and the goddess is often depicted holding a mirror. Both mirrors and water represent the gateway to the spirit world. In Igbo cosmology, the spirit world is said to be separated from that of the living by seven rivers, and Mami Wata oversees the passage. As a

mermaid, Mami Wata is also historically tied to the transatlantic slave trade. Her cult is most robust in regions around the sites of ancient slave ports. Thus, Mami Wata is also an arbiter of Africa's long troubled relationship with the rest of the world. In a breathtaking symbolic synthesis, Mami Wata has become the postmodern goddess par excellence – simultaneously a goddess of fertility, female autonomy and global culture. As such she has become a rich source of material for researchers, and a favourite topic for Nollywood movies.

For all of these reasons, I did not hesitate when I was invited to visit the most revered Mami Wata priestess in Enugu State. She was known as Eze Nwanyi – not a name but a title, meaning: 'chief priestess' Eze Nwanyi's home was isolated deep in the bush near Akpugo village not far from the Enugu. To get there we took the expressway North and then followed the local road to the small village. We asked for directions and then followed ever more rudimentary roadways into the bush until at last; we navigated a rutted path that led to a large iron-gate that featured a larger-than-life image of the mermaid goddess. A young man met us at the compound gate and explained that tradition required us to remove our shoes and to leave all cameras and recorders behind before we passed the gateway. Inside, the compound was scrupulously traditional in appearance. Indeed, Eze Nwanyi seemed to draw prestige and celebrity from the fact that she rejected the trappings of Nigerian modernity, instead presenting herself as an ardent traditionalist. In a rare performance of pre-colonial self-presentation, she refused to embrace the (now fully indigenized) imperative that women should cover their breasts in public. Instead, she draped her chest with nothing but a necklace of heavy bones and beads. The young man escorted us to a small and simply furnished room where we waited for our audience with the priestess. One thing about the room caught my attention immediately. In one corner there was a television and video player surrounded by stacks of Nollywood videos.

Eze Nwanyi was gracious, thoughtful and articulate. We spoke of many things before I finally asked what she thought about the depiction of Mami Wata in Nollywood movies. Since the goddess is often cast as a succubus or demonic entity I was expecting Eze Nwanyi to express some disapproval. Her opinion however, was that of a shrine priestess not a film critic. She expressed no concerns about ‘representation’ or misconceptions that might be conveyed by the movies. Her issues were cosmological and professional. She explained that actresses who play the role of Mami Wata might be putting themselves at risk. While she emphasized that women are free to play the part of the goddess, she insisted that they must make appropriate sacrifices to ensure that their actions do not provoke Mami Wata to seek retribution. She then told a tale of an actress who played Mami Wata in a movie, but failed to make the appropriate sacrifices and suffered illness and misfortune as a consequence.

Eze Nwanyi clearly enjoyed Mami Wata themed movies because of their depiction of the mermaid goddess as very real and powerful. She was not particularly concerned that many of the movies portray the goddess as demonic. Ultimately, like so many Nigerians, Eze Nwanyi was a Nollywood fan because the movies were about her world. By prominently featuring Mami Wata, the movies affirmed the significance and modern day relevance of the Mami Wata priestess. Indeed, her regional prestige and her proximity to Enugu meant she was well positioned to cultivate a career as a priestess to the stars – performing the necessary rituals for those who might need protection.

Eze Nwanyi’s reading of Nollywood movies, and her concerns regarding them were very different than those of film scholars. Yet if we want to understand these movies – that are made for and watched by millions Africans – then we need to understand the cultural significance that the movies have for their primary audience. If we fail to take African perspectives and concerns

into account when we speak of African cinema, or worse, if we dismiss those concerns as ‘false consciousness’, then we are engaging in the very process that has rendered Nollywood invisible. The mirror that Nollywood holds up reflects an Africa that is quite familiar to many Africans. Their recognition stands in sharp contrast to the relative invisibility of Nollywood’s Africa in African Studies. This disparity brings into sharp relief the failure of scholars to see or account for the hopes and fears of ordinary Africans. Kabat claimed that Nollywood’s great strength was its ability to ‘touch’ those sensibilities. He went on to say:

I think the content, the form, is African. I think this is the truly African film we have been waiting for... Celluloid, 35mm, no thank you. We shoot our digital – DV. It is okay because it is cheaper for us, we can express ourselves better, and the stories are just there for us to express – African – purely our story. I think we are telling our story now for the first time.

For the various reasons that I have reviewed, scholars of Africa have been reluctant to gaze into the mirror that Nollywood holds up to Africa. Perhaps we are too comfortable with the cultural chauvinism that often lurks beneath the obscure rhetoric of proscriptive theory. But look we must. We have much to learn about Africa, and nothing to lose but our misconceptions.

Development without the state

I went to Ghana to study the political associations of migrants as citizens; but, in the face of political apathy, I soon turned to the economic vitality of the streets. This... gave me insight into what people do when the state’s ‘macro-economics’ fail. In this sense, Ghana’s ‘informal economy’ was leading the world. (Hart 2007)

OJ Productions is one of the most prolific creators of video blockbusters in Nigeria. The movie producer: O. J., or Ojiofor Ezeanyaeche, is a quite, unassuming man. I first met him when I was in Enugu in 2002. He took an interest in my research project and invited me to observe the shooting of a movie called: *Ebube: Land of Tears*. His production company had reserved rooms in Enugu's Macdavos Hotel for the two weeks it would take to complete the footage. When I arrived at the hotel, they were holding auditions for supporting roles. The lead roles and children's parts had been cast in advance, and the superstar Pete Edochie had been secured for the lead as a traditional village chief. Several hundred people were crowded in an outdoor pavilion for the auditions. The hopefuls were a mixed lot. A few glamorous young women carried themselves with an air of established celebrity, dressed in striking creations of Nigeria's avant-garde designers. Many others, however, wore the trickle-down clothes from American charities that find their way to local markets, and are now the standard attire of Nigeria's poor. Some of the shabbiest hopefuls were visibly uneasy with the hotel's imposing luxury. A large aviary full of brightly coloured tropical birds stood next to the pavilion, and I watched one particularly thin young man stare longingly at a large bowl of cooked rice placed within the cage for the birds.

The assistant director, Kabat Esosa Egbon, ran the auditions. He screened actors in groups categorized by age and sex: young men, elders, girls and mothers. Each actor performed a cold reading while O. J. and Kabat observed. Kabat cajoled the actors along and quieted the crowd as needed, while O. J. sat silently. In the end, Kabat would make the casting decisions. O. J.'s presence was largely symbolic. In fact, he soon left to complete arrangements for the next day's shoot. Since the drama was to be set in a pre-colonial village, O. J. had secured a location

that could evoke a stereotypical image of village traditional life. He had negotiated extensively with the village elders for the rights to use their land and the surrounding bush for the movie location. Ultimately, the village elders agreed host the shoot in exchange for a resurfaced road and O. J.'s commitment to hire local residents for some of the non-specialized work.

Such arrangements typify Nollywood's informal mode of production. Not only are Nollywood's profits largely invisible, the contributions the movie industry makes to Nigeria's development are also not easily seen. Grading the road clearly served the movie producer's need to bring busloads of people into the bush. The benefit to the village, however, was also substantial. In a country where the government rarely maintains rural roads, village residents must make do with their own resources. In this case, and many others, Nollywood creates alternative development strategies that allow citizens to move their communities forward in spite of endemic government neglect and corruption.

Acting has become a viable occupation for an increasing number of Nigerians. The average Nollywood cast member is somewhat older than is typical for Hollywood, probably because Nollywood targets an older audience. Thus former teachers and other civil servants, who face mandatory retirement at 50, now flock to audition for parts as 'elders' and 'mothers'. Acting jobs, however, represent only a small part of the labour Nollywood mobilizes. Since production companies maintain no equipment, a burgeoning equipment rental industry has developed to meet Nollywood's perpetual demand for cameras, lighting, sound and other equipment, as well as cars, generators and other miscellanea. O. J. handled this complex web of arrangements and informal contracts, while his director and assistant director attended to the large cast and staff. On the day I went to join the shoot for *Ebube*, the hotel sector was clearly profiting from the movie business as well. Crews for seven different production teams had moved into the

Macdavos and a neighbouring hotel. I hopped on one of the busses in the caravan of vehicles that travelled to the shoot location at dawn. When we arrived at the village, the set crew immediately began to put finishing touches on the various sets that had been constructed in large clearings in the bush.

The shoot itself was quite well organized and soon multiple scenes were being simultaneously recorded. The costumers' area hummed with activity as women with Chinese foot-treadle sewing machines fit actors in their costumes. Make-up artists and hairdressers worked on an array of characters dressed for the nineteenth century. Much effort was devoted to hair braiding, recreating the intricate styles that women wore a century ago. Teams of technical specialists managed video and sound equipment moving from one set to another. At the centre of it all, a large kitchen staff kept massive pots of rice and soup cooking to continually feed the cast and crew.

A 2002 study by the French ministry of Foreign Affairs in Nigeria estimated that the video industry has created some 3000–4000 jobs (Barlet 2005). I think this figure is quite conservative. It seems to account for production jobs only and it is unclear whether it includes the market vendors who distribute and sell millions of videos each year, or supporting sectors, such as Nigeria's the printing industry that has been revitalized by demand for posters and video packaging. The employment impact of the informal sector is not documented, and Nollywood's economic effects are not easily traced in all their various forms. Nevertheless, it is clear that the video industry is having significant economic impact on the lives of many Nigerians, regardless or whether that impact is reflected in official economic indicators.

Some 80 per cent of Nigeria's GNP comes from petroleum, an industry that produces billions in revenue but negligible employment. When Nigeria was under British rule, the

colonials exported palm oil, coal and other raw materials. Their claim to these resources was established and maintained by military force – a system of resource extraction that did little to develop a Nigerian commercial sector. In the current neocolonial arrangement, the petroleum industry now dominates the ‘formal’ economy. But economy exists a world apart from the economy of most Nigerians who continue to rely upon and invest their labour in informal commerce. Nigeria’s oil, and the wealth that it represents, leaves the country with virtually no ‘value added’ (as economist say). In other words, its value is not enhanced by the labours of Nigerians, and the lives of Nigerians are not enhanced by the value of the resources extracted from their land.

Indeed, when massive oil resources give governments the ability to generate wealth without recourse to the labour of citizens, the typical result is the so called ‘petroleum curse’, a term referring to the statistical tendency for countries with large oil wealth but underdeveloped economies to degenerate into kleptocracy (Sachs and Warner 1995). The petroleum curse weighs heavily on Nigeria. The extraction of raw materials for consumption elsewhere is accomplished without generating significant economic development in Nigeria itself – few jobs, no peripheral industries to speak of, and little direct enhancement of Nigerian lives.

Postcolonial rule in Nigeria has reproduced the worst characteristics of colonial rule: military government, predatory resource extraction, bureaucratic indifference and a wealthy kleptocratic elite. There are more universities in Nigerian than in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa combined. But when Nigeria’s best and brightest graduate they face a dismal poverty of options. Some join the exodus of Nigerian intellectuals to other countries – the so-called ‘brain drain’. More disturbing are the stories of college graduates who, frustrated with hopelessness and campus cult affiliations, turn to armed robbery in the hire of corrupt elites. While Nigerians may

exaggerate the education level of the armed robbers that plague their country, these popular stories resonate precisely because they capture the absurdity and futility that characterizes the Nigerian condition. Nigerians embraced development with faithful enthusiasm. Many families pooled their limited funds to send their children to college, only to find that they remained unemployed and poor in spite of their education.

Nigeria is a nation whose substantial natural wealth remains resolutely out of the reach of anyone who might choose to pursue a legitimate career. It is hard to imagine a society in which affluence is more radically divorced from any sense of a relation to labour. It is a nation where the most educated and capable citizens are at risk of becoming beggars and thieves, while a small cadre of thugs with good connections control the nation's oil wealth. In this environment, the booming video industry presents an intriguing and original alternative. Stories persist that drug smugglers fund the video industry. These rumours, however, are largely a product of a hardened incredulity that any wealth can be legitimate in Nigeria. In a country where entrepreneurial imagination is high and economic opportunities are few, the video industry has created the possibility for what might be called a Nigerian Dream – a genuine opportunity for legitimate financial success and even celebrity, open to virtually anyone with talent and imagination.

Nollywood's fundamentally indigenous foundations make it strongly independent of foreign control or monopoly, and allow the film industry to get their media to African audiences while developing local economies. As I have detailed however, these same conditions limit the growth potential of Nollywood producers in various ways, and the burgeoning video movie industry is straining against the limitations of its informal mode-of-production. As one might imagine, key players in the video industry are endeavouring to move beyond the 'low-quality in mass-quantities' model that frustrates many of Nollywood's most creative artists. The recent

construction of modern, locally owned multiplex theatres in Lagos signals these new directions for Nollywood.

The economic apartheid that has isolated Nollywood from the world's formal markets cannot continue to hold against the global aspirations of the Nigerian video industry. The recent construction of several modern, locally owned multiplex theatres in Lagos is indicative of new directions in Nollywood that are distinct from the informal folk cinema roots from which it emerged. Theatrical releases in Lagos are now showcasing a new generation of Nollywood films that, along with higher-production quality, are fostering new channels of corporate funding and a more formal system for capturing revenue and controlling piracy. After decades of struggle against formidable odds, these African film-makers seem on the verge of realizing the long elusive goal of producing high-quality cinematic work that participates extensively and in a meaningful way in the cultures and lives of African people. The outcome of these developments remains to be seen. At this juncture however, it appears that we can expect Nollywood to continue to be upwardly global and resolutely African.

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Contributor details

John McCall is an ethnographer and cultural anthropologist with a lifelong interest in African arts. He has conducted extensive field research on the arts and cultures of south-east Nigeria and has published on a wide range of topics including music, dance, masquerade and film. His work includes *Dancing Histories* (Indiana University Press, 2000) and numerous articles in professional journals. Since 2000, McCall has been writing about the emergent video movie industry in Nigeria. He is an Associate Professor of Anthropology and Africana Studies at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.

Contact: Department of Anthropology, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901-4502, USA. E-mail: jmccall@siu.edu