

Nollywood:
Through the Eyes of Nigerians and Other West Africans

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a draft research proposal

prepared as part of an assignment for a media and communications course at

Concordia University, Montreal, Canada

April 2014

Introduction

The term Nollywood refers to the Nigerian film industry – which takes place in and outside of Nigeria and is run by Nigerians. Nollywood is known for its unconventional filmmaking strategies. Film budgets are low and production times limited. Filmmakers do not operate with the typical (and relatively expensive) celluloid format, and these movies are made to be watched on small home television screens (Adeyemi, 2006, p.59). Because of this, some might contest the idea that these are films, however there is no one universal standard for filmmaking, and there is a need to break away from that narrow outlook (Location One, 2010). The Nollywood film industry, which caters to the entertainment industry, has grown from when it started in the 1980s (Haynes, 2007, p.134). It has expanded tremendously, and is still evolving. Some of the movies produced are now marketed around the globe, in Africa, Europe, North America, the Middle East, and the Caribbean (Adeyemi, 2006, p.66; Location One, 2010). They appeal to Nigerians and other West Africans who have been to school and also those who do not read and write. The literacy rate in Nigeria is about 51% 2012 (UNICEF, 2013).

The term Nollywood was created in 2002 and provoked some debate. Some thought the name portrayed Nigerian films as an imitation of the American Hollywood, and others argued that it reflects the widespread popularity and influence of these films (Haynes, 2007, p.132). Nollywood has distinguished itself from other film industries, namely Hollywood and Bollywood. Nigerian movies are even different from other African movies. According to Haynes (2007), Nigerian movies depict chaos and class division; they are noisy, crowded, and at times frantic, whereas many other African movies use silence as a tool. Some claim that some of Nollywood's techniques

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have inspired Hollywood, which has recently started to make films with simple videotapes (Adeyemi, 2006, p. 68). Nollywood is still growing. While it will keep building on its foundations, it will be different tomorrow from how we know it today.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the proposed study is to begin to understand what Nollywood brings to the African continent and the African Diaspora around the world. This movie industry is important for Africans, including Nigerians, as they break away from the stereotypes and stories set and told by others. It is time for Nigerians to tell and consume their own stories and share their culture with the world; this can be done through their films. Africa is a more heterogeneous place than has been depicted in mass media. Nollywood movies might give Africans a chance to express their complex heterogeneity. The films are breaking down the stereotypes developed by others telling the stories of Africans and the standards set by others regarding movie production and consumption (Location One, 2010). As mentioned by the filmmaker Zina Saro-Wiwa (panelist in Location One, 2010), Nollywood is self-representation on a mass scale.

Research is also necessary because Nollywood is one of the largest filmmaking industries, along with Hollywood and Bollywood. Some say Nollywood might even be bigger than Hollywood and Bollywood, producing more than 1000 films per year (Andrew, 2009; Location One, 2010). Nigerian films are one of the fastest growing parts of the Nigerian economy. Nollywood has created from three to four thousand jobs over the years (McCall, 2004, p. 100). Hence, Nollywood is becoming increasingly influential, not only in how Africa and regarding how Africans are represented, but also in how other

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businesses in Africa are structured. Many are learning lessons from Nollywood to jumpstart their industries (Location One, 2010).

Research Question

This study will investigate what makes Nollywood films so popular among urban Nigerians and other urban West Africans. I hypothesize that they are attracted to Nollywood films because they see themselves and their cultures in them.

Literature Review

Content

Content, a distinguishing feature for Nollywood films, is mentioned by many authors. These films are very much geared towards an African audience. Internationally renowned film critic Dudley Andrew mentions in his interview titled “What is Nollywood?” how “these films are really made for the people in the culture.” Nigerian films reflect realities of Nigerian culture in particular and African cultures more generally (Akpabio, 2007, p.97). The content might not appeal to audiences that do not share similar customs. In his interview, Andrew also explains how “people have a taste for them likely because they’re seeing their own circumstances, their social problems, and their mythological references.” The content is closely related to the real conditions of the people, and it exhibits an accurate representation of the truth without overemphasis on what is too familiar, for example, traffic jams and garbage piles (Haynes, 2007, p.14). Awam Ampka, filmmaker and film scholar at New York University, explains that while the nation-state may be failing to relate to its people on many levels, Nollywood seems to

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have its finger on the pulse and everyday lives and aspirations of Nigerians, as well as other Africans (Location One, 2010).

Many complain that the content in these movies is violent and negative, however, Ayedemi (2006) found that “respondents have a largely favorable attitude to Nigerian home video production even though they expressed the view that there is too much emphasis on themes such as sex, violence, prostitution, sibling rivalry, evils of polygamy, devilish spiritualism and related themes” (p. 99). This might be a result of the producers being close to their audiences, and being in touch with what their audiences want to see (p. 97). In addition, Ayedemi found that movie producers believe that audiences like negative themes and that these spread more quickly; they feel that this is how the sensibilities of their audiences are touched. As McCall (2004) says, “Nigerian videos [...] capture the hopes and fears of today’s Africans in unprecedented ways” (p. 107).

Haynes (2007) points to the fact that Nigerian films appeal to their audiences because, like any other film industry, Nollywood is also about selling the dream of individual advancement (p. 147). Haynes references an author (Birgit Meyer) who says that there is “an attraction of the films for their audiences, who overwhelmingly live in modest circumstances” and that “they purport to provide a glimpse behind the high walls and imposing gates of the wealthy, which shut out the rest of society to shelter bourgeois nuclear families” (p.144).

Ekwenchi (2008) claims that there is still influence of the West in the content presented in these movies. Which might be one of the reasons for which they also appeal to the public.

Production Techniques

Production techniques, as mentioned in the introduction, also distinguish Nollywood from the big filmmaking industries. Movies can be shot in five to ten days and are released to the public almost immediately, which often yields films of relatively poor quality, especially in terms of sound quality (Location One, 2010). Jedlowski (2013) argues that the lower quality in film might appeal to “audiences that are tired of the heavy structures that usually characterize cinema industries in other parts of the world” (p.162). Thus, what some see as weaknesses, others perceive as strengths of this industry. Some Nigerian films, however, are shot in 30 days; others might even reach the two months Hollywood take to shoot a film (Jedlowski, 2013, p. 163). Thus we should be cautious when using short production time as a main characteristic of Nollywood’s filmmaking.

Economy

Nigeria has an unsteady economy, and corruption is widespread. However Nollywood in itself gives hope for “a genuine opportunity for legitimate financial success and even celebrity, open to just about anyone with talent and imagination” which creates what many call the “Nigerian Dream” (McCall, 2004, p. 102) This industry has created a great deal of jobs in the country, and it might be the only “bright spot in the country’s gloomy economy”(p.102).

These movies are not state-sponsored; some say Nollywood is more independent than many an African country (Location One, 2010).Producers do not want the sector to be formalized, as they do not want their activities scrutinized and taxed.

Methodology

Research Design

For the purpose of this study, surveys will be administered to people in Nigeria and in cities in other West African countries.

Five research assistants will be hired in five different West African cities (Abuja and Lagos in Nigeria, Accra in Ghana, Abidjan in Ivory Coast, and Bamako in Mali) to administer the questionnaires and conduct the interviews with 100 participants per city, for a total of 500 participants. Among the participating countries, there are Anglophone and francophone ones. The research assistants will be required to speak English or French and one or more of the national languages.

The questionnaire will be tested before being administered to the targeted populations. I will send it by email to two friends in each of the afore-mentioned cities to test it. I will also share it with two graduate students or professors for their input. I will then make changes according to the feedback received before sending them out to be completed.

Sampling

Convenience sampling will be used to reach segments of the populations in the five cities mentioned, as it is the most fitting for this situation. Hence, participants will be selected on the basis of their willingness to participate. They will be selected from universities, high schools, cybercafés, and other public places. Certain neighborhoods will be targeted to make sure that different socioeconomic classes are represented.

Men and women of different age groups in each city will be asked to

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participate; level of education, religion, residential area, socioeconomic status, and the participants' ability to read and write will be documented.

Instrumentation

Questionnaires

Questionnaires are appropriate instrument to assess people's thoughts and feelings on a particular topic, thus these will be administered to obtain a reading of West Africans' thoughts on Nigerian films. The questionnaire will have to be translated into French and the common national language(s) in each of the chosen cities where the study will be carried out. I will do the translation from English to French, and the research assistants will translate it into the national language(s). The questionnaire will contain closed and open-ended questions.

Interviews

Because a large portion of the targeted population is illiterate, research assistants will need to complete the questionnaires via interviews in some cases. The questionnaires will be handed out for participants to fill out in places such as universities and high schools; however in other settings, the research assistant will ask the questions and the questionnaire will be completed by him/her based on the answers given by the participant.

Data Collection

For those completing the questionnaire themselves, the letter of consent will be read, signed and dated by the participant if he/she agrees to the conditions of the study.

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We will use implied consent with the participants with whom the questionnaires are completed via interviews. The purpose of the study will be explained, and the research assistants will assure participants that their anonymity will be respected. The questionnaires will be completed solely on the basis of voluntary participation.

Data Analysis

The completed questionnaires will be scanned by the different research assistants and sent to me on a daily basis. The originals will be sent to me later. The data will be put into SPSS for analysis. ATLAS.ti will be used in the analysis of the qualitative data. I will travel to one of the cities and undertake the data entry and data analysis/interpretation with one of the research assistants. I will send the results to the other research assistants for comments.

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