



## Film Production in Nigeria: A Historical Perspective

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### Abstract:

This paper examined the history of film production in Nigeria, focusing on home movies, soap operas and sitcoms. The Nigerian home movie industry, popularly known as Nollywood, was an adaptation from popular movie industries from the western world like Hollywood, Bollywood, etc. The history of the film industry in Nigeria transcended from the colonial era to the current Nollywood. However, prior to *Living in Bondage* – the first home movie in Nigeria – there had existed many soap operas and sitcoms on Nigerian screens as well as cinemas. Some of them include *New Masquerade*, *Checkmate*, *Things Fall Apart*, *The Village Headmaster*, *Icheoku*, *Basi and Company*, etc. Currently on the Nigerian screen, there are *My Flatmates*, *The Johnsons*, etc.

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### Introduction

Film has been present in various countries around the world before it came to Nigeria. Film as a medium first arrived to Nigeria in the late 19th century, in the form of peephole viewing of motion picture devices. These were soon replaced in early 20th century with improved motion picture exhibition devices, with the first set of films screened at the Glover Memorial Hall in Lagos from 12 to 22 August 1903. The earliest feature film made in Nigeria is the 1926's *Palaver* produced by Geoffrey Barkas; the film was also the first film ever to feature Nigerian actors in a speaking role (Oparaugo, 2021).

The Nigerian video film has emerged a strong element of Nigeria's popular culture. It has established for itself the unique characteristic ability to meet the entertainment and educational needs of the cross spectrum of the Nigerian society. It is patronized by the honorable members of the National Assembly,

members of the executive and by the low peasantry class in rural Nigeria. Nigerian home video has also become a huge export of Nigeria's popular culture (Idachaba, 2018). However not all scholars and analysts can recall the evolution of Nigerian video film and the historical and cultural elements that shape its current form. The home video has emerged as a very powerful and popular medium of communication in Nigeria. But in spite of this huge popularity, not many analysts understand the historical complexities that have shaped its current form and structure. Issues like the hugely debated distribution patterns and other policy Issues. An examination of the history and origin of the Nigerian home video can without doubt lead us to its current reality or the reality that it aspires to project. Many Nigerian families spend several hours of their daily lives consuming television content which substantial part is made up of films or movies. When Television programming ceased to satisfy the audience quest for films and their accompanying graphic sex and violence, media devices like DVD and VCD players are resorted to, for viewing video DVD or VCD films that litter Nigerian markets and neighbourhoods today (Akpan and Anyianuka, 2010). This article therefore looks at the historical origins of Nigerian video film, soap operas and sitcoms.

### **History of the Movie Industry in Nigeria**

The Nigerian aspect of filmmaking actually begins over five decades ago with people such as, Latola Films in 1962 and also, the Calpeny Nigeria Limited, which anchored the escapade. According to records, Latola Films was recognized as the only first film and also the earliest film production film in the country, which began film production in the year 1962.

More so, Calpeny Nigeria Limited was the company that produced the first Nigerian film, called the 'Kongi's Harvest', which was based on a play that was written by Wole Soyinka. In 1980 many films produced in the country were then short plays, some were culled from books, the major challenge then was how to access resources, as well as, adequate facilities. Besides such challenges, the Nigeria's film industry was thriving. The industry actually grow from one challenge to another problem until the Nollywood was birthed, which is the apex body in charge of everything in the industry, from production, right to the distribution of produce in Nigeria.

Nollywood was considered as a name that will resemble or be in similarity with other topnotch and big shots in the film industry, for example, the Bollywood and the Hollywood which are Indian film industry and the American film industry respectively. Actors such as Pete Edochie, Kenneth Okonkwo, Kanayo O. Kanayo Nkem Owoh, and also Bob-Manuel Udokwu among other actors, are considered as those die hard Nigerian actors, and are also considered as those Nigerian actors, who actually made the first impression of what the Nigerian films are all about, and what they look like.

These set of actors have starred in some of the selected Igbo casts especially, when the Nigerian home film began, for example, the 'Living in Bondage', which was produced by Kenneth Nebue, and that was the time some of these films were shot with VHS cameras, and were also edited in television studios by using VCR machines. A good number of Nigerian actors who took part in the making of Nollywood were Ola Balogun, Eddie Ugbomah, the late Hurbert Ogunde, Adeyemi Afolayan alias Ade Love who is a father to Kunle Afolayan, Ladi Ladebo, Moses Adejumo, Adebayo Salami as well as, Afolabi Adesanya. Having said that, the film industry began some years back. The Nigeria's film industry came to be some decades ago. The film is made up of English language films, known as Bollywood, and the Yoruba film industry, and the Kano film industry, which also known as

Kannywood – this area of film production also produces films in other languages, such as, Hausa language, and Igbo language, including other indigenous languages in the country.

More so, what they called, the direct-to-video, that is, the VHS, VCD and DVD distribution system, that they considered as the hallmark of Nollywood in the country was actually started in the year, 1992 with this film called, *Living in Bondage*, it was however, the very first successful movie that was shot straight-to-video. It was that development that heralded a new dawn in the Nigerian film industry, which has actually demonstrated what the industry participants can accomplish with little resources and in the aspect of lowering barriers that could hinder the entry into reaching a good number of talented filmmakers. Nigeria is a country of diverse cultural traditions and diverse lifestyles, and is made up of over 180 million people, and about 300 tribes with over 500 languages. These diversities have offer quite a wealth of materials, whereby the Nigeria’s filmmakers have skillfully draw out some simple stories that have to do with the daily life which relates to Nigerians, and they actually, shared almost a similar culture and a similar heritage across the country and the Nigerian diaspora. Therefore, it is these Nigeria’s colourful stories and their entertaining stories that eventually capture the imagination of Nigerians and other audience out there.

The film industry in the country has succeeded in echoing Nigerians life experiences, it has also feature a strong moral theme as well as, African juju, that is black magic.

Nevertheless, this present generations of Nigeria’s filmmakers, have indeed, focused on that area of harder-hitting social issues like, rape, some called it, *Tango with Me*, and domestic abuse, also called, *Ije* and the one they called, *cancer*, that is, ‘living funeral’. Nollywood generally in their acting, is considered and recognized as expressing the depth and breadth of Nigeria’s and even Africa’s cultural diversity. It makes Nigerians to be able to tell their own story.

The Nollywood has distinctively tell the story of Nigeria’s diversity, and this has held a broad appeal to the Nigerians, and even at that pace of success, the film’s production in the country is actually tended to be low, in terms of technical quality. Films that have predictable storylines are the kind of films that have been churned out into the public, and these are according to tried, as well as, tested formulae.

For some years now, filmmakers in the country have made many films without recourse to formal script, and even actors and actresses are making up their own lines as they go along. Just of recent, I think is some years now, filmmakers in the country are actually working hard in order to make sure that the amateur in the country are shed out of practices as well as, working towards enhancing the quality of their products. For the most part., the country’s film industry has informal structure such that is understood by filmmakers and it had worked for Nigeria’s filmmakers. The Nigerian film industry has actually spread across Africa, and Europe, and for the most part, Nigerian films are also loved in other places like Asia. And as a result many Nigerian actors and Nigerian actresses, who were simple people, have gotten international recognition, as well as fame, they have earned fortune beyond what they could have think, just by starring in a good number of Nigerian films.

In 2018, Genevieve Nnaji became the fist billionaire in Nigerian movie industry after her movie “*Lion Heart*” was purchased by Netflix. Today, some popular home movies in Nigeria include: *Living in*

Bondage, Ritual, Billionaires' Club, Last Burial, Oracle, Narrow Escape, A Cry for Help, Chain Reaction, Suicide Mission, Osuofia in London, Arusi-Iyi, etc.

## Soap Operas

Origins and Ironies of the Phrase "Soap Opera" Although the person who first coined the phrase "soap opera" is unknown, the use of the word "soap" can be explained by the fact that soap manufacturers, namely Procter and Gamble, were the primary sponsors of many daytime radio serials (Allen, 1995; Hagedorn, 1995). Although probably unintentional, employing the word describe and devalue the entire soap opera genre. According to Brown (1994), "trash" suggests "that which ought to be discarded ... cheapness, shoddiness, the overflow of the capitalist commodity system ... a superficial glitter designed to appeal to those whose tastes are ill-formed ... " (p.115). Describing the world of soap opera as "trashy," therefore, clearly devalues and puts down both the soap operas themselves and the women who watch them. Despite this obvious negative connotation, the word "trash" can have a different meaning for subordinate groups who take pleasure in activities regarded by the popular culture as trashy (Brown, 1994). Furthermore, most of this enjoyment stems from the knowledge of that subordinate group that they and their activities are devalued by the dominant value system (Brown, 1990, 1994). When applied to soap operas, this means that some of the pleasure of viewership stems from the fact that dominant masculine culture disapproves of the genre (Brown, 1990, 1994).

The roots of the word "opera" are less clear than those of the word "soap" and have generated considerably less discussion among scholars. Buckman (1984) speculates that the term originated either from the melodramatic nature of the serial program or from the brief musical jingles that were heard throughout each radio serial episode. Allen (1995) and television theorist Charles Derry (1992), however, believe the word "opera" was intended to be ironic, in that opera is a highly artistic expression of human experience, while daytime radio and television is not commonly viewed as a form of art. Given the irony surrounding use of the word "soap," the latter explanation seems most plausible.

Regardless of where the title of the genre came from, Derry (1992) points out that, unlike the category labels given to other forms of television, such as "westerns" and "quiz shows," the name "soap opera" reveals little about the characteristics of the programs it encompasses. Derry (1992) humorously prop such a framework would require the creation of rigid genre categories, which is difficult because the boundaries between television genres are fluid and constantly changing. Furthermore, defining soap opera in terms of its function for viewers, as many scholars do, is limiting because many television genres overlap in the purposes they serve (Mumford, 1995).

Checkmate: Created and written by the late Amaka Igwe, Checkmate was the tale of the aristocratic family Haatrobe trying to survive attacks from enemies both inside and outside of the family. For three years Nigerians were held spellbound by the Sunday night soap opera. The soap opera introduced many to Ego Boyo, the late Francis Agu, Norbert Young and the charismatic Richard Mofe Damijo who played the role of Segun Kadiri. Checkmate also touched on societal issues such as cultism and polygamy too.

Fuji House of Commotion: Fuji House of Commotion offshoot of Checkmate, the Amaka Igwe directed and produced comedy series hilariously portrayed the unique experience of living inside a polygamous home.

The Village Headmaster: The Village Headmaster is one of the most iconic Nigerian TV series of all time. It ran for 2 decades making it the longest-running series aired on the National Television Authority (NTA).

The Village Headmaster which featured greats such as the late Justis Esiri, Dejumolu Lewis, Funsho Adeolu, and Enebeli Elebuwa. The TV series focused on topical issues such as "inter-ethnic harmony, problem-solving and intervention in public affairs, health education and family enjoyment" according to The Nation.

Everyday People (early 2000s): The brainchild of media entrepreneur, Everyday People focused exclusively on the lives of middle-class Nigerians. The movie featured the late Sam Loco Efe, Carol King, Ify Onwuemene, Seun Soremi, Juliet Martin-Abazie, Ignis Ekwe and others.

### **The theme song was very famous.**

Things Fall Apart (1987): This is another classic TV show produced by NTA. In 1987, the television authority adapted the timeless novel written by Chinua Achebe. The lead character of Okonkwo was played by none other than Pete Edochie. Other acts in the TV special were the late Sam Loco Efe and Nkem Owoh. The NTA adaptation is one of the best moments of the NTA in terms of producing a flawless TV show that has resonated with many generations.

Super Story (2001-2018): Super Story is the brainchild of TV producer Wale Adenuga who is also responsible for Papa Ajasco on TV and on print. 18 years running, Super Story is a unique format that has appealed to the Nigerian audience. The first season of the show told the story of Suara and Toyin Tomato (played by the brilliant Sola Sobowale). The debut season was a hit which has influenced the success of the following seasons. Each season tells a different story centred around the lives of middle-class Nigeria.

### **Situational Comedy (Sitcoms)**

A setting and a group of characters providing the opportunity for a comic narrative, usually resolved in 25-30 minutes (although the 'situation' remains open to future disruption), and broadcast in a series of five or more episodes. In Nigeria, examples of this include My Flatmates, Clinic Matters, The Johnsons, etc.

New Masquerade (the mid-80s - mid-90s): The New Masquerade is regarded as Nigeria's greatest sitcom. It was a classic 30-minute show on NTA which featured Chief Zebrudaya alias 4:30 played by Chika Okpala, his wife Ovularia (Lizzy Evoeme), late Chief Jegede Shokoya (Claude Eke), Giringori (James Iroha), and Clarus (David Ofor). The gang of friends, wives and houseboys dished humour to millions of Nigerians every Tuesday night from 8:30 pm - 9:00 pm. The New Masquerade is one of Nigeria's most beloved TV shows with an iconic theme song and unforgettable characters.

It was created and written by James Iroha who also acted in the sitcom. It is one of Nigeria's longest running sitcoms. The TV show started out as radio program known as The Masquerade transmitted on the East Central State Broadcasting Corporation, Enugu.

The show started out a segment called Masquerade aired on *In the Lighter Mood*, radio program of the East Central Broadcasting Corporation. It was created after the civil war as a means to bring laughter

to the homes of citizens after the devastation caused by the Nigerian Civil War. The creator was James Iroha who also played Giringori on the TV show.

The protagonist of the show is Chief Zebrudaya, a World War II veteran who has visited various foreign countries and he is perceived by other characters to have attained some level of sophistication and enlightenment. Many of the shows' plot take place in Zebrudaya's sitting room. Zebrudaya has a wife, Ovularia, a daughter, Philo and two Houseboys, Clarus and Giringori. Though a comedy, the show also incorporate melodramatic plots about teaching morals and the consequences of some of society's problems if they are not corrected.

Basi and Company (1986-1990): Written and produced by Ken Saro Wiwa, Basi and Company aired on NTA. Filmed in Enugu state, the TV series touched on corruption and African folklore. The comedy series starred Albert Egbe, Zulu Adigwe, Aso Douglas, Laso Amoro and was lasted after 150 episodes.

Icheoku (80s)" If you watch a comedy skit of a translator wrongly interpreting the words of a speaker, the format most likely came from the TV series Icheoku. The comedy series that ran in the 1980s, featured a court translator who made a mess of interpreting the words of a British judge to locals.

The comedic format is still used by many Nigerian comedians till today.

Papa Ajasco: Created by Wale Adenuga, Papa Ajasco was initially a comic strip in the 80s which turned out to be very successful. After an initial movie in 1983, Wale Adenuga adapted it for TV in 1996 starring the famous characters, 'Papa Ajasco', 'Mama Ajasco', 'Bobo Ajasco', 'Boy Alinco', 'Miss Pepeye', 'Pa James' and 'Pa Jimoh'.

Clinic Matters: Clinic Matters is a situational comedy that dramatizes the everyday experience of a busy doctor, his committed Nurses and their different patients with their unusual character and attitude. The sitcom involves a troublesome nurse.

My Flatmates: Four guys share a flat, and their daily quest for better lives leads to fun escapades. Frank (Bright Okpocha, a.k.a Basketmouth) is the owner of the flat where he stays with his friends Obus (Buchi Ojeh), Sammy (Emmanuel Ikubese) and Willy (Steve Onu, a.k.a Yaw). They were later joined by two others: Chief Donatus (Bethel Njoku, a.k.a Senator) – who was a school father to Koko (Kayode Peters) a friend to Frank, and Hon. Dan (Daniel Nwoka, a.k.a Dan D' Humorous). They all share a flat with Frank's girlfriend Mimi (Rakiya Yusuf). Then they have compound neighbours: Nduka the barber (Okey Bakassi), his boy Titus (MC Pashun), his wife Sandra (Wofai Fada), the mechanic Jite (Otas Onojaiyeke, a.k.a I Go Save), his wife Tejiri (Oluwatosin Albert), the landlord (Dayo Davies) an always drunk gateman Prosper (Emmanuel Jibunoh)

The Johnsons: A family sitcom focused on an average family based in Lagos Nigeria, their diverse traits and how they cope with what life has to offer them. The family is made up of Lucky Johnson (Charles Inojie), Emu Johnson (Ada Ameh), Efe Johnson (Chinedu Ikedieze), Tari Johnson (Olumide Oworu), Jennifer Johnson (Seun Osigbesan), Blessing Johnson (Susan Pwajock) and their adopted son Spiff (Samuel Ajiboye).

### **New Nigerian Cinema (mid 2000s – present)**

This is an emerging phase in Nollywood which started in the mid-2000s. It was a subtle move from the Home Video film era to this emerging phase. In the early 2000s, several conferences, meetings and

workshops were held to restore professionalism in the industry. Some filmmakers and producers took bold steps to actualise this that they produced films such as *Thunderbolt*, *Madam Dearest* and *Dangerous Twins* that are different from what was known as the norm at that time (Sidomex Universal, 2018).

Silverbird cinemas upon establishment started screening Nigerian films with high production quality, as a result discouraging poor film production. The first New wave film to be shown at a cinema was the Yoruba-language film *Irapada* (2006) by Kunle Afolayan, which was screened at the Silverbird Galleria in Lagos. The Silverbird experiment became very successful, and as a result, the group launched few more cinema branches in Lagos and other cities in the country.

Not long after the establishment of Silverbird cinemas, Genesis Deluxe Cinemas and Ozone Cinemas were also launched creating a competition in the cinema business.

Much later, in the 2010s, FilmHouse cinemas also came into the picture, leading to the availability of more cinemas in the country, especially outside the affluent neighbourhoods.

Several grants have been launched by the Nigerian Government, in order to support quality content in Nigerian films. In 2006, “Project Nollywood” was launched by the Nigerian Government, in conjunction with Ecobank. Also in 2015, Bank of Industry launched another “NollyFund” program for the purpose of giving financial support in form of loans to film producers (Okon, 2019).

The popular 2009 thriller film *The Figurine* is generally considered the game changer, which heightened the media attention towards “New Nigerian Cinema “revolution.

The film was a critical and commercial success in Nigeria, and it was also screened in international film festivals. The 2010 film *Ijé* by Chineze Anyaene, overtook *The Figurine* to become the highest grossing Nigerian film; a record it held for four years, until it was overtaken in 2014 by *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2013).

**By 2016, this record was held by *The Wedding Party*, a film by Kemi Adetiba.**

By the end of 2013, the film industry reportedly hit a record breaking revenue of ₦1.72 trillion (US\$11 billion). As of 2014, the industry was worth ₦853.9 billion (US\$ 5.1 billion) making it the third most valuable film industry in the world, behind the United States and India.

It contributed about 1.4% to Nigeria’s economy; this was attributed to the increase in the number of quality films produced and more formal distribution methods.

Unlike the home video era, films in the new wave are generally of much improved quality, with considerably bigger budgets; averaging between ₦40 million (US\$250,000) and ₦120 million (\$750,000). These films’ production periods take months and even span into years, a far cry from the films in video format which are usually shot in a matter of days or weeks.

Other notable improvements in the New Nollywood include: more subtle performances from actors; different from the overt melodrama which constituted the video era, more practical, more logical and generally better stories. Themes explored in these films are often characterized by consciously cosmopolitan themes, as most of the filmmakers are relatively young.

A proper copyright and distribution system still remains one of the major challenges in the New Nigerian Cinema.

## The Future of Nigerian Video

Today, the Nigerian film industry or Nollywood as it is more commonly referred to, is recognised as one of the biggest in the world. There are star actors, higher production values and the intensely enthusiastic participation of global audiences in the burgeoning film scene in the country. However, these advancements did not occur until recently, when it went from its direct-to-video hits in the Golden Era to its current state – the new wave, more controversially called “New Nollywood” (Ugobude, 2021).

In projecting a future direction for the Nigerian video film, Ekwuazi (2001) states that film should recognize that the nation, is a continuous project, a project always in the making always interrogating governance and citizenship and scripting social positions for the viewer or reader (Idachaba, 2018). He notes that it may be used to dictate views and positions and could also be used as part of social transformation in which the oppressed express their problems and grievances. Films therefore should play more than passive roles in the ideological, perceptual and socio-political concerns of government in its relationship with the people.

## Conclusion

The Nigeria’s film industry came to be some decades ago. The film is made up of English language films, known as Bollywood, and the Yoruba film industry, and the Kano film industry, which also known as Kannywood – this area of film production also produces films in other languages, such as, Hausa language, and Igbo language, including other indigenous languages in the country.

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