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# NOLLYWOOD AND 'OTHERS': PERSPECTIVES ON AUDIENCE RECEPTION

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# CHAPTER EIGHT



## **NOLLYWOOD AND 'OTHERS': PERSPECTIVES ON AUDIENCE RECEPTION**

**Oluyinka Esan**

### **Introduction**

Once it was unfamiliar, today it needs little introduction amongst film audiences outside Nigeria. Nollywood has gained grounds globally. Nigeria's video/film industry was acknowledged by UNESCO as the second most prolific industry in the world in 2009. Reasons for this are varied and beyond our scope here (see Esan, 2010) but suffice to note that sizeable niche markets, consisting of those dissatisfied with orientation adopted in mainstream film industry and/or seeking subaltern voices are now being served. This is evidence of a much desired, and long awaited contra-flow of media content from Nigeria, but a question is raised. How do audiences other than those for whom it was intended engage with film? This chapter, examines how these 'Other' audiences engage with Nollywood. Using ethnographic techniques - observations, post screening discussion and in-depth interviews, we examine audiences at a local film festival in London, revisiting questions about film viewing. Nollywood's success offers an opportunity to engage with the issue of Otherness as it relates to audiences.

At the outset, distribution of Nollywood films largely followed their cultural-linguistic base; the industry consists of discrete linguistic and cultural categories, defined along dominant Nigerian ethnic lines – Yoruba and Igbo being more notable. Commercial imperatives to expand the market base and the apparent multicultural dynamics of contemporary society then resulted in blurred boundaries. These films now address audiences other than their primary targets. The sheer magnitude of what began as

informal transnational incursions into other markets have since been accorded formal academic and professional recognition.

Nollywood emerged as a 'geo-cultural' network through incursion into markets within Nigeria's immediate (geographical) vicinity, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Thereafter, it extended further afield to the Eastern and Southern African regions. This trail coincides with that of Nigerian traders, technocrats and businesses, suggesting that it was a Nigerian phenomenon. By virtue of Nigeria's history and foreign policy, there are large communities of Nigerians in the UK, the USA, Canada, Ireland and other parts of Europe. The trend can be traced back to the mid-80s when some Nigerians fled the insecurities that accompanied the down turn of a once buoyant economy. Some had gone out in pursuit of academic laurels, but failed to return to the degenerated state. Many left Nigeria on account of political persecution, civil strife and impoverishment experienced under oppressive military regimes. Nollywood's distribution pattern is evidence of the contraflow of the films from the Third World, to markets in the global-North where audiences use them to replace or complement the dominant (Western) fare (Thussu, 2007).

Migrants cut across class divides; some were legal, others were not. Patterns of settlement reflect how accommodating host nations are. Some, (like USA, Canada) had actively recruited migrants through visa lottery schemes. In any case, the flow tended to be towards places where there were existing contacts or ties, usually though not necessarily English speaking nations. One can trace the expansion of Nollywood's markets through these communities of Nigerians resident abroad and networks of their personal relationships. Initially Nollywood was consumed by Nigerians as a means to assert their identity, to maintain contact with their cultural heritage. Its appeal extended to others interested in African cultures. This includes scholars, film enthusiasts and those with African heritage seeking to reconnect with their roots. Nollywood phenomenon reveals a subterranean face of globalisation; it raises questions about films' ability to communicate with its audiences especially those who are distant from its cultural origins. Though long before it came along, film audiences around the world had been contending with film texts from far flung cultures, the focus here is on Nollywood's 'Others'.

### **Media and Identity - Defining Self and Others**

Otherness is associated with constructions of identity. It is about the imaginations of self and boundaries of sameness. When conceived on the basis of sameness, cultural identity signals a quest for common historical experience; a search for the very essence of a group. Shared frames of reference account for the distinction of groups. This essentialist view privileges a particular "authentic" (static) self-imagination, perhaps a longing for primordial affiliations, a search for "authentic" cultural experiences.

Cultural identity can also be construed on the basis of difference. Such differentiation adopts value laden binary classifications which mark out boundaries of associations.

Hall rightly argued, “there are critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute what we really are . . . or have become.” (Hall 2003:225) [my emphasis] An essentialist view may look at critical points as milestones of life – birth, schooling, religious instruction and commitment, occupational attainment, coming of age. Occurrences at these junctures of life can shape who the person becomes. Civic nationality for instance is determined by place of birth, ethnicity usually based on ancestry. Age, as with other biological traits like sex, is often used to define people. Therefore, physical and social location and consequent cultural affiliations are crucial in forming identity. These are taken for granted. Yet more critical is the steady stream of social encounters and ideas which people are exposed to. Life experiences or associations made over time even through the media help to construe identity.

Media help shape understanding of parameters of identity which are taken for granted by showing what sameness means. Mediated experiences may reveal sameness in unexpected quarters; viewers may find images, roles, relationships, dilemmas that resonate with theirs in the ranks of those who are otherwise regarded as different. Films and media messages have the capacity to exhibit universal traits of humanity, even as they indicate notions of the boundaries within. Audiences are guided to make sense of their places in society, in this way social relations can be established or sustained. This perspective acknowledges that identities are socially constructed, and they evolve. “. . . far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, [people] are subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power.” (Hall 2003:225) Identity is thus not about what one is, but what one is being or becoming. This hints at the nature of work being undertaken through consumption practices.

Contrary to the notions of audiences being uncritical (couch potatoes) in the early strong media effects model, or impermeable pleasure seekers in the uses and gratifications models, they do actively process mediated experiences, imagining themselves and their world. Media stimulate empathy - the ability to see oneself in the place of the other, in situations radically different from familiar grounds (Thompson, 2001: 189). So film viewing is not a mindless pastime. It is an active processing of experience albeit mediated. Through such experiences, audiences conceive their sense of distinction, self-affirmation and boundaries required for shaping notions of difference.

Markers of identity include age, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, class, and religion but race, nationality and ethnicity tend to dominate discussions of Otherness. These are deep critical points due to their importance in power relations as evident in social inequalities within and between nations. The imposition of identities which privileges one at the expense of Others is crucial. With political and economic domination of media and cultural industries, Western values inform standards of normalcy and progress while blackness tends to be associated with backwardness or savagery. Arguably more flattering, but no less derogatory is when Others are cast as 'exotic' - subjects of imperial curiosity of privileged colonialists (see Said 1978/ 2003).

'Othering' is indicative of the locus of power. Textual representations pitch civilised West against barbaric Orient (Other). The binary oppositions in texts affirm the West's superiority over all Others. As Wilkinson and Kitzinger note "Others by definition are oppressed by the dominant culture; consequently their cultures and traditions are typically represented as inferior or pathological." (2009: 88) Such was the plight of the global south, the motivations for self-imaginings expressed through subaltern voices like Nollywood. Representational practices helped to maintain racial supremacy but dichotomised representations operate in markers of identity other than race, in urban–rural distinctions for instance. Urban epitomises 'enlightenment' 'modernity', 'Western'. Rural signifies the traditional often pitched as 'dark', 'backward', 'Third World'. Zones of inclusion (or exclusion) are reflected in the contrasts established within language (we, us, ours; they, theirs, them) directing viewers' gaze. How does this work with texts like Nollywood with its attempt to reverse norms dominance in a global market – a space other than its own?

### **Business with a Mission**

Nollywood's success in its establishment within transnational spaces is commercial but its mission is more than this. It has been argued that audiences in transnational spaces seek to establish their distinct identity through consumption of cultural products including films (see Okome, 2007, Shivers, 2010). An earlier ethnographic study of Nollywood audiences in the UK confirms this (Esan 2008). Audiences in London had used Nollywood films to maintain their links with home cultures, to create acceptable forms of recreation and culturally appropriate values for themselves and their children. Yet, appreciation of cultural artefacts demands knowledge of the codes to decipher them with. As Bourdieu argues, "consumption is . . . a stage in a process of communication, that is an act in deciphering, decoding which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code." (Bourdieu, 2000: 85) Such mastery determines depth of engagement that occurs with texts since meaning is conveyed at different levels of signification. These are gates that Others must get past in their engagement with media texts.

Three levels of signification identified by Barthes all require the decoder to be familiar with cultural codes and properly connect signifiers with the signified (Long & Wall: 2009). Universality of signifiers at the level of denotation makes meanings more easily recognisable to foreign audiences, whereas appreciation of connotations and myths can be easily lost when audiences are not conversant with cultural origins of texts (in this case films). The gaze brought to viewing and the interpretation of experiences may still be directed by dominant (racialised) discourses that subaltern authors seek to counter. Audiences are not compelled to accept dominant meanings inscribed into films. Aberrant decoding can occur unwittingly or deliberately. Viewing must therefore be deemed politically significant especially in multi-discursive spaces where certain groups are disadvantaged on account of their cultural distance to sources of films.

Films have long been known to cross cultures. Cinemas were introduced to audiences in the third world by colonial authorities, missionaries and commercial operatives. Velez – Serna (2008) documents the dominance of Hollywood and European films on Colombian cinema back in the 1940s when film was still a novelty. This was in spite of the influence of Argentina and Mexico. Her account shows that language was an issue which affected exhibition patterns and pricing at the cinema. The cheaper cinema service was for the majority who (with the exception of students and middle to high income earners) had no knowledge of the English language and could not read subtitles. Lower-income audiences, consumed a variety of films from different parts of the world, whilst higher-income audiences (Westernised elites if you like) consumed what was 'almost exclusively Hollywood'. Velez – Serna argues that this was bound to have 'long-term cultural consequences', since arguably, patterns of consumption help to shape how audiences imagined themselves. (Velez – Serna, 2008) It stands to reason that 'colonial mentality' helps to shape imagination of self as the 'Other'.

Experience of film in colonial Nigeria chronicled by Larkin (2008) is similar. He describes earliest encounters with film in this erstwhile British colony. "For millions of Nigerians, and millions more all over the colonial world, mobile cinema units showing educational films were their first regular experience of cinema." (Larkin, 2008:78) Mobile cinema vans travelled round the country, showing instructional films (documentaries, newsreels, dramas) to audiences both in rural and urban areas. Majigi as film was known in Northern Nigeria (possibly a derivative of magic lanterns) was a novelty to all, regardless of status. Government film-shows were accompanied by short lectures to help clarify the developmental message. Whereas missionary films were also accompanied by short sermons, films exhibited in commercial cinemas did not have such clarification. Audiences were left to make sense of these on their own.

Commercial films and newsreels, which dominated cinemas around the world, were invariably foreign to local audiences. Through these (Western, Indian and Chinese) films local audiences were transported into new experiences; worlds in which they were the Other. Cultures represented in these films, particularly those of Western origins were reinforced by other messages from popular culture notably music. They were also undergirded by knowledge derived from other socio-cultural institutions. More enlightened audiences were likely to have encountered similar discursive frameworks operating in films operated through educational, religious and political institutions. Arguably, the synergy that occurs when signs recur in multiple spaces facilitates the recognition of signs and production of meaning. Thus the impact of prior exposure to educational, religious, official or political sources on how films are read should be acknowledged, even if they do not guarantee an acceptance of (inscribed) dominant meaning.

Knowing how viewers construct their identity and their location in relation to the film is crucial if we are to appreciate how they watch films. This brings to scrutiny how

accessible or obtuse the language of film is. It stands to reason that the further audiences are from a text, the less intelligible it will be. This is more likely to occur when film is distributed within global networks. Diasporic audiences exist within diverse cultures. Since cultural competences within such communities cannot be assured it should not be assumed that Nollywood communicates effectively within its niche—its primary target audience of Nigerians and other Africans.

Effective communication must be predicated on shared meaning which implies an appreciation of cultural codes. The study reported below was inspired by the challenges posed above. What is the nature of viewing in the event of cross-cultural communication? How well does Nollywood communicate with Other audiences? Besides the academic interest in appreciating how films are read, questions raised here are pertinent to those with a commercial focus.

### **Nollywood's Terms of Engagement**

It has been established that audience response to texts vary and they are structured by texts (See Encoding/Decoding model Hall 1980, 2006) yet audience predisposition remain crucial to their engagement with texts. For example, the manner adopted when studying a film, is likely to differ from that assumed when being entertained. The intensity of attention varies further, depending on the desired end - quest for knowledge, or pleasure, or sense of belonging or assertion of identity. So if watching films is a means to an end, it is useful to examine the declared or implied mission(s) of Nollywood, the terms of engagement set for audiences.

Contextual and promotional information about films (paratexts) is one critical source available to those viewers 'in-the-know'. Specialist circles where films are discussed is another. These include presentations made in film festivals and academic conferences. In the quest for professional esteem and acknowledgement of Nollywood as an established communicative space, its terms of engagement are set out for specialist audiences. From such overarching statements, viewers can learn to define how to position themselves in relation to films.

As stressed in the documentary *Nollywood Babylon* (2008, dirs Ben Addelman & Samir Mallal; see also Okome 2007) and apparent from the sample of films exhibited at the 2010 London festival, Nollywood films seek to assert an identity. They present diverse stories about Africans, told by Africans in their own peculiar style(s). Though some producers' deny having any motive beyond a good return on investment, the political dimensions of their texts and the pleasures that their audiences derive has been recognised. In Nigeria, politicians and others do exploit the popularity of the industry for specific ends. Nollywood is political. Its mission is twofold Other than the commercial imperative

Nollywood producers (whether intending to or not) seek to redress the impact of imbalanced Western (US-led) flow of information and cultural goods. Film is one

means by which such cultural reorientation can be accomplished. In spite of its theoretical naivety about media influence, the following view is widely held.

*“ . . . Nigerians really do believe the images they see about the [W]est. They believe that all are making money easily and that people live in luxury. They prefer that image over [their] reality, even when told [otherwise] by those who live abroad. They DO believe the Hollywood/ Buckingham Palace fairy tales and . . . won't budge from it until they see the harsh realities with their own eyes. **That's why some risk life and limb (literally) trying to get here [to the UK] with the belief they are coming to a paradise.** Just the same way, those whose only exposure to Nigeria/ ns is Nollywood will believe that “there has to be some truth in it”, because we are the ones telling the story. No balance is provided at all and these same people will believe what is portrayed about Nigeria/ ns until they too see different with their own eyes.”*

Londoner's post endorsed by Mr. President on Nairaland.com (my emphasis)

By failing to acknowledge other factors implicated in the migratory pattern which [film] images are supposed to have evoked, this argument bears the hallmark of all that is wrong with the media effects debate (Gauntlett, 2001). It adopts a crude Stimulus – Response model in its analysis of audience behaviour. Yet audience-centred and contextual (socio-cultural) factors could also account for the particular readings and selected course of action. Nonetheless, there is merit in acknowledging the cultural imbalance in film industry as Nollywood has done in seeking to redress it. Some scholars are rather optimistic about the impact of such a mission arguing that

*“ . . . if recent global events reveal anything about present cultural and artistic reorientations, they indicate that the changing stakes within a series of geopolitical spaces are now challenging the traditional American-led Western Alliance. If this is indeed the case, it would mark the end of a historical cycle of overwhelming influence, power, and prestige of the entire Western Alliance, its institutions, structures of legitimation and, with it, a worldview shaped by the constancy of the American brand.”* (Enwezor 2010)

This is a lofty aspiration but unless films, as sources of cultural reorientations have the communicative ability, commanding presence and prestige to match dominant cultural orientation, arguments for cultural realignment ring hollow. This mission may be no more than sentiments of a marginalised people. This will be the case if texts are still filtered through Western lenses.

Nollywood's other mission is no less grand in its assumptions about film's ability to influence audiences. The industry is charged with the task of enhancing national image and investment opportunities. Government officials including presidents have



made overtures to the industry in order to promote national economic growth. (Economist July 27 2006) Attempts have been made to regulate the industry; Nigerian Film and Video Censorship Board regulates Nigerian productions partly to ensure they reflect a better 'national image'. (Soriwei, 2009; Nollywood Affairs, 2009; see also examples of public response to Akunyili [then Minister for Information] on Nairaland.com) The industry proved to be an influential lobby in the run-up to general elections in Nigeria, as Nollywood personalities helped to define issues and endorse candidates for political office. Such assumptions about the influence of film are further justifications for closer examination of audience reception as was attempted in the study of participants of 2010 Nollywood Now: London Festival of Nigerian Films.

A variety of films were exhibited at the festival<sup>1</sup>. Internet Movie Database classifies all of them as drama, but the sample reflects other generic conventions often conflated in Nollywood films: action, adventure, romance, comedy, crime, family life, intrigue. Perhaps, such hybridisation makes it more difficult to classify them as anything other than drama. That said five signifying systems have been identified within Nollywood (Okome 2007:7). These classifications bleed at the edges but they reveal terms of engagement that audiences can expect.

The 'City video' privileges the city, presenting inconsistencies of postcolonial modernity especially when embraced unreservedly. The 'Occult video' seeks to explain the inexplicable impoverishment prevalent in society by looking to the mythical or magical seeking to expose diabolical forces, duplicitous ways abounding among those who refuse to cut ties with 'tradition'. 'Halleluyah videos' are similar in that they highlight moral degeneracy engulfing society through reckless abandoning of known values. Implied in the label is the assumption that the genre adopts a Christian (Pentecostal) framework. This is misleading, since it overlooks Islamic proselytising efforts evident within Yoruba films. The focus on churches in the genre echoes Wole Soyinka's attention to the Africanisation of Christianity in *The Trials of Brother Jero*. Yet unlike Soyinka's parody of the church, this genre venerates this place of hope. As in the carnivalesque, the 'Witty humorous genre' offers relief from a debilitating state of existence but remains critical of those responsible for the conditions. Entertainment is often the cue for viewers to comment on the contemptible in society. Nollywood is characterised by its attention to social conditions of those who constitute its primary audience.

Okome suggests that Nollywood's most eloquent presence as a distinct cinematic industry is in its coding of postcolonial conditions. (2007: 7) Because primary audiences are steeped in this cultural context, they are proficient in reading naturalised signs in the narratives. The 'Epic' in its attention to the cultural heritage is distinct from other genres (though similar to the Occult). Consequently it is likely to be impenetrable to 'outsiders' or culturally distant audiences. Nollywood offers certain experiences of African heritage which those in the diaspora can excavate for

“authentic” representation of self, yet Nollywood is not monolithic or readily accessible<sup>ii</sup>.

Earlier studies do confirm that Nollywood audiences use films to assert their identity. Films were used by some to maintain contact with cultural practices. Films thus aid the reclaiming of space when in a foreign land, and Nollywood offers a means of being. Like Hollywood, it manufactures “dreams that people want to see and hear.” (Okome, 2007: 7) Whereas Hollywood had been a means to being American, influencing speech patterns, fashion trends, lifestyle; fuelling desires to emigrate to live the American dream; Nollywood is used among sections of migrants to maintain a distinct identity especially for the younger generation; it is used to teach culturally appropriate values which they may be re-negotiating.

### **Finding the 'Other'**

The discussion here is based primarily on audiences at the week-long festival of Nigerian film Nollywood Now (October 2010). Audiences were observed on two days out of the six-day event (Wednesday and Monday). Findings were complemented by comments from post screening discussion on one of the days and six in-depth interviews conducted thereafter by email. The festival was held in South London, an area noted for its cosmopolitan population including a large concentration of Nigerians. Some of these have shops where Nollywood films are readily available to be sold and viewed. That this festival was organised through a local (Deptford) film club, an initiative not dominated but supported by Nigerians is remarkable. The event was to provide an opportunity for Nollywood fans to “. . . celebrate Nigerian film in a public space” and “to introduce the joy and excitement of Nigerian film to new audiences.” (Nollywood Now website 2010) Ostensibly it was a grassroots festival involving people of different nationalities. This contrasts earlier studies of Nollywood audiences in which the initiative and patronage was largely Nigerian (Esan 2008, 2010). Findings from the earlier studies augment the analysis presented here.

The audience profile was generated using attendance records of consenting participants at the event (sample = 66). Compared to the crowd seen at Nollywood film premieres, the crowd was rather modest<sup>iii</sup>. This was in spite of the high population of Nigerians in close proximity, press and web based coverage, targeted publicity (including bills posted outside the venue, Deptford Town Hall – Goldsmiths University). Many attendees came from considerable distances beyond South East London due to their academic or professional interests. They came out of curiosity or to support the emerging industry. Some came to explore prospects.

*“I’m interested in the Nollywood phenomenon, I like the films, and as someone coming from a documentary background I’m interested in film movements and traditions that are successful in spite of limited budgets and equipment constraints.” (British, Male, Film Teacher / occasional film maker)*

*"I want to take part in the structuring and development of the industry. Meet people of like minds."* (Nigerian, Male, Film maker)

Drawn by the promise of good company, affordable fun on the doorstep, and an opportunity for multicultural experience as illustrated in the following comments, local residents also participated. From these, Nollywood potentials for fostering integration and enriching multiculturalism.

*"... just for fun with friends or to improve my Yoruba, as it's not something I know a lot about. I also really wanted to support the initiative, both to get more cultural activities going on in South East London (where I live) ... to support the viewing of (and raise the profile of) Nigerian film in the UK. I thought the programme looked really interesting and I had several friends who wanted to come too. It was also quite convenient for me to get to, which makes a change from the usual central London events. It was above all a really good, relaxing, fun series of evenings out for a relatively low price, and I enjoyed hearing the commentaries about the films too."* (British, Female doctoral student)

*"... I also wanted to see the films. I'm aware that I could probably buy them on DVD (it would take me a while to find them!) But I like watching films with an audience if I can find the time ... I am really happy that the festival took place in New Cross / Deptford because the neighbourhood needs more community based events like this..."* (Asian-Canadian, Female Film Scholar)

The modest crowd size may be due to preoccupation of potential fans on weekdays when the events occurred, or even limited appeal of a film club activity. In any case, the films exhibited lacked novelty appeal for avid Nollywood fans since they had been on the market for a while. Another possible disincentive was that Nollywood fans can access films via internet and satellite television. One interviewee (Nigerian female) reported watching Nollywood films through these channels twice a week (a reduction from her daily viewing). Many participants on this occasion can be described as being more active film viewers<sup>iv</sup>.

Just about half (47%) of the sample were British. This included five people of Nigerian extraction. In all, only one-third of the sample self-identified or could be placed by their names as being of Nigerian origin. Others were North American (USA, Canada) European (Germany, Spain, Belgium, Russia, Hungary, Romania), Australian, South American (Colombia) South East Asian (India) Middle Eastern (Iran, Syria) and African (Ghana, Congo, South Africa). This pattern is consistent with reports of widening acceptance of Nollywood (Haynes, 2006, Okome 2007; Shivers 2010). It is worth noting that some respondents opted to define themselves by their ethnic identity (e.g. Niger Deltan<sup>v</sup>, Sikh Indian, Chinese Canadian), not by nationality. This pattern attests to the complexities of self-imagination, which is often lost in cultural transactions that occur in transnational spaces. This audience

composition reflects London's cosmopolitan population but it should also refine views that Nollywood's audience consists of Nigerians and other Africans. It is evidence of new types of viewers that Nollywood attracts. Owing to the number of doctoral or research students in the sample, the educational profile of new viewers is worth noting.

### When Watching as 'Other'

There is evidence that 'Others' in this study approached Nollywood out of curiosity or professional empathy; accepting Nollywood's terms. Someone better acquainted with Nollywood's conventions, appreciated the films for the "passionate and dynamic stories; honesty in acting and writing; low-budget sometimes 'documentary style' aesthetics, humour, melodrama". Another, less familiar with its conventions, expected its low production values but enjoyed Nollywood for "the immediacy of action / narrative, shoestring budget, inventiveness, bizarre supernatural elements" [my emphasis]. Compared with Hollywood, Nollywood was deemed refreshing, a feat to be celebrated. Its failings were accommodated. 'Other' audiences exhibited politeness not usually shown by Nigerians.

*"I will often make an effort to see films from parts of the world beyond North America and Europe because they offer a different perspective. Also I like watching films in a more informal, community setting."*

Asian Canadian, Female Film Scholar)

*"... I don't like scary films so generally prefer dramas or comedies. . . I like getting caught up in the narrative, relaxing, and sometimes learning something about another culture. I love the feeling of getting lost in the emotions some films produce." (British Female non specialist doctoral student)*

*"I am looking at them partly for entertainment value, partly as interesting insights into life and concerns in Lagos (it's normally the Lagos films that I see). I enjoy the cleverness and energy of the films..."*

(British, Male Film Teacher / occasional film maker)

[my emphasis]

These 'Others' were mindful of their limited competencies knowing that narratives were sometimes beyond them. Viewing which began as mere pleasure could thus become work, albeit pleasurable work. This should be differentiated from 'viewing-as-work' inspired by technical considerations of productions as occurs when teaching.

*"Sometimes where the context is quite specific . . . dealing with Pentecostalism, witchcraft, Nigerian politics or history . . . I get a bit lost . . . trying to understand the context and don't just let the narrative flow over me in the way I would with... a Hollywood film. . . ."*

*I sometimes have to work harder to decode a Nigerian film as I can't take the context for granted as I feel I can with Hollywood films, or films in other European languages. I find the same with 'Bollywood' films - some are relatively easy to make sense of straight away, while others can be bewildering for an outsider like me without enough knowledge of the context."*

(British, Female non specialist doctoral student)

*“[Decoding of Nigerian films] doesn't really differ from other films from other regions or nations (though I am not Nigerian). I follow them as entertaining and involving stories, often cleverly made. Perhaps I also see a certain self-aware or self-reflexive humour in them as well.”*

(British, Male Film Teacher / occasional film maker)

These responses raise some critical questions regarding the type of gaze brought by 'Others' to texts when knowledge of codes is limited. Are subjects objectified, as exotic species tend to be? Does the voyeuristic gaze seek to perpetuate preconceived notions of subject or groups which it beholds? Perhaps this will occur when there is no opportunity to negotiate meanings. More regular viewers are empowered by conversations occurring during communal viewing or in mediated fora (Esan 2010). It can be argued that contra-flow of films, cannot independently reverse the status quo since culturally distant viewers will struggle to interpret films. Arguably acts of looking necessary for making meaning are informed by unstated (often unacknowledged) purpose of viewing such as the quest for knowledge, clarification or confirmation. The clue to understanding the gaze of culturally disadvantaged viewers may be in these, but much is left unexplained in the claim that one views for pleasure. Some common grounds exist between Nollywood's 'Others', and its primary audiences, notably, resistance to the domination of Hollywood; and the love of good stories which offer insight into societies and cultures. Nollywood's modes of address contribute to its viewers' pleasure. Poor camera work, the melodramatic (excesses in dramatic conversations), excessively long scenes, incomprehensible humour (due to obtuse language or translations) were frustrations experienced in viewing.

Since the days of silent films, audiences have relied on visual signifiers - socially recognisable characters', costumes, acting, gestures, colours, mise-en-scene to decode messages. Lighting, camera work (angles and shot sizes, focus, transition devices and special effects) are likewise recognisable codes. At the denotative level, visual and aural codes may be near universal. Across cultures an old woman, a lustful man, a belligerent lady, a boy in love, a nod of the head, eerie sound, calming tune are recognisable. This is facilitated by long established traditions in film and television. However, because these signifiers are still culturally loaded, much is lost on the uninitiated viewers of the subaltern (contra) flow. Aural elements are particularly susceptible to being lost, yet they have to anchor meaning and they are required to showcase the unfamiliar within the cultures. Critical cues in verbal gestures or lyrics of mood music, incidental and theme music is lost when not translated. Whether adequate or not, subtitles put added pressure on viewing.

*“As a student of Yoruba, I find it frustrating that subtitles from Yoruba films into English aren't fuller - I am just beginning to have enough comprehension of Yoruba to see that they sometimes miss out key points or the deeper nuances of*

*the Yoruba (sometimes due to lack of space, but sometimes this is inexplicable)*  
...”  
(British, Female Doctoral Student)

These compromise the depth of social commentaries that 'Other' audiences are privy to. Nollywood is reputed for its reflection on inherent contradictions in (Nigerian) social life. Through its characters and the dilemmas they face, Nollywood subjects to scrutiny aspects of public life as well as acts conducted in the privacy of homes. By presenting them within their social contexts Nollywood directs attention to wider social relations, and issues which may have once been taboo. This is exemplified in Arugba (2009) a nostalgic and aspirational Yoruba film aired at the Nollywood Now, London festival.

The story spans two worlds (traditional and contemporary). It showcases Osun festival and its rituals, yet it challenges audiences to re-examine wider issues in an ailing contemporary Nigeria. Its messages are couched in veiled references to socio – political life. Folk songs like names evoke particular meanings beyond what is explicitly stated. For example Onikoyi symbolising a governor (in whose state Ikoyi is to be found). Close-up of a car sticker, juxtaposition of American President Obama's portrait behind the king are examples of easily missed codes. Even when translated, skilful use of language for persuasion and conflict resolution cannot be fully conveyed when casually encountered by the uninitiated. Perhaps this is why language remains the bastion for subversive masses, those to whom the codes are apparent because they are immersed in them.

Post screening discussion of Arugba suggests it was viewed as an 'exotic' film even by some Nigerians in the audience. This complex film was watched with rapt attention, the audience identifying no less than seven issues raised in the film. They enjoyed the film, but many were baffled about some aspects. Working from a western perspective, the story of Gbonjubola, the heroine in Arugba was deemed contradictory; it was valorising women's participation in public life yet validating the imposed shackles due to sanctity of chastity. Language (perhaps translations of the poetic) was deemed too formal and unrealistic. Non-linear story telling was confusing yet to those 'in-the-know' these cultural practices only contribute to enigmatic pleasures of films.

### **Conclusion**

Nollywood is evidence of marginalised cultures fighting back; an example of subaltern media (contra) flows. The findings of the study reported here offers some encouragement for film producers about prospects of any ambitions for the industry to expand its reach. Not content with offering distinctly African stories to Nigerian audiences, it has been asked to help fashion the image of a nation and its people. If it insists on reversing or at least ameliorating western domination of film audiences it seemed reasonable to understand how Nollywood communicates with its 'other' audience. This chapter has highlighted who these are and how they experience Nollywood's fare.

For displaced or remote populations, mediation is essential for cultural discovery. Film creates new ways of imaginings - cognitive maps, symbolic journeys. Nollywood's ambitions are lofty and noble. It sought to aid self-imaginings of the marginalised, foster understanding and social integration in multicultural societies and to promote regional unity, but it must work in tandem with other sources of knowledge. Non-Western films cannot counter the dominant view if subjected to a 'Western' gaze; if audiences are bereft of cultural capital required to appreciate, (not merely accommodate) the films. That this represents the situation of some Nigerians prompts a rethinking of 'Otherness'. Nationality may be a poor indicator of cultural distance, whereas 'Othering' based on ethnicity, age, education, immersion in culture (or absence from it) is more reliable<sup>vi</sup>.

Cultural familiarity occurs through a variety of channels. Relevant academic study, exposure to current affairs, theatre, music and literary works helps. Nigerian artistes like Wole Soyinka, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, Chimamanda Adiche, Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, have paved the way for Nollywood. Initiatives from centres like London's Barbican, British Film Institute and the swathe of information available online help prepare 'Other' audiences in the UK. To facilitate more efficient translations greater effort should be devoted to the development of languages and literature.

Since they offer scope for clarification, personal encounters through travel and friends create deep understanding of cultural codes. These personal encounters require cultivation; living in close proximity of particular ethnic groups does not equate immersion in their culture. However, informed discussions as offered in local film clubs for example, offer the cultural capital required to decode less familiar texts. This chapter focused on experiences of Other audiences of subaltern texts but it is also indicative of longer standing challenges faced by audiences of mainstream film texts. In view of the fact that large proportions of Hollywood's audiences are culturally distant from the films, the difficulties of 'Others' documented here may just be theirs as well.

## Endnotes

- I. Nollywood Babylon, (2008, dirs Ben Addelman & Samir Mallal) a documentary outlining practices in Nollywood, was exhibited at the festival. There were also feature films in English and Yoruba language - Dangerous Twins, (2004, dir Tade Ogidan) White Waters, (2008, dir. Izu Ojukwu) Osuofia in London, (2003, dir Kingsley Ogoro) Modupe Temi (2008, dir Daniel Adenimokun), Arugba (2009 dir Tunde Kelani)
- ii. The industry had evolved from distinct ethno-linguistic bases (English, Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa) reflecting Nigeria's geopolitical structure. Though there is some evidence of collaboration between these, they are still linked to stereotypes and distinct socially recognisable traits and practices.
- iii. The turn-out for the premiere of *The Mirror Boy* (dir Obi Emelonye) at London's Empire cinema in London in February 2011 was more in keeping with Nollywood's rising profile and a cinema event. However, this was a commercial event, and it had an intense media blitz including use of TV airtime on ethnic channels. Perhaps this, and the fact that as a film premiere, it offered the chance to see the stars on the red carpet, explains why the event was sold out.
- iv. This is without prejudice to the frequency, intensity or accuracy of viewing films but a reference to the existence of a particular academic or professional bias.
- v. Delta state is one of the 36 administrative states in Nigeria; the reference could also be to wider geographical oil rich delta area of the river Niger. The latter makes the identification more politically significant as it encompasses a region within Nigeria troubled with conflicts due to environmental degradation perceived exploitation and prolonged marginalisation.
- vi. Age and gender appeared not to matter much in the pattern of responses in this study, though the sample seemed skewed in favour of those within 30 – 49 age brackets.



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