

Nollywood: Nigerian Videofilms as a Cultural and Technological Hybridity

Uchenna Onuzulike, Ohio University

Nigerian videofilms reflect the economic, political, and cultural transformation in Nigeria. This article discusses Nigerian videofilms as a cultural and technological hybridity. The Nigerian movie industry, known as Nollywood, resorts to shooting movies in video form due to the high cost of celluloid. The term videofilm implies something between television and cinema. This article extends the definition. I define the term videofilm as any movie or motion picture produced mainly in the video format while adhering to particular cinematic values and conventions. Videofilm has transformed the way in which Africans tell their stories. Regarding cultural hybridity, this work evaluates Nigerian videofilms' influence on the African diaspora and on African religion. Regarding technological hybridity, this paper investigates the videofilm revolution in Nigeria. This work employs postcolonial theory for a vivid analysis of videofilm culture. Videofilm can be used for cultural explorations and representations, or by individuals or groups who cannot afford celluloid.

Nigerian videofilms are deeply rooted in Nigerian cultural traditions and social texts that focus on Nigerian community life. Nigerian videofilm stories are told using African idioms, proverbs, costumes, artifacts, and the imagery of Africa and cultural displays. The common Nigerian videofilm genres include: horror, comedy, urban legend, myth, love and romance, juju, melodrama, and historical epic. In this study, the term videofilm is defined as any movie or motion picture produced mainly in the video format while adhering to particular cinematic values and conventions.

The Nigerian movie industry shot films on celluloid before it shifted to video format. There are numerous reasons why Nigerian movie productions shifted from celluloid to videofilm, which include political, cultural, and economic factors. In Nollywood, the prohibitive cost of producing celluloid led producers to resort to videofilms (Adeiza, 1995; Adesanya, 2000; Ampaw, 2002; Ansah, 2002; Faris, 2002; Haynes, 2000; Onuzulike, 2007a; Onuzulike, 2007b; Owen-Ibie, 2006; Servant, 2001; Tucker, 2005). Another reason for the shift was concern for safety. Videofilm producers started with less costly VHS cameras while utilizing a number of VCRs for editing. Nowadays, the movies are predominantly distributed on VCD and DVD. Also, they have been shooting with digital video cameras while utilizing contemporary computer editing programs for better quality. Nollywood movies are sold in the streets of major cities in Nigeria such as Lagos, Onitsha, and Aba. Nollywood movies are also available in other African countries, such as Kenya and Ghana.

With the advance of videofilm technology, many have raised the question of whether videofilm may take over celluloid. Barsam (2004) writes that "in 1889, George Eastman began mass producing celluloid roll film, also known as motion picture film or *raw film stock*, which consists of long strips of perforated cellulose acetate on which a rapid succession of still photographs known as frames can be recorded" (p. 19). As the term videofilm implies,

Haynes (2000) says “they are something between television and cinema, and they do not fit comfortably within the North American structures” (p. 1). Adding to Haynes’ definition, I define the term videofilm as “any movie or motion picture produced mainly in the video format while adhering to particular cinematic values and conventions” (Onuzulike, 2008a, p. 2).

The conceptualization of, the objections to, and acceptance of the name “Nollywood” for the Nigerian movie industry have been a cultural phenomenon. Though no one could claim exactly how and when the name “Nollywood” was first used to describe the Nigeria movie industry, according to Haynes (2005), the name “Nollywood” was invented by a non-native. It first appeared in an article by Matt Steinglass in the *The New York Times* in 2002, and continued to be “imposed” by non-natives to Nigeria. According to a global cinema survey conducted by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), “India remains the world’s leading film producer but Nigeria is closing the gap after overtaking the United States for second place.” The survey found that “Bollywood produced 1,091 feature-length films in 2006 compared to 872 productions (in video format) from Nigeria’s film industry, which is commonly referred to as Nollywood. In contrast, the United States produced 485 major films” (2009, p. 1).

Nollywood videofilms serve as a cultural and technological hybrid. Nollywood has demonstrated that shooting movies on video is an avenue to promote culture and an inexpensive medium for expression for those who cannot afford celluloid.

The boundaries between “domestic” and “foreign” cultural influences are not always clearly demarcated. Hybrid media texts reflect the existence of a variety of historical, economic, and cultural forces whose enmeshments with one another are... [manifested] at the local, national, and regional levels as they are visible globally. (Kraidy, 2005, p. 6)

Through the low cost of video technology, Nollywood is a hybrid of African and Western cultures. Most filmmakers embraced the video as a survival option. The popularity of the trend influenced even active filmmakers to engage in fast growing-videofilm.

Cultural hybridity is a synthesis of distinct cultural identities. It is not limited to language, religion, beliefs, norms and values, and artifacts; each of these elements has multiple cultural influences. On the other hand, technological hybridity is a fusion or mixing of two distinct technologies or convention/concepts such as montage, mise-en-scene, and cinematography. It is not only technologically constructed but, economically, video is less expensive than film. The difference between technological and cultural hybridity is that the former predominantly incorporates equipment and convention/concepts, while the latter is more socially constructed.

History of Nigerian Movie Industry

The history of film in Nigeria from 1903 to 1992 is closely related to crucial stages in the history of Nigeria (Okon, 1990). I have divided Nigerian film history into four periods for better analysis and clarification. They are: (1) The Colonial Period, 1903-1960; (2) The Independence Period, 1960-1972; (3) The Indigenization Decree Period, 1972-1992; and (4)

The Nollywood Period, 1992-Present. The following is a brief analysis of the four periods of Nigerian film industry.

The Colonial Period began with the first exhibition of film in Nigeria in August, 1903 at the Glover Memorial Hall in Lagos. The reasons for the colonialists bringing cinema to Nigeria were basically to distribute political and colonial propaganda, and, to some extent, to serve as social events (Mgbejume, 1989). The contents of these films were largely documentary and focused on topics such as education, health, agriculture, and industry amongst others. The Nigerian natives were shown films by means of traveling cinema vans because films were few and theaters did not exist in remote areas.

The Independence Period includes the aftermath of the departure of the colonialists, in which the Nigerian Federal and States Film Unit that replaced them continued in the mold of the colonial government by concentrating on the production of mostly documentary and newsreel. The Federal Film Unit continued to use mobile vans to show films in rural areas. However, due to a continuing shortage of vehicles, a majority of rural Nigerians did not have the opportunity to see films shown by the units. The Colonial Film Unit was not only concerned with producing films for African audiences, but also involved itself in training Africans in the techniques of film production.

The Indigenization Decree Period included indigenous filmmakers who were trying in vain to make successful films. The Nigerian film industry also tried to build itself based on a Nigerian context as opposed to the foreign influence of Lebanese and Indian film distributors who dominated the film distribution and exhibition sector in Nigeria (Okon, 1990). Although the Indigenization Decree of 1972 gave exclusive rights of film distribution to Nigerians, the three main feature film distribution outlets were the American Motion Pictures Exporters and Cinema Association (AMPECA), NDO Films, and ACINE Films. "NDO Films and ACINE Films are Lebanese companies which control the importation and distribution of Indian films and the films from other Asian countries" (p. 103).

The Nollywood Period occurred with the emergence of the Nigerian movie industry in the twenty-first century. Nollywood emerged as a result of several factors, one being economics. The low cost of video technology, coupled with greater awareness and demand for home entertainment, led to the rise of videofilm producers. In addition, the military government and the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) further affected the Nigerian economy, resulting in reduced funding for celluloid productions. Also, the movie *Living in Bondage* produced by Ken Nnabue in 1992 set the pace for the emergence of Nollywood. Videofilm has become an important mode of apprehending reality and illusion in contemporary Africa. Nollywood is a vehicle through which Nigerian cultural heritage is represented. In his 2005 dissertation *Worlds That Flourish: Postnational Aesthetics in West African Videofilms, African Cinema, and Black Diasporic Writings*, Adesokan notes that Nigerian videofilms portray societal reality and he reflects on Nigerian videofilm as an element of self and social struggle:

As an aspect of social action the videofilm represents a mode of self-conception and self-advancement, through which people renegotiate the changing sense of selfhood in contemporary West African societies, without the large-scale differentiation of populations that was characteristic of an earlier phase of economic development, particularly in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe. (p. 105)

Nigerian cultural heritage is being transmitted through Nollywood videofilms. It is not only a voice for the people in Nigeria and the diaspora, but also for other Black African nations.

Cultural Hybridity

Nigerian Videofilms' Influence on the African Diaspora

Hybridity resonates with the globalization tune of unrestrained “economic exchanges and the supposedly inevitable transformation of all cultures” (Kraidy, 2005, p. 1). Cultures are the creation of human interaction. Culture is something we learn, not an instinct. Hall (2005) writes that changes in human society reflect the dynamic nature of culture. This dynamism is responsible for constant change in patterns associated with given cultures, and the multicultural character of most, if not all, societies substantially widens the range of influences on such cultures. As Orewere (1992) states, “We are often reminded that film is a powerful medium of entertainment and the transmission of cultural values” (p. 206). Nigerian movies hold a very prominent place in the minds and hearts of many Africans and among a broad variety of Africans or those of African descent who have been exposed to Nigerian videofilms. This reveals how Nigerian videofilm has had an impact on African culture. Nigerian filmmakers are now extending their activities to Sierra Leone, Kenya and other African countries in order to help build the film industry in these countries. African cultures are similar and distinct based on their heritage, and this creates another hybridity in videofilm. For example, there have been collaborations between Nollywood and the Ghanaian film industry.

Washington Post staff writer Steven Gray (2003) quotes Joy Oreke-Arungwa, a Nigerian-born consultant now living in Laurel, who has written extensively on the evolution of sub-Saharan African media, in his article “Nollywood Films Popularity Rising Among Emigrants.” He says, “For us parents, it becomes a reference book.’ She recalled scenes in various Nigerian movies she made a point of showing her own children. ‘Our kids, when they get here, they get lost, too Americanized,’ she says: ‘These movies show them the other side’” (p. 1). Gray (2003) resonates with the fast growing emergence of Nollywood in the diaspora. He notes:

These English-language Nigerian movies are gaining popularity among the nation’s fast-growing African immigrant population, offering their very Americanized children a glimpse of African life, particularly the clash of modernity and traditionalism. (p. 1)

With the affordable technology, Nollywood has produced movies that dominate the viewing of African immigrants in the United States and Europe. Some Africans who migrated to the west have married within other ethnic groups or adopted their new home country’s culture, “but... popular culture and mass media... have helped produce mass homogenization of hybrid identities, through now ethnically diverse programming and entertainment” (Grassian, 2003, p. 102). “Furthermore, television, with its polyphony of stations, programs and diversity, has helped produce individuals with hybrid identities, able to mimic various

ethnic and professional dialects” (Grassian, 2003, p. 103). Likewise, Nollywood videofilms—which are emulating other cultures, especially western culture—depict a hybridization of African and western culture. African immigrants use videofilm to create what the author Kolar-Panov (1997) calls “an iconic continuum” between native home and adopted country. “In doing so they concretize the tensions between the community and the host society that bear upon the creation of a hybrid culture based in the host society but drawing its emotive energy from the native country” (as cited in Kraidy, 2005, p. 11). Nollywood produces a shared African identity that helps the African diaspora hybridize cultures.

African Religious Hybridity

Africans’ religiosity is one of the pillars on which the current knowledge of Africa is built. Based on this statement, it could be argued that the religious identity of Africans is a matter of constructed cultural hybridity. Many say that Nollywood movies are full of religious overtones (McCall, 2002; Okome, 2001; Onuzulike, 2007a; 2007b). For example, religious overtones are evidenced in Nollywood movies such as *Evil Doers* (2002), *The Holocaust* (2008), and *40 Days in the Wilderness* (2005). Therefore, the medium of “videofilm” is used to explain cultural hybridity in the Nigerian diaspora. Although there are other religions in Africa such as Islam and Judaism, this analysis focuses on African traditional religions and Christianity.

It is difficult to separate African culture from African traditional religions because religion is embedded in the culture. Therefore, I divide the hybridization of African traditional religions and Christianity into two parts: African traditional religions (cultures) which are aligned with Christianity, and those which are opposed to it. I will use masquerades as an example to qualify this argument. Some Christians partake in masquerade festivals. However, others would never partake in them because they consider it a superstitious form of idol worship. Interestingly, some Christians would participate as long as the masquerade has nothing to do with the consultation of an oracle, a witch doctor, or any other supernatural medium. This issue is difficult to address because religion is such a complex aspect of African life.

In his book *African Religions and Philosophy*, Mbiti (1999) emphasizes that “Africans are notoriously religious” and each group has embraced its own religious system of “life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it” (p. 1). He writes that African religions are:

The product of the thinking and experiences of our forefathers and mothers that is men, women and children of former generations. They formed religious ideas, they formulated religious beliefs, they observed religious ceremonies and rituals, they told proverbs and myths which safeguarded the life of the individual and his community. (1991, p. 13-14)

According to Mbiti (1991), there are no sacred writings in African traditional religions; therefore, the question arises of where one finds it if not in a book. Whoever would like to observe or study it has to do so in practical life. Mbiti gives a summary of where to find African traditional religions: in rituals, ceremonies and festivals, shrines, sacred places and

religious objects, art and symbols, music and dance, proverbs, riddles and wise sayings, names of people and places, myths and legends, and in beliefs and customs. In fact, African religion is found in all aspects of life. Garrard-Burnett (2004) concludes:

Several of these works also suggest not long into this century, Christianity will not longer be considered so much a “Western” religion associated with colonialism and domination, but a polycentric, transnational force that, increasingly, has its two main centers in Latin America and Africa. Both regions, where Christianity's numbers swell from both rising birthrates and increasing numbers of conversion from nominalism or non-Christian beliefs, may well be home to four out of every five Christians in the world by the year 2050. (p. 257)

Videofilm composites an avenue for the African diaspora to be reminded and to be reconnected with their religious cultural heritage. Also, it connects African descendants who are not familiar with their ancestral religious tradition. Mbiti (1991) argues that African traditional religion(s) “is not preached from one people to another. Therefore a person must be born in a particular African people in order to be able to follow African Religion in that group.” He further says, “It would be meaningless and useless to try and transplant it to an entirely different society outside of Africa, unless African peoples themselves go there with it...The peoples of Europe, America or Asia cannot be converted to African Religion as it is so much removed from their geographical and cultural setting” (p. 14). Videofilm can transcend for geographical settings. In this context, videofilm will help keep alive religious concepts among Africans who have migrated to countries outside Africa, while helping the African diaspora to relate to their parent’s roots.

Nollywood videofilms demonstrate how Africans have incorporated Christianity into their culture. On the other hand, there are some conflicts as a result of the hybridization of African traditional religions and Christianity. Nigerian videofilms have confirmed those issues that resonate in African society such as spiritual warfare and conflicting religious philosophies. Mulago (1991) states, “Any meeting of two different realities incurs at the risk of conflict. We do, in fact, observe at times conflict between the cultural heritage of black African and Christianity” (p. 128).

In his work, Oha (2000) argues that Yoruba Christian videofilms are instruments of evangelization that appear to be carrying out a deconstructive project in which, as always, Christianity utilizes other religious narrative traditions and semiosis to reinvent and legitimize itself in other cultures (p. 122). Yoruba is one of the three major tribes in Nigeria besides Hausa and Igbo. “The attitude of African filmmakers toward their local religions is quite complex. Some of them advocate African religions, while others reject them for their inefficacy” (Vokouma, 1997, p. 270). Africans have been brought up in at least two cultures, which are African and Western; as a result, they have lost the richness of their culture, and casually pass on what remains to next generation. In other words, African parents and their traditions may not be as strong as in previous generations.

Technological Hybridity

Videofilm Revolution in Nigeria

Nollywood has become a household name to Africans and Africans in diaspora since the proliferation of video technology. According to Mclaughlin (2005), Nollywood is a video movie industry (Nigerians call it “home video”). He says that Nollywood movies are produced using digital video technology. Faris (2002) notes that Nigerians first began expressing themselves through movies in the oil-booming 1970s, but ironically it took an economic decline for the industry to really revolutionize. By 1990, the country had been battered by years of military dictatorship.

As mentioned earlier, the prohibitive cost of producing celluloid led the producers to resort to video in Nigeria. Larkin (2000) adds, “Video culture has proliferated so much that today it is the most vibrant sector of Nigerian Media” (p. 219). According to Okome (2001), the videofilm is the “medium of the city. It was initiated in the city and defined by the aspirations of the upwardly-mobile young urban generation.” He states that when videofilm “first made its debut in Nigeria, it regularly portrayed the seedy and flamboyant aspects of urban life, in the starkest of terms” (p. 1).

Nollywood as a technological hybridity has created an avenue for any cultural group to tell their story. “Since hybridity involves the fusion of two hitherto relatively distinct forms, styles, or identities, cross-cultural contact, which often occurs across national borders as well as across cultural boundaries, is a requisite for hybridity” (Kraidy, 2005). He goes further and says:

The occurrence of contact typically involves movement of some sort, and in international communication contact entails the movement of cultural commodities such as media programs, or the movement of people through migration. The first is motivated by commerce or geostrategic considerations and occurs primarily through the mass media, but also through exchange of people ideas, and practices. The second is motivated by poverty and repression and by the promise of upward mobility and concretely happens through transportation technologies. The former is properly understood as international communication. The latter’s relevance to this book is indirect and through one of its consequences, namely the development of migrant or diasporic media. (p. 5)

Adesanya (2000) suggests that while some might be persuaded that it is better to come to terms with video, “the truth of the matter for a filmmaker is that the production techniques of video are inferior to those of celluloid and lack the inherent human touch that has made filmmaking an intimate experience for the filmmaker” (p. 50). On the other hand, video created an open door for mass production. Tucker (2005) notes that the birth of Nollywood in the Nigerian commercial capital of Lagos in the early 1990s signified the first mass-market films by and about Africans that were marketed domestically. He says that the raw energy of the movies and the speed in which they are shot, filmed and sold is a kind of grassroots creative revolution on a continent where stories have been told for generations but rarely committed to film.

Videofilm Hybridity

When comparing video to photographic film, Thomas (2006) writes that moving images were first captured on photographic film in the late 19th century, and for decades film—an optical/chemical medium—was the only way to record and preserve moving images. With the release of the first practical videotape recorder in 1956, it became possible to capture moving images electromagnetically, eliminating the pricey and time-consuming process of developing and printing film. Until the early 1980s, film and videotape had separate, well-defined uses in the worlds of news and entertainment. During the 1980s and 1990s, the differences between film and video gradually became less well-defined (p. 1). Ansah (2002) reiterates that film or celluloid is expensive, although ideally that is the format in which he would prefer to use to tell his story. Practically speaking, few African filmmakers can afford celluloid. However, Ansah contends, “Neither can we wait for our mismanaged economics to be revamped before telling our stories” (p. 17). The low cost of video is the factor that will drive video production to success. In his interview with Frank Ukadike, King Ampaw claims film is dying almost everywhere in the world. He argues that this is true even in Hollywood. “If large institutions like Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer [MGM] are selling their Hollywood studios for video production or television production, then it is an indication that film is dying” (208). Also, Thomas notes that as video technology grew more reliable and less expensive, videotape became important in news and documentary production, in corporate communications, and eventually in consumer products. He says that videotape’s picture quality also improved greatly, to the point where low-budget feature films like *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) were shot on video and transferred to film for theatrical distribution. Kraidy (2005) concludes that

migrant media practices are not, however, restricted to institutions, commercial or otherwise. With the availability and relative affordability of video cameras, videocassette recorders, and even sound mixers and video-editing consoles, migrants have been known to produce media text at home. (p. 11)

As a new way of telling stories, videofilm allows previously colonized cultures to break free of the constraints of the colonial era, in which the stories of African cultures were told by outsiders. I therefore turn to postcolonial theory to provide some context for this interpretation.

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory is postmodern in its analysis of colonialism, which has been an important cultural structure of the modern period. Scholars who are working in the postcolonial movement are devoted to understanding Eurocentrism, imperialism, and the processes of colonization and decolonization—all of the ways in which the colonial experience can be understood as an ideology of domination (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005, p. 331). Postcolonial theory is concerned with how all the cultures are affected by the imperial procedure from the moment of colonization to the contemporary time. Postcolonial theory analyzes how the colonized utilize creative resistance that challenges and complicates the colonizer-colonized communication. Hybridity becomes a useful motif in explaining the

complex colonizer-colonized relationship. In addition, postcolonial literature centers on the avenues in which the community and culture of the colonized are continually constructed as the inferior other by the colonizer's literature.

Therefore, an important theme in postcolonial work is hybridity – the spaces between cultures (Kraidy, 2005). Living between two cultures and not being truly part of either creates what Gloria Anzaldua calls the borderlands, a displaced position that carries with it a special consciousness and ways of seeing that are valuable to understanding both cultures (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 9). “The postcolonial turn took up hybridity as a central dimension of the literary and cultural productions of Africa, Latin America, Asia, and diasporas in the West” (Kraidy, 2005, p. 57). Just like Africans in diaspora or other nationals who may have hybrid identities by residing in different cultures, the indigenous cultures across the world have been influenced by their respective countries. It is evident in African countries; for example in Nollywood movies, the culture of Nigeria has been influenced by Western culture. Now, movie producers are emulating Western lives.

Many Nollywood moviemakers are turning their backs on Nigerian culture. The reasons could be economic, audience demand, and low esteem of their heritage. Some Nollywood filmmakers maintain African themes in their movies, notably Tunde Kelani, who promotes Yoruba cultural heritage in his movies. Videofilms based on the Travelling Theatre tradition were often concerned with conflicts disturbing the peacefulness which exists in local societies. There is often a political critique embodied in this kind of story, as in *Ti Oluwa Ni Ile*, produced by Tunde Kelani in 1993 (Haynes, 2006). He does not let the influence of Western society deny him his cultural artistic styles.

Conclusion

The effect of Nigerian videofilms as a cultural and technological hybridity has created a unique means of communication and social transformation that cannot be underestimated. The Nigerian videofilm industry is very much integrated with Nigerian popular culture. The emergence of the Nigerian videofilm industry is a cultural phenomenon and Nigerian videofilms serve as a representation of Nigerian culture. According to Hall (2005), any person can learn another culture. He states that the fact that culture is a symbolic system gives culture both the power to change and the power over change. The evidence in this study showed that Nigerian culture has changed since the arrival of the colonialists. Nollywood has been generally beneficial in terms of promoting African culture, dignity, and the need for greater levels of social justice in and for Africans who live abroad. Movies that are made in Africa and about Africa help bridge continents and the people who live on them. They provide critically important points of reference for immigrant people who are struggling to reconcile dual identities as citizens of their countries of origins and citizens or residents of the new society in which they are trying to adapt and build new lives. McCall (2002) attests:

Nigerian video movies are one of the most visible aspects of an emergent African culture industry that, while participating in global forms, does not take its ideological or imaginative directions from academic or corporate forces from abroad. It positions itself in a locus both complimentary and in opposition to the hegemonic culture industry of the overdeveloped world. Crudely made and folksy, distributed in

open markets and by itinerate traders who once specialized in music cassettes, its movies are somehow more “of the people” than any of the self-consciously critical masterpieces edited in Parisian cutting-rooms by the masters of African cinema. (p. 4)

Nigerian videofilms had been a very strong hold in recent years in developing and improving African culture. Outside Africa’s shores, many stores, web sites, magazines, community newspapers, and journals are making remarkable endeavors to promote African culture in the lands alien to Africans. They’re also creating awareness in Africans abroad so that while in their sojourn to establish themselves elsewhere, Africans would not lose touch with their heritage. This work shows that Africans and the diaspora are embracing Nigerian cultural heritage through videofilms. Nollywood videofilms appeal to people with hybrid identities. The African diaspora uses the Nollywood videofilms to connect to their cultural heritage, thereby contributing to cultural and technological hybridization.

Videofilm allows especially the immigrant African born children in the West to be able to see their parent’s native homeland. The children might become curious and may adopt some of the characteristics because of the influence media have on our children. This can be extended to other ethnic groups who develop an interest in Nollywood movies.

In general, the development of one’s cultural identity is an ongoing process, and Nollywood videofilms as cultural and technological hybridity has highlighted the issues of nourishing and maintaining of identity. Nollywood consumption by people of African heritage could be seen as a shared identity and videofilm serves as a diasporic medium by which Nigerian cultural heritage is disseminated. Future research will explore how Africans in the diaspora are able to integrate their traditional religions and Christianity in their daily lives and the role videofilms play in helping them stay connected to their homeland.

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