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Transnational Neo-Nollywood: Reviewing the Roundtable Event

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It was early in the New Year, January 3, 2020, participants had convened in London to review the state of the Nollywood industry and the potentials of the enterprise. Could it be positioned in the UK as a commercially viable transnational cinema? The agenda was set to cover film production by Nigerians in the diaspora, and to identify challenges facing geographically displaced Nigerians in producing and distributing their movies. Participants were to consider and proffer solutions to challenges confronting Nigerian filmmakers, including structural hindrances in financing, (pre/post) production, distribution and exhibition of their productions. That the original idea was proposed by a Nollywood legend, Clarion Chukwura made it fascinating. The event, held at the University College London, was an occasion for dialogue between the professionals and academics.

The conveners both scholar/practitioners were Dr. Samantha Iwowo based at Bournemouth University and a filmmaker in her own right; and Rejoice Abutsa, a creative communicator, brand consultant and a Chevening Scholar on a postgraduate course at the University College London. They are both aware of the long-standing differences between the Anglo-American and Nigerian film industries. The impact of

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the (neo)Nollywood industry and the recent development of sleeker cinema quality on the tastes and demands of its audiences, had propelled them to call for this critical interrogation of Nollywood. It is an apt and timely call since (neo)Nollywood films are now seizing new opportunities for exhibition–streaming services such as Amazon and Netflix. On such platforms, the films are placed among others, making really stark, the well-known differences in production value. The conveners were therefore justified to call for deliberations “to strategize and map out solutions for neo-Nollywood sustainability in the UK – particularly as a transnational film form”.

Participants joined from the UK, Nigeria and the USA. Most were present in person while others joined by video link, as if heralding practices that have become dominant since the onset of lockdown policies instituted on account of the Coronavirus pandemic. The figure below by Kole Odotola—a Senior Lecturer in Languages, Literatures and Cultures Department at the University of Florida—is a web-diagram informed by the discussions raised during the different sessions. The schematic diagram puts issues into perspective, mapping Nollywood as it was framed in the discussions on the history and meaning of the industry, and what it connotes in terms of form and content.

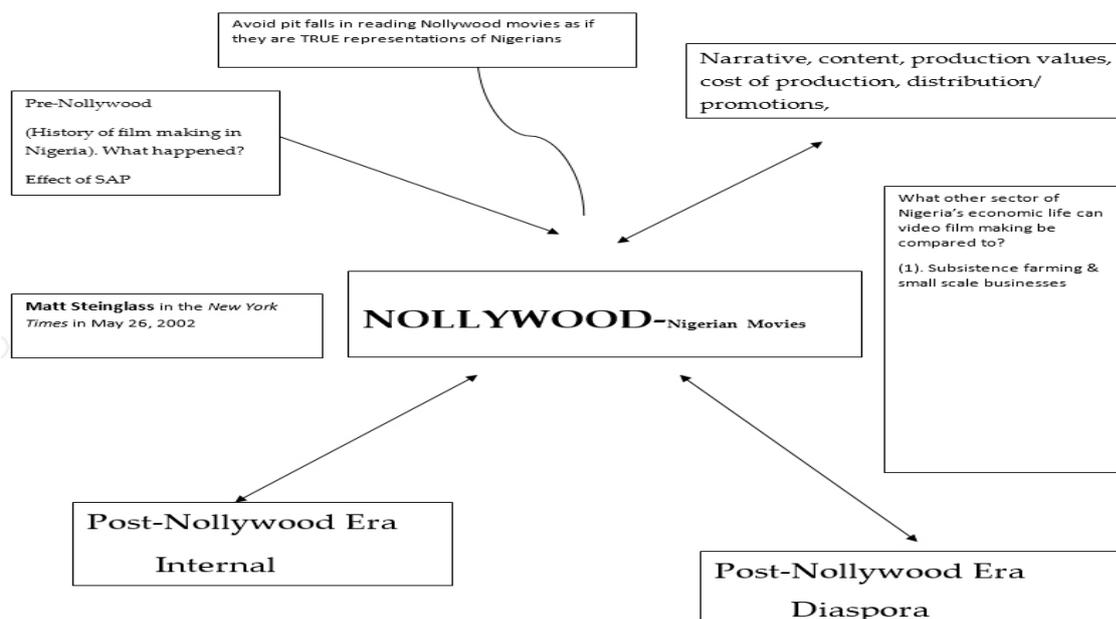


Fig. 1: Kole Odotola ©

The pivotal reference point identified, was when the Nigerian movie industry got christened, thus there are pre and post Nollywood eras. The acknowledgment of a spatial delineation helped to identify different types of audiences that the industry serves - those in-country and those in the diaspora. The dialogue focused much (as it was charged to do) on assessing the nature, structure and flaws of Nollywood

movies - how they are produced and what conditions they have to meet to promote its consumption outside of Nigeria.

There were nine presentations across three sessions, along with summaries and a grand review, all seeking to find the way forward. The sessions were highly participatory – positions were passionately presented and defended from different perspectives. The contention seemed to be centered on how far criticisms about the industry should be permitted. Whereas all present acknowledged lapses of the industry, some saw these as evolutionary, others insisted on the need for immediate remedial action. Whereas all present acknowledged lapses of the industry, some saw these as evolutionary. Others insisted on the need for immediate remedial action. One point was clear from the start, in the UK (and beyond), there are opportunities for Nollywood to tell stories, not merely to reflect the past but also to envision a future.

Since the process begins off-screen, in thought, in observations and fantasies about society, the place of research and scholarship in the craft of filmmaking was highlighted. The contribution required from scholarship is varied. There is need to plumb the deep African cultures for its literature, folk tales, and imaginings which can enrich Nollywood offerings. Producers need to understand markets - audiences and reception practices.

For these, there was a call from Femi Odugbemi a Nigerian writer and seasoned filmmaker, for data and deep insight. Cultures of production need to be studied, refined and taught to the broad range of creatives. Business models need to evolve from the traps of secrecy and elusiveness which hide detrimental sides of practice. Odugbemi who is a Fellow of the National Association of Nigerian Theatre Arts Practitioners (NANTAP) is also a voting member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in the United States submits that Nollywood must understand global standards and compete fairly within the global markets. Commercialisation should drive professionalism. There must be accountability and sums must add up to encourage investors.

Abass Tijani a UK based media and entertainment consultant has been pivotal in promotion of Nigerian arts in the UK scene. Teju Kareem a member of Nigeria's Institute of Directors and the CEO of Zmirage Multimedia Ltd. Both men have vested interests in Nigeria's film industry and in their presentations suggest that investors care to see Nollywood become truly *transnational*. This was conceived in terms of the production and distribution of films. Of course, there were expectations of the transnational identities disseminated (and maintained) through these. This was buttressed by interventions from other participants.

Nollywood's successes in the Caribbean market as presented by Thompson Shabaka, a cultural activist within the UK African and Caribbean communities, offered insightful lessons. By and large, these presentations spoke to the need for authenticity in the industry. The film industry should build on distinctive dimensions of culture as Nigerian music industry has successfully done. Nollywood must find its niche! Its professionals must improve their craft to raise the quality of their work.

Rogers Ofime, (producer of *Oloibiri* and several seasons of *Tinsel*), interrogated one of the possibilities of giving art its authentic voice. His intention was to enquire if Nollywood as an art form, can "speak to non-African Hollywood-movie lovers?" He spoke based on experiences he garnered whilst working in Canada. Of the interesting recommendations that he shared, the most paramount was his response to dilemmas created when identity intersects with offshore marketability. On this premise, he advocated for the "Tyler-Perry model" due to Tyler's successful inroads into the patrimony of African-American community. Ofime viewed Tyler's success as being achieved "by re-imagining their realities; from this, he would build that niche audience into a commercially significant constituency." Nollywood may need to adapt this model in order to reach its fragmented and spatially diverse fan base.

There was unanimity at the roundtable discussion that limitations of Nollywood's production techniques must improve for audience base to be expanded. Like most other presenters, Ofime was critical of Nollywood's linear plots and story lines. In her presentation, Samantha Iwowo addressed specific techniques relying on film dramaturgy and the *mise en scene* to improve storytelling in (neo)-Nollywood. If Nollywood were to adopt a "show-don't tell" mode, with the wealth of stories at its disposal, the industry would thrive better internationally. That submission raised more complex questions about access to the global creative economy and in his optimism Ofime might have overlooked the murky waters of global politics that dog distribution of creative works.

Another conundrum raised in the story of Nollywood is the scarcity of committed cast and crew in a country bustling with raw talents. In Ofime's view, the relocation and subsequent dislocation of talents to Europe and the Americas may account for this, if only in part. In that case it would appear that the personal aspirations of those who should build the industry may undermine its prospects of being transnational. To resolve this, an increase in international productions that "command the funds" was suggested. Courting global venture capitalists in search of emerging markets may help to secure these. This solution on its own, sound as it seems, may be like papering over cracks, it was observed. Dr. Vanessa Iwowo, a management scholar at Birkbeck College, University of London, with expertise in Leadership development especially in African contexts, called attention away from the global to local roots

through the concept of *Ubuntu - I am because we are*. Her presentation commended the resources existing within African cultural structures. She encouraged producers to tap into grassroots networks to raise funds for projects; explore industry networks for mentoring and training. She advised them to document their professional practices in order to develop their industry's canons. These ideas show that though funding is key, talent must also be honed. It is when the trinity of production, promotion and distribution are aligned as Ofime proposed, that Nollywood's art can speak with a commanding voice in the global sphere.

The pedigree of participants at this roundtable allowed for serious deliberations on Nollywood's production challenges. Discussions were passionate with no holds barred. Co-convener Rejoice Abutse spoke of her joy when listening like a fly on the wall to members of the audience. She heard of their joys, dissatisfaction, and debates about Nollywood raged on even after the official close of proceedings.

Really this debate about Nollywood's quality and prospects as a transnational industry is not new. For instance, in a study to compare what audiences in South Africa had to say about Nollywood movies Onuzulike (2016), noted the reservations expressed by South African audiences. The sample disliked the "repetition, poor quality and the [emphasis on the] supernatural". The study found that for Nigerians resident outside Nigeria, viewing the films served to relieve their nostalgia for home, aiding their symbolic escape to Nigeria. Clearly audiences have higher expectations of Nollywood, comparing its quality to Hollywood's, but co-convener Abutsa is sympathetic, advocating that the industry be given a chance.

"When they say, why is Nollywood not making the quality of Hollywood films? I give them statistics to back the fact that, unlike Hollywood, Nollywood is self-funded, without formal industrial structures and does not have the same years of experience as Hollywood. I have come out of every argument a winner. Or at least, I have successfully convinced them to watch a Nollywood film [which] I think can calm their defenses [agitations]." [sic]

In the final analysis, there is optimism for Nollywood. It is right to aspire to expand its realms of operations, to seek out new markets, and new esteem indices. For this to occur, the industry needs to be better organized to leverage on its cultural strengths, form synergies to address its weaknesses. Skills must be upgraded, practices must be documented and scholarship in the area must grow to meet these needs. In all these the industry needs to transcend what some participants regard as "the colonial mentality" [an inferiority complex?] that seeks to undermine it. As was agreed at this roundtable, Nollywood's transition to the global stage must be predicated on the transformation of the facilities for film production, a recreation of

the investment climate, making it conducive to foreign capital; the establishment of ethics and aesthetics of production and diversification of the Nollywood fan base.

Reference

Onuzulike, U. (2016). 'Audience Reactions to the Different Aspects of Nollywood Movies', *Cinej Cinema Journal* (5.2), 88 – 104. Retrieved from <https://cinej.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/cinej/article/view/13>