

BINARIES AND AMBIVALENCE: AN ANALYSIS OF TWO NOLLYWOOD ACTORS' SPATIAL DISCOURSES

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Abstract

It is quite safe to say that Nollywood owes its existence to globalization processes. Widely available and affordable video technology, the ease in air travels and a nose for lucrative business¹ have combined to create the industry that has toppled Hollywood as the premier provider of audio visual entertainment in Nigeria. Video technology equally gave birth to other 'woods' in sub-Saharan African countries such as Ghana, Kenya and Malawi and is the engine behind the revitalization of Nigeria's and Ghana's previously comatose national film industries. The accounts of globalization have, however, largely marginalized the subjective dimension of the impact on these countries' culture industries of the globalization of the video technology and of culture. This article highlights this aspect of the impact of globalization but especially as it concerns the issue of identity. Using Segun Arinze and Steph-Nora Okere, two well known Nollywood actors as cases, and drawing also from interview excerpts with both actors², the article employs critical discourse analysis to argue that a contradictory structure of feeling has developed in the actors in relation to Nollywood and social practices elsewhere, symbolized by Hollywood. This tension comes mainly from the reality of working in the country's video film industry and the global ideals as imagined by the actors. The paper concludes by arguing that imagination has combined with wide availability of foreign cultural materials to foster mental migration in the two Nollywood actors.

Introduction

A key argument in the globalization dialectic is that culture has become untied from national moorings (Featherstone, 1995). Robertson (5) has equally pointed out that this disembedding instantiated by globalization processes has led to the intensification of our consciousness of other societies but warned, however, that such a consciousness of other places 'may well be grossly misinformed.' When awareness of other societies that one has is based on partial information, the pitfall then becomes that abstract social spaces are treated as real, concrete spaces resulting in what Lefebvre (93) has called a fetishization. Partial knowledge of Hollywood that generates the ambivalent attitude

displayed by the two actors towards their industry, and one that illustrates the mental state that Lefebvre above warned about, is rooted in Nollywood in general and acting in particular. But what is it about acting in Nigeria and in the video film industry itself that could, in some cases, predispose some people in the industry, as the two actors, to unsubstantiated and exaggerated views of elsewhere?

Acting was previously seen in the country as something one took up in addition to 'normal' employment. With the birth of Nollywood, though, acting is fast becoming the number one 'profession' of choice for many, especially the young, who it would appear by the many new faces in video films in the recent times, are not discouraged by the fact that only few actors ever succeed in the industry. The rising popularity of acting in Nigeria is also, in large part, the reason that many producers never hold auditions for roles in their productions. As one actor³ put it, every Nigerian would then turn up to be auditioned! The claim is perhaps an exaggeration, but it does serve to highlight the scale of the challenge actors face within the industry.

This could as well accounts for the enduring image problem of Nollywood productions in general and of the professional status of acting in particular. Productions are, in many cases, hurriedly put together. For producers on slim budgets, it becomes a case of economy of scale in which quality loses out to the more overriding need of wrapping up every aspect of production within the shortest possible time, sometimes in as little as a fortnight. Besides, where competition for roles is as cutthroat as it is in the acting 'profession' in general, and where some Nollywood producers would rather pay less to hire an 'upstart' with no training than hire a 'star' with formal training, professionalism is bound to suffer. The net effect is the comparing and contrasting that characterize the ways the two actors spoke about their social context and other places.

Nollywood and Elsewhere

In the two actors' talk, such binaries as standard/sub-standard; professional/unprofessional; exploitative/humane; were used by them interchangeably to describe conditions that exist in the industry and the way the actors imagined similar conditions to be elsewhere. In such discourses of approbation, 'standard' or 'professional' practice was used to stand for places where the actors believed the best practices obtain and which similar practices in Nollywood would do well to follow. The comments of the actress, Steph-Nora Okere when asked about the changes she would like to see in the current practices and attitudes in Nigeria's video film industry capture aspects of this particular way of looking at the world:

Ms Okere: I need the working environment to be different. I need the pace to be different too. I need everything to be different. I need the Nigerian movie industry to actually follow the ideal situation, not playing to the Nigerian thing. Home movie is not a Nigerian thing. We are copying, so let's copy right.

Mr. Arinze, continued on this theme of the global as a place of 'ideal', 'standard' practice where things are done in the 'right', 'professional' manner in his response to the question of how he got his roles. The actor had been asked whether his agent negotiated his roles or whether the actor negotiated his roles and fees with the video film producers himself. Mr. Arinze's answer was at once self-deprecatory and serious but it again highlights this tension between local reality and global ideal:

Mr. Arinze: Hump, (in self-mockery) when you speak of agent, you're speaking as if you're in Hollywood. Please, there is no agent. Here, the actor is his own manager, the agent, PA. He negotiates his roles and his fees by himself, which is very unprofessional indeed. It is unprofessional because then a lot of sentiments get in the way. Unfortunately for us here in Nigeria, the actor is his own everything. He even provides his own clothes on set because we are more of interpersonal relationship here. We haven't yet got to the highest level of professionalism in the business.

Apparently, production practices considered to be 'standard' are at the rudimentary stages as yet, if not a distant prospect in Nollywood, when compared to places that have perfected the practices, such as Hollywood. Through the standard/sub-standard binary, the actors have also highlighted interpersonal relationships and sentiment as aspects of the local that drag down film making practices in Nigeria into the 'sub-standard' zone. Sentiment is seen to interfere with practical matters of finance. This structure of feeling, a post colonial condition, marked by unfavourable comparing of the local context with a global one exemplifies the nature of the shadow that colonialism does still manage to cast on the thinking of some Nigerians more than four decades after independence. Morley's (165) argument regarding the way European imperialists constituted the notion of modernity during the colonial era supports the above position in accounting for the Nigerian actors' ambivalent attitude:

In the context of imperialism and colonialism, the centre as the site and source of modernity, progress and metropolitan advance is thus set up as the power node of a binary opposition with the periphery—as the site of traditionalism, regionalism and provincial backwardness. In this binary, the centre acts as a model –or point of originary reference—while the periphery can only ever be a poor copy, a reflex extension condemned to the reproduction and imitation of a succession of original moments.

For the above Nigerian actors, Nollywood that has yet to attain the 'professional' standard of the centre, is thus a 'site of traditionalism, regionalism and provincial backwardness.' This opposing conceptualization of the global as the centre of excellence and 'the realm of 'eventfulness', and the local as a work in progress could not be unconnected with the harsh criticisms Nollywood video films have drawn in Nigeria in relation to technical quality. Although quality has generally improved since he made his observation but Shaka (2003) has blamed the poor technical quality and which has continued to dog the industry on the take-off technology (VHS) which led to a high rate

of depreciation after post-production. Writing separately, the authors, Robert Allen (1992) and Jeremy Tunstall (1977), also see one consequence of the globalization of popular culture and wide availability of foreign films of all sorts in developing countries such as Nigeria as being the capacity of such films to accustom film audiences in these countries to expect too much from their own culture industries.

In fact, as Allen (25) put it, such foreign programmes are likely to cultivate in their local consumers 'standards against which that country's domestic programs will find difficult to compete.' Barber (1997) was, however, a lot more direct in her observation about the Nigerian elite and university educated people, like the two actors, generally preferring foreign films and television programmes to those produced locally. Hollywood has set the bar which Nollywood can never match. Therefore, the actor who wanted Nigeria's video film producers 'to copy right' may discover she may still have some time to wait before the local video film industry can attain the level, if ever, to which Hollywood has accustomed her.

For the two Nollywood actors, other places are not only constituted as models of standard practice but are equally seen as some sort of guide or teacher. Described by Lull (2007) as a relationship at a distance and by Thompson (1995) as non-dialogical and non-reciprocal relationship, individuals from other places, usually Hollywood movie stars, incidents that have occurred elsewhere and plots from Hollywood films, provide points of reference, ideas and tips on human behaviour. These external resources also increase the range of available options for Mr. Arinze on how to handle real life interpersonal and other relationships within his local context Mr. Arinze had, while relating his experience with a Nigerian publication that alleged the actor had contracted some disease, referred to a Hollywood film he had watched. Apparently, tips from the film had influenced his reaction to the provocative story, as Mr. Arinze's answer, when asked why he never considered a legal action against the magazine clearly illustrates:

Arinze: I won't fight them. What I've learnt to do in the past years is ignore it; it will go away. I watched a movie *Double Platinum*. They were talking about something and this guy said, 'hey, listen, this is the media, it sucks, let it go.' That's the attitude, ignore it and it will die. That's what I've learnt to do. Because, immediately you start to make a noise about it, you blow it out of all proportions. And, of course, everybody begins to look at your objection. So, I've learnt to ignore the press.

Thus, his relationships with plots and characters in a Hollywood film have combined to become for the above actor a script for imagining his own life (Appadurai 2003, p.255) and invariably those of Hollywood stars. For the actor and others like him, one consequence of this imagined affinity with other people and places has become an overvaluation of elsewhere and the construction of the local as a site of deprivation.

In such a 'deprived and sub-standard' social context as Nigeria, not even human and business relations escape 'contamination' or comparison with other places, it would

appear. When asked what his experience of working in the industry had been, Mr. Arinze's response is an open criticism of certain production practices in Nollywood and an implied comparison with other societies:

Mr. Arinze: My experience has been a mixture of everything: the good, the bad, and the not-so-good. Sometimes you work with people who are highly professional, who know what they are doing. Sometimes you work with people who don't at all know what they are doing. And sometimes we celebrate mediocrity and that is the worst ailment you can ever think of, when we celebrate mediocrity.

Ms Okere's criticism of the 'unprofessional' practices in the video film industry, when asked whether she was happy with her earnings, was even more damning and neither is unstated comparison with other places very far behind:

Ms Okere: No, I won't say I'm happy and I won't say I am sad. You know, the regular African wants to rip you off, if he can. Not because he doesn't know your worth, he knows alright but wants to get around it. The pay to me, when compared with when we started, is a whole lot different. It's a whole lot better but it's still not right. And why it happened like that was because of what I said earlier. Some people who were money-minded capitalist came into the industry and now they are doing it as if you're trading things, buy tomatoes, sell and make a little profit. But they are not being truthful about their profits, their sales. So they are not paying us what we're supposed to be earning. And that saddens my heart because some people want to keep all the money for themselves. Honest producers too. But a regular producer finds it difficult to produce a film because he is scared of losing his money because some people might just not level up with him when it comes to the sale of the movie. So, you find some people have just commandeered the market. It's got to an era of writing, producing, directing, acting.

People are not doing the normal work because some aspects of the industry are not being truthful about what really is the situation. We are made to believe sales are poor. Yet the man who tells you sales are not good, why are you still in the industry, why are you building houses, why are you buying new cars, why are you attaining new grounds? You don't want the man next to you to grow. So the pay is alright as in you can feed your family relatively, you can buy this one car that you've been pushing around, pay your rent and the rest of it. But entertainment is more than that. We have more than 150 million people in Nigeria and people are telling us that they can't even sell up to 200,000 copies. I think that's sheer robbery. I'm not happy about it. And even when some people came out and took the bull by the horn and said, 'pay us a little more than you pay us,' they got slammed with a ban. I find that very insulting.

The privileges accruing to actors in other places are also knowingly or unknowingly exaggerated in these discourses of deprivation and affluence. The two Nollywood actors employed comparison to highlight what they perceived as the big divide in their working conditions in comparison to Hollywood. Such comparisons are also based on

the assumption that the situation spoken about in these other places exist literally. Successful Hollywood actors also represent what appropriate reward for working in a film industry should be, in these comparisons. While talking about their fee, a subject which some Nollywood actors are extremely cagey about due, perhaps, to its paltriness, Mr. Arinze had said Will Smith was previously earning about \$20 million to star in a film but now commands as high as \$40-\$60 million for a starring role in a single film. However, no account of the Hollywood actor's fee or any other Hollywood A-list star in scholarly literature or entertainment media, has credited any actor, male or female, who played only a lead role in a production, with earning as high as \$50-60 million.

Some background facts about Nigeria's video film industry in relation to Hollywood will perhaps help contextualize Mr. Arinze's claims about the Hollywood's actor's fee. It will, as well, support the argument that it is mainly to emphasize in a most unmistakable manner the fact of Nollywood's poverty when seen alongside Hollywood rather than envy of the Hollywood star that is behind the Nigerian actor's claim. Haynes (2007) has estimated the total yearly worth of the Nigerian video film industry at about \$200 million. Nollywood's annual net worth, however, pales into insignificance when understood against the backdrop of the value of US films' global sales in 2004 which Thussu (2006) estimated at \$25.24 billion with \$9.54 billion generated within the US domestic market alone. That Will Smith earns \$20 or \$40 million for appearing in a film, it is important to point out, is not a problem for Mr. Arinze. The American star's supposed earnings have, instead, been used by the Nigerian actor to highlight a dimension of 'sub-standard and unprofessional' video film production practices that exist in Nollywood.

Mr. Arinze is also a star in his country's entertainment industry but was being paid about \$300 in 2006 for his starring role in the Wale Adenuga Productions' *A New Song*. For people in Nollywood as the above actor who erroneously equated the abstract with the familiar Lefebvre (1991, p.93) would further argue that they have turned themselves, their presence, their 'lived experiences' and their bodies into abstractions too." While it is safe to say that Will Smith will no doubt welcome the idea of commanding \$50 million to star in a film, Mr. Arinze has failed to separate reality from the false picture of Hollywood stars' earning prowess that exists in his imagination. It is this failure coupled with the reality of the context of video film production in Nigeria that has given rise to the fetishization of America apparent in the actors' talks about Hollywood. The two actors are thus transformed into 'armchair émigrés', imagining the existence and possibilities of a better life elsewhere which probably could also be theirs with as little as a one-way ticket and a plane ride to Hollywood.

Counting their Blessings, Nonetheless

Apparently, those other sites of standard practices are not always worthy of emulation. In fact, elsewhere is also seen as a site of negative practices while the local, though as yet developing in such a sense, is preferred. In this discourse of innocence versus

corruption, the local is portrayed as being spared some of the negative consequences of the 'standard' and 'professional' practices that are often times features of the West. For instance, such individuals as groupies and practices, like stalking, that are associated with places of 'professional standard practices', like Hollywood, are almost unknown in Nigeria. When such comparisons are made, local video film production practices that are considered rudimentary and lacking in professionalism tend to carry a positive charge. Lack of professionalism is then seen as something of a shield for the video film producer.

This is a protection which their counterparts in other places have forfeited, living as they do in a context where the positive healthy intercourse that characterises interpersonal relationships at the local, has become corrupted for material gain. Mr. Arinze, when asked about how he dealt with the issue of overenthusiastic fans, spoke about actors in Nigeria being spared false allegations of sexual harassment and abuse that their better known counterparts in 'developed' countries sometimes suffer at the hands of their fans:

It is such a good thing we have going for us in our society. Our society has not got to that advanced level of blackmail. We have no problem of blackmail, unlike places where if a female fan manages to gain access to you and talks to you and says one or two things and you get carried away; the next thing you know, she has reported to the police that you've sexually harassed her. And then the police will pick you up. We're lucky we've not got to that level.

His view of the global as not being an entirely benign space is, perhaps, the reason for the resistance to certain globalizing tendencies that is apparent in this interview excerpt with the same actor. Mr. Arinze did not like the idea of Nigeria's video film industry being called Nollywood. In his words:

I hate calling it Nollywood, because there is no reason why I should call it Nollywood. I prefer to call it Nigawood, if it has to be any 'wood' at all.

The suffix 'wood', derived from Hollywood which has become synonymous with film production, is employed by many a national film industry to give visibility as well as credibility to their industry. Although Mr. Arinze's affirmation of the 'right to be different' is incomplete, seeing he still retained 'wood' in his preferred 'Nigawood', the actor's objection could be understood as a reaction to what is increasingly looking like an appeal for legitimation that is implicit in the use of 'wood' by many 'Third World' national film industries and the universalization of the name Hollywood. India's film industry alone has spawned other 'woods' such as Kollywood (Tamil) Tollywood (Telugu) besides the more famous Bollywood. Pakistan cinema industry goes by the name Lollywood. And there must be other 'woods' besides these better known ones if one looks hard enough.

Despite their expressed dissatisfaction with certain practices within their industry, Nollywood producers are not exactly voting with their feet out of the industry. If anything, in the same breath that despair is expressed, expressions of hope and optimism would usually soon follow. The actors interviewed expressed the hope that things would improve with time. Ms Okere, who said she had thought of quitting at some point because of what she considered the influx of mediocrity whose 'unprofessional' practices and activities resulted in the lowering of standards in the industry, was glad she reconsidered her decision and stayed on. According to her, 'things are getting into shape now.' Mr. Arinze was equally optimistic that things are improving in the industry, particularly with regard to what he saw as the wide appeal of the Nigerian popular culture within the country itself. According to him:

We are going on smoothly. Well, I won't say smoothly, but, of course, every country has its own problem. We are all staggering, we are all stumbling, but of course we'll perfect it as we go along. Who would have ever thought that in Nigeria we would see something like *Big Brother Nigeria* showing on television? That Nigerians would actually want to watch their own movies; Nigerians listen to their own music? Before it was, 'please, can we have Michael Jackson, Lionel Ritchie?' Now, whenever you play any Nigerian music, everybody goes crazy. If you doubt me, go to any night club. It's Nigerian music they want to listen to, Nigerian Jamz. Everybody wants to watch Nigerian home movie.

Conclusion

Such notes of optimism about future improvements in Nollywood notwithstanding, prevalent poverty in the industry will continue to ensure that only few actors will ever manage to achieve relative financial success. Working also in an industry whose yearly net worth of \$200 million is easily outgrossed by one Hollywood blockbuster, imagination has, understandably, become the actors' means of escaping the largely impoverished condition which is mostly the reality of video film production in Nollywood. For the majority clinging on to the uncertain hope that the industry would one day reward them with the kind of lifestyle and fees Hollywood guarantees its successful practitioners, imagination offers the only viable escape route out of the reality of video film production in Nigeria. For this vast band, a fetishization of Hollywood has also become a worrying legacy of the globalization of video technology and culture.

Notes

¹ Video technology, initially used by affluent Nigerians to document such ceremonies as christening, wedding and chieftaincy title conferment, was first introduced into Nigeria from the Asian markets by Igbo electronics dealers.

² In 2006, one of the authors, Ogochukwu Ekwenchi had, as part of fieldwork for her doctoral research at the University of Westminster, UK, travelled to Lagos in order to study video film production and used Wale Adenuga Productions Ltd as her research site. The original intention had been to provide an account of video film production in Nigeria by observing location shooting and interviewing the practitioners. This the author did between March and July of the same year by travelling to Ikorodu and staying at Papa Ajasco House with the cast and crew of Wale Adenuga Productions' *A New Song*. It was, however, while analyzing the data that she noticed these comparisons that the actors and other crew members would, without being asked direct questions about film industries elsewhere, make about video film production practices in Nigeria and other countries. That was what informed the author's position that accounts of Nollywood would be more productively rendered within the debate on the impact of globalization. Mr. Arinze and Ms Okere, both graduates of theatre arts and actors with many years of experience in the industry, had been the stars on the set and they had played the lead characters in *A New Song*. The two actors were used in the discussion to provide views of the industry from male and female perspectives.

³ The actor, Mr. Biodun, also worked as the soundman on the set of Wale Adenuga Productions' *A New Song*.

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