



**Mahir Şaul, Ralph A. Austen.** *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century: Art Films and the Nollywood Video Revolution.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010. vii + 248 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1930-4; \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1931-1; ISBN 978-0-8214-4350-7.



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## Nollywood and New Cinemas in Global Africa

The cinematic arts can be arguably defined as the apex of a culture of visibility and it is not by chance that the moving image and images of all kinds in general have become a key technology of narrative in the era of globalization. In this regard, African cinemas of different historical origins, discursive focus and aesthetic orientation are increasingly notable as key aspects of African visual and cultural experiences. The debate over what constitutes African cinemas occupies an important place in these developments, especially in light of the divide between auteur and populist traditions of African filmmaking that seem to divide neatly along colonial lines into Francophone and Anglophone cultures of African cinema. However, these categories do not adequately describe the divergent modes of practice evident in how such cinemas are located in the global economy, where transnational engagements defeat the essentialist idea of a homogenous or nationalist African cinema.[1]

In the contemporary era, the classical definition of African cinema as a mode of practice that adheres to the auteur tradition of French filmmaking confronts

the emergent example of Nollywood and related modes of film production that hew to Hollywood's powerful business-oriented model with its global preeminence. These contexts present two visions of African cinema that can sometimes seem totally divergent. Mahir Şaul and Ralph A. Austen, in *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century: Art Films and the Nollywood Video Revolution*, attempt to bridge this divide between the auteur and populist contexts of African cinema by comparing the two dominant and very different African film industries. In the introduction to their anthology, Şaul and Austen define these as a relatively long-established tradition of celluloid films centered in French-speaking West Africa and identified with its biennial FESPACO (Festival Panafricain du Cinema et de la Television de Ouagadougou) and a newer more commercial video film industry based in English-speaking West Africa and labeled, after its major Nigerian source, Nollywood (p.1). According to Şaul and Austen the obvious differences between FESPACO and Nollywood film extend beyond the production conditions, content, and form into the

realm of cinema scholarship (p. 2); scholars of francophone art film are humanists who are mainly concerned with cinema aesthetics while the study of video films is mainly dominated by social scientists (mainly anthropologists) and relegated to the realm of cultural and media studies. The book transcends previous scholarly inquiries into these phenomena by combining studies of both.

*Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century* consists of an introduction by Åaul and Austen and thirteen essays divided into three parts: part 1 (suggestively titled 'The 'Problem' of Nollywood') contains five essays that describe and interpret the Nollywood phenomenon and its spread to different African countries. Part 2 ('Imported African Films and Their Audiences') contains two essays that analyze the historical and contemporary audience reception of African film. Part 3 ('FESPACO/Art Films in the Light of Nollywood') has six essays that carry out case studies of FESPACO and its engagements with Nollywood. Åaul and Austen state that the essays in the book came from a 2007 conference at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, that brought together scholars working in both FESPACO and Nollywood film, and the collected essays affirm the importance of this conference. However, they erroneously credit the first conference on Nollywood to this 2007 Urbana-Champaign gathering. Actually, the first such conference was the 2005 Nollywood Convention in Los Angeles devoted to clarifying how the new Nollywood industry fits into the discourse of African film (full disclosure: I organized this conference). The Nollywood Convention conference was documented on a website, printed programs and radio. The disregard of this earlier conference by Saul and Austen is an example of the perennial Western tactic of unduly claiming primacy in the study of African cultures.

Although *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century* pays attention to the history and development of FESPACO-style (auteur) cinema, its main focus is on the challenge posed to African cinema discourse by Nollywood and related practices. Nollywood emerged from the economic turmoil that struck African countries in the 1980s, which killed off a nascent celluloid film industry. The key practices that it identified came from Nigeria, where the term Nollywood was coined to describe a nascent film industry that used the video-film format. Moving from celluloid to video film as its primary medium, the Nollywood industry in Nigeria produced a vast number of movies between 1992, when Kenneth Nnebue released *Living in Bondage*, widely regarded as the first Nollywood movie, and 2010 at the rate of

circa 1,500 movies per year.[1] Although it is usually discussed under the rubric of African cinema, Nollywood is quite a different phenomenon; its films are almost exclusively produced in the video format, and since the early 2000s, in digital video format. Also, the films are produced in the English language, which distinguishes them from contiguous ethnically oriented films made in Nigerian languages such as Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa (in Nigeria), Twi (in Ghana), and Kiswahili (in Tanzania) that support equally substantial and competitive contexts of contemporary filmmaking usually classed under the Nollywood rubric. Nollywood has subsequently become a truly pan-African cultural machine and a nexus of transnational cultural productivity.[2] Shot on video, edited on personal computers, and copied onto cassettes and digital video discs, Nollywood films have achieved a global footprint connecting Africa, particularly Nigeria, to its diverse and far-flung diasporas everywhere.[3]

Nollywood originated at the end of the twentieth century as a national media form that emerged free from the control of the state and has since become the most visible cultural machine on the African continent.[4] However, Jonathan Haynes notes that the explosion of video production in Nollywood and related industries in Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa—perhaps the most significant cultural phenomenon in Africa in the past two decades—has produced a delayed echo in scholarly attention and academic publishing.[5] Saul and Austen's anthology emerged as an appropriate response to Haynes's challenge to scholars. It contains essays by leading scholars of African film who focus on the emergent media and technologies embodied by Nollywood: the video/digital film format, the relative independence of the industry (it is mainly financed through the private sector), the frenetic pace of production that embodies what Sidney Kasfir describes in another context as *jua kali* (hot sun), which in Nigeria led to astounding numbers of films produced in a single year, and of course its global footprint developed through informal but surprisingly efficient partnerships.[6]

Åaul and Austen's introduction to *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century* provides a succinct summary of each article included in the book and justifies its tripartite division. Part 1 of the book contains articles by Jonathan Haynes, Onookome Okome, Birgit Meyer, Abdala Uba Adamu, and Matthias Krings. Jonathan Haynes is widely regarded as the dean of Nollywood studies and his article outlines protocols and suggestions for how to incorporate the study of Nollywood into existing film discourse. Noting that ethnogra-

phers working in the field of anthropology of media were largely responsible for the foundational work in the field, Haynes encourages film scholars to apply the full disciplinary apparatus of film studies to video films. Haynes's definition of the structure of this industry as an aggregation of myriad tiny, relatively impoverished producers marks Nollywood as a classic example of what Robert Neuwirth defined as a System D economy, covering economic activities that operate largely outside neoliberal control.[7] This is changing though, as African governments have moved to formalize the industry, mainly in order to regularize procedures for taxing video-film products.

Nollywood engages contemporaneity and globalization from an unapologetic location on the African continent. Its locale specificity and transnational formations are therefore of significant scholarly interest. This perhaps accounts for Onookome Okome's unapologetic description of Nollywood as the mirror through which contemporary Africa is represented to the world (p. 26). For this author, what Nollywood offers is a medley of social, political, and cultural discourses framed within the discursive regime of the popular, commodified and commercialized machine of popular-arts production in Nigeria (p. 35). Okome dismisses challenges to Nollywood from cultural mediators and the older generation of Nigerian/African filmmakers who worked in celluloid and were marginalized in the new dispensation. Most of their complaints centered on what they considered the problematic subject matter of Nollywood films. Ademola James (former director of the Nigerian National Film and Video Censors Board) characterized these as follows: occultism, fetishism, witchcraft, devilish spiritualism, uncontrolled tendency for sexual display, bloodiness, incest, violence, poisoning, etc. (p. 29).

Okome mounts a spirited defense of the industry, pointing out that its films reflect the difficulties of living in a criminalized state (p. 37). However, it is hard not to fault Nollywood in all its incarnations for promoting a colonial mentality, especially in the realm of religion, through video films that privilege Western ideas over indigenous African mores, in what Birgit Meyer describes as the staging of spiritual fights in which the Christian God eventually overpowers indigenous deities (p. 43). In reality, this simply mirrors contemporary social developments related to the overwhelming impact of Pentecostal Christianity and charismatic churches in the social life of the people.

The articles by Birgit Meyer, Abdalla Uba Adamu,

and Matthias Krings describe contexts of video-film production in Ghana, Northern Nigeria (whose distinctive video-film industry is inspired by Bollywood), and Tanzania. Meyer's study of the Ghanaian video-film industry describes its precedence to Nollywood but also the overwhelming impact of Nollywood films on the industry. Abdalla Uba Adamu's analysis notes that the transgression of local norms of privacy by Hausa video filmmakers, have both created and revealed tensions between media globalization and Hausa Muslim culture (p. 72). Matthias Krings in turn documents the transnational impact of Nollywood and its global reach, using its spread to Tanzania as a case study. Krings's article discusses how foreign video-films were localized by dubbing their dialogue in Kiswahili (in Tanzania); having them narrated by veejays (video jockeys) who comment live on foreign films shown in local video clubs; and in one particular case, turning them into photonovels.

Part 2 of the anthology reviews film viewing in Africa, both before and immediately after independence, and consists of two articles. Vincent Bouchard's essay about commentary and spectatorship in African film reception describes various film-viewing practices, noting in the popular forms of film projection, the brouhaha and various audience activities modify the reception of the film shown [and] the interaction between the spectators allows a form of appropriation (p. 95). He concludes that the practice of adding an oral commentary to popular film screening is the result of a media reconfiguration born during the encounter between (non-modern) oral practices and the appropriation of a cinematographic apparatus born out of a foreign culture, in this case, Western modernity (p. 106). However, in her study of audience preferences in Tanzania, Laura Fair points out that African audiences were selective consumers of global cultural flows, as well as active agents in the construction of meaning from the texts they chose to engage (p. 109).

Part 3 of *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century* evaluates FESPACO films and their interaction with the emergent Nollywood industry. It opens with Mahir Aul's analysis of the history of this cinema in its relationship to French support, pan-Africana and Third World ideology, African audiences, the important role of Upper Volta/Burkina Faso as a permanent site of the festival, and the growing role of South Africa as a new center of financing for FESPACO and Nollywood cinema (p. 5). It also includes other essays by Jane Bryce, Peter Rist, Stephan Sereda and Lindsey Green-Simms (who both draw direct comparison between FESPACO and Nolly-

wood films), and Cornelius Moore, who describes how California Newsreel serves as a conduit through which FESPACO films reached the American public.

Overall, *Viewing African Cinema in the Twenty-First Century* is a first-rate compendium of ongoing discussions about the nature, protocols, and impact of video-film production as a new media form in African cinema. Jonathan Haynes is correct that scholars should bring all the arsenal of canonical film studies to bear on the study of video-film in Africa and many of the essays here make commendable attempts in that direction. It is, however, true that at this early stage of this discourse, many essays still focus on providing basic documentation of the various contexts of video-film production. The essays here transcend this by highlighting the relationship between the local contexts of these video-film industries and the larger transnational discourse of African cinema. More importantly, their effort to bridge the FESPACO/Nollywood dichotomy is commendable since it is really an attempt to bridge the Francophone and Anglophone divide in contemporary Africa, a stubborn and abiding legacy of colonization. The increasing formalization of Nollywood, the influence of new online-based technologies and several examples of collaborations between filmmakers working on both sides (as well as the growing influence of South Africa) suggest that the lines between the two modes of African cinema are collapsing. Hopefully, many more books of this kind will document the new contexts that emerge as a result.

#### Notes

- [1]. Pierre Barrot, ed. *Nollywood: The Video Phenomenon in Nigeria* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).
- [2]. Moradewun Adejumo, "Nigerian Video Film as Minor Transnational Practice," *Postcolonial Text* 3, no. 2 (2007), available online at <http://journals.sfu.ca/>, 2007.
- [3]. Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome, eds. *Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).
- [4]. Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
- [5]. Jonathan Haynes, "A Literature Review: Nigerian and Ghanaian Videos," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 22, no. 1 (2010): 105.
- [6]. Sidney Kasfir, "Jua Kali Aesthetics: Placing the City as a Context of Production," *Critical Interventions: Journal of African Art History and Visual Culture* 1, no. 1 (2007): 35-45.
- [7]. Robert Neuwirth, *Stealth of Nations: The Global Rise of the Informal Economy* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011).

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