Original Research

From Living in Bondage to Queen Amina: An Aesthetic Evaluation of Contemporary Nollywood

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Abstract
The history of the Nigerian cinema remains a popular discourse in scholarship. However, one phase in the history of its emergence and development remains more prominent and dominant over others—the video boom era. While some scholars discuss this with appreciation of the doggedness and determination of its players, some are condescending, even condemning as the industry is mirrored against the professionality and remarkability of renowned industries especially Hollywood. This negativity has persisted, warranting that some industry players distance themselves from the sobriquet, Nollywood, which has come to stand for the Nigerian video and film industry. This study takes up the call from industry players for scholarship to re-evaluate and redefine the contemporary Nollywood whose history as well as industrial activity has gone beyond the video boom era. Beyond discussing factors that are currently reshaping Nollywood, this study uses two select films and data collected via interviews with over 20 industry players to re-evaluate production and distribution of films in the industry.

Keywords
Nollywood, formalization, regeneration, cultural industry, film, old/new Nollywood

Introduction
In this study, I use two Nollywood films to interrogate the industry’s formalization, aesthetic regeneration, and overall transformation. The study examines issues of class, quality, and standards associated with the old and new Nollywood labels (Adejunmobi, 2015; Ezepue, 2020; Haynes, 2014; Jedlowski, 2013) in the production and distribution of Living in Bondage (1992) and Queen Amina (2017), both produced by Okechukwu Ogunjiofor. The aim of this study is not to favor either the new or old Nollywood, but to present them as filmmaking strategies that have impacted on the business of filmmaking in the history of the industry. It draws on interviews conducted with industry players to determine what instigated the new Nollywood idea. Starting out as a buzzword around 2010 in Lagos, new Nollywood has found its way into academic discourse on Nollywood. Although the term, its idea as well as use remain controversial within the industry, especially among film practitioners, new Nollywood depicts a blueprint, an approach to filmmaking in Nollywood. It departs and differs from the blueprint of the video boom era which has invariably become the old Nollywood. New Nollywood is a strategy adopted by filmmakers to make films characteristically different from the qualities that have been stamped to Nollywood films—low budget, small screen consumption, amateurism in acting and directing, and poor storyline (Ajibade & Williams, 2012). I discovered in the cause of data collection that some industry players relate to these labels as category for individual filmmakers. They fail to perceive them as an evaluation of practice, a business strategy, and an inevitable transformation in the course of evolution. Ironically, they appreciate that the industry is evolving, but perceive the labels as a derogatory and separatist attack on practice.

Okechukwu Ogunjiofor serves as a common denominator in this study to highlight the possibilities of border crossings in the old/new Nollywood discourse. Although Ogunjiofor is not the only available example of border crossings in the old/new Nollywood business models, he is significant because of the position which Living in Bondage occupies in Nollywood study. Ogunjiofor is very passionate about Queen Amina and Living in Bondage having been committed to the projects from pre-production to its final stages of production. This study serves to indicate how far the contemporary Nollywood has come and what potentials the future holds.

Drawing on data collected via ethnography, I discuss how the new Nollywood is about class and aesthetics manifested through plotline, choice of distribution channel, and audience...
target. I equally re-evaluate Nollywood based on a number of factors that have contributed and continue to contribute to the transformation of the industry. I inquire into the rise of formal film training among Nollywood filmmakers, an aesthetic trend that is causing low quality, low budget films to become less in demand among a class of audience members. I thus interrogate the new Nollywood as a gentrification (Ezepue, 2020) of the production, distribution, and consumption spaces in Nollywood. This analysis will be approached from a production perspective rather than from an audience or consumption point of view.

Method

This study draws from a 6-month fieldwork within Nollywood during which time I observed productions and interviewed 28 industry players (filmmakers and scholars). I prepared a list of filmmakers to be interviewed based on their popularity and presence in the industry. The filmmakers observed were randomly selected based on factors that included being on set at the time of research, availability, and willingness to be part of the study. Those interviewed included filmmakers who were accessible and willing to be interviewed. To create a balance in this old and new Nollywood discourse, I reached out to filmmakers who had been active in the industry well before 2010 when the new Nollywood buzzword became fashionable. Among them are Zeb Ejiro, Teco Benson, Lancelot Imasuen, Izu Ojukwu, Mahmoud Ali-Balogun, Okechukwu Ogunjiofor, Stephanie Okereke-Linus, Fred Amata, and Obi Emelonye. I interviewed scholars who are also involved in the business of filmmaking. Among them are Professor Hyginus Ekwuazi, Professor Femi Shaka, Dr. Charles Okwuowulu, and Dr. Sam Dede. Interviews were conducted through a combination of the semi-structured and unstructured methods. This was for flexibility and to allow opportunity for establishing relationship and trust.

Re-Evaluating the Nigerian Film Industry

In terms of production, Nollywood has recorded transformations since Living in Bondage (1992). However, its definition as a poor quality, low budget video industry has remained continually replicated despite these being the characteristics of a period in its history—the video boom era. With the commercial success of Living in Bondage and the ease of operating the video technology, Nollywood became all-comers’ affair, a larger percentage of the films were made by learn-on-the-job amateurs (Ajobade & Williams, 2012). Learn-on-the-job filmmakers are those who learnt filmmaking by working with and observing experienced or formally trained filmmakers, hence the description of the industry as infested by hare-brained boys armed with camcorders (Ogunsuyi, 1999), and Olayiwola’s (2007) suggestion that filmmakers be trained and retrained to ensure and sustain quality productions.

Professionalism is becoming a crucial element within Nollywood. From speaking with directors such as Opa Williams, Obi Emelonye, Lonzo Nzekwe, and Kenneth Gyang, I discovered that knowledge acquisition is a major contributor to the transformations reshaping the art and business of filmmaking within Nollywood. Transformation in film industries is sporadic and their evaluation should be periodic. Hallett (2013) elaborates this in her consideration of Hollywood transformations over a 5-year period. Such periodic evaluation of Nollywood is infrequent in Nollywood studies. Traced from 2009, the marked increase in large budget, improved quality, and large screen pictures which characterize new Nollywood films have become the focus of recent publications (Adejunmobi, 2015; A. Afolayan, 2014; Connor, 2015; Denton, 2014; Haynes, 2014; Jedlowski, 2013; Okome, 2014).

Re-thinking filmmaking in contemporary Nollywood is essential because, although not complete and entire, Nollywood filmmakers no longer “generally” indulge “poverty of creativity, ideas, innovation and a coordinated strategic plan” (Iroh, 2009), nor produce predictable, multi-themed stories drawn from family and society. Currently witnessing formalization, the industry, its films, but essentially, the filmmakers are cultivating auteur personalities (C. Okwuowulu, personal communication, March 22, 2016); in other words, they are becoming conscious of imprints and signature by which their works of art are recognized and preserved, hence the likening of Nollywood transformation to the gentrification of a ghetto. From data collected, I discovered a number of factors that have contributed to and continue to inspire this process. Notable among them are Hollywood, technology, film school, state/corporate organizations, and publicity.

Hollywood

All of my interviewees at a point or two referred to Hollywood primarily in comparison to their own industry. Texts in world cinema do not fail to discuss industries in a comparative “Hollywood and other” perspective. Parkinson (2012) categorically states “without Hollywood, there would be no Bollywood, Lollywood (in Pakistan) or Nollywood (Nigeria). There also wouldn’t have been variations on the studio system in Britain, France and Japan” (p. 54). Although there exists among scholars and Nollywood filmmakers those who believe comparing Nollywood or any other industry to Hollywood is an anomaly (Haynes, 2016; McCall, 2012), such comparisons remain the major driver among filmmakers who constantly aim at “international best practice, standards and quality.” While introducing the Australian cinema, O’Regan (1996) notes that all national cinemas interact with one another and partake in broader interaction with Hollywood by imitating and indigenizing its genres, artistic movements, and influences. Luedi (2018) discusses the progressive relationship between Bollywood and the Nigerian film industry, citing a greater influence in Northern Nigeria.
Nollywood does not gain only artistic inspirations from Hollywood. Its peculiar business structures are being discarded for a formal, Western-style one where individuals and corporate organizations are making plans to adopt the studio system. Understanding the challenges faced by Nigerian and indeed African filmmakers who travel abroad for studio services, Kunle Afolayan, filmmaker and entrepreneur posits, “I am looking to expand, start a film school, have a proper studio where I can serve not just Nigeria, but Africa” (personal communication, April 13, 2016). This undertaking has been achieved in the establishment of the Kunle Afolayan Production Hub (Ekechukwu, 2020). Hollywood maintains a level of influence over the development of other national cinemas, dominating over them both culturally and commercially. Parkinson (2012) claims this predominance will remain unchallenged for a long time to come. In urban geography, the position Hollywood occupies would be described as a world or global city—that city with predominating influence over continental and worldwide economies that might be gentrifying. In other words, Hollywood serves as a model for the Nollywood filmmaker reinventing their practice. Like filmmaker and scholar, Charles Okwuowulu submits, “the new Nollywood tries to copy classical Hollywood narrative technique” (personal communication, March 22, 2016).

**Technology**

Gentrification is simply defined as the process of upgrading devalued property. In the film business, along with talent and expertise, technology undergoes regular upgrade. State and corporate bodies boost Nollywood gentrification by providing funds for technological upgrade. Besides funds mapped out for capacity building and production, the state, under the project ACT Nollywood, provides funds for technology-based solutions to the industry’s distribution challenges. The Bank of Industry partners with production studios who, although expensive to use, provide quality service and guard intellectual properties against piracy. Technological upgrade remains one of the turning points in the evolution of Nollywood. From speaking to filmmakers such as Zeb Ejiro, Fred Amata, and Gab Okoye, I observed a transition from cumbersome film equipment to portable digital cameras. Nollywood has benefited from proliferation of portable cameras that are not only less cumbersome, but affordable. It has encouraged the influx of filmmakers into the industry too as modern models are easier to operate. Fred Amata traces the technological transition in the Nigerian film industry and concludes that it has been as much blessing as it has been the industry’s downfall. He cites,

In the late 80’s, the equipment available was the U-matic camera. It was difficult to capture a picture without knowing what you were doing or having a team that understood it. In the 1990s, technology improved tremendously which affected production. There was the transition from u-matic to betacam before the digital to HD cameras. U-matic was cheaper to hire, betacam cost more, but then the high cost reflected on the picture quality. Digital format facilitated easy shoot which brought about mediocrity. (F. Amata, personal communication, April 14, 2016).

Amata explains that mediocrity was evident in the prevalent three-point camera shoot at the video boom era—master shot, medium shot, and close-up. Further training to balance knowledge of arts and technology brought about experiments with not only scripts, but other technological innovations such as camera rigs, drone, special effects, and animation. The internet and exposure are availing filmmakers opportunities to meet with others from around the globe and learn new inventions. Nollywood filmmakers now have the opportunities to choose what technology best gives expression to their projects. In a predominantly digital age, Izu Ojukwu chooses to shoot ’76 (2016) on 16 mm. Ojukwu elucidates that his choice was prompted by a desire for the dirt of 16 mm (Robinson, 2016). With handheld portable cameras like the Blackmagic URSA Mini whose resolution and range contend that of a super 35 mm, camerawork becomes fluid, creative, and manipulative. Although not every Nollywood filmmaker can afford to purchase such high-definition cameras, studios exist that rent them. They also offer production and postproduction services. In the face of the rising debate on quality and standards within the industry, investors as well as filmmakers are continuously aiming for the best quality they can afford to produce.

**Film School**

The proliferation of film schools and film workshop providers in Nigeria indicates both commercial success of the venture and the rise in demand for such services. As recently as November, 2020, I saw a call on WhatsApp, for practical and interactive workshop classes in directing, cinematography, and acting. This call does not indicate any affiliations; instead, it provides mobile numbers and an office address. For an intensive 4-week workshop, it proposes to charge 150,000 naira for directing and 100,000 naira each for cinematography and acting. There is a rise in the demand for formal or professional film training in Nollywood. Prior to its becoming an affair for everyone, Nollywood was essentially an industry for professionally trained filmmakers and seasoned actors. Filmmakers who had no formal training had some form of informal trainings via apprenticeship, and mostly free of charge. Marcuse (1985) cites higher education as a defining characteristic of the gentrification process. He observes that the process is accompanied by reduction in demand for labor which particularly affects the unskilled workforce. To remain relevant in the industry, a drive currently contributing to the gentrification process, filmmakers and actors are availing themselves of formal training. Kunle Afolayan, however, submits that while formal training is relevant and offers the rudiments of filmmaking, proper filmmaking art is learnt on the job.
Beyond trainings organized by guilds and associations, conventional film schools are emerging across the nation, offering short- and long-term programs to graduates and secondary school leavers. Notable ones among them are run by prominent Nigerian film and television practitioners like Stephanie Okereke-Linus, Olu Jacobs and wife, Joke Silva, Emem Isong, Wale Adenuga, Zeb Ejiro, and Lancelot Imasuen. While Okereke-Linus’ Del-York partners with the New York Film Academy, Jacob’s Lufodo Academy of Performing Arts (LAPA) and Isong’s Royal Art Academy (RAA), among others, are locally and solely run. Their curriculums may differ, but they emphasize the fundamentals of filmmaking—from acting to directing, cinematography, set design, editing, and animation, among others. However, informal training by apprenticeship still thrives as cost of enrolling into formal film schools within the country still remains unaffordable to some individuals. While tuition fees at the Royal Art Academy is 110,000 naira or $439 for a 3-month class in Lagos, Del-York charges between US$1,500 and US$3,500 for a 4-week intensive class. Del-York is clearly affordable only to the upper class. Although the difference in the quality of training offered remains unassessed, the difference in fees charged and Del-York’s affiliation to the New York Film Academy further speaks to issues of class associated with gentrification.

Training is contributing to the transformation of contemporary Nollywood and those who can afford the cost travel abroad from South Africa to India, United Kingdom, and the United States. Opa Williams, director of Bank of Industry–sponsored Pat Ogbere Three Wise Men (2016), suggests that the industry is quickly absorbing fresh talents with some level of training and exposure. Ajayi Osagho, cinematographer, colorist, and director of photography for Lancelot Imasuen’s Beyond Your Sight (2016) highlights the importance of further training:

Most of us learnt the art informally. I started from the street, grabbing ideas online and from people who appeared to know better than me. But I got to a point when I needed further creative upgrade, so I went on to further studies outside the country (South Africa). That is not to say those who are unable to study outside Nigeria are no good. But further training and education are relevant because technology changes all the time, if not, the DOP could be left behind. (Personal communication, March 17, 2016)

In Bollywood, Ganti (2012) observes that education and training, evidenced in filmmakers’ portfolio and class backgrounds, played an important role in the transformations that gentrified the Hindi film industry. Tracing its influence on Russia, the Soviet film industry and across Europe, Parkinson (2012) concludes that the proliferation of film schools across Europe impacted on the United State’s film industry.

State and Corporate Bodies

A study carried out by Zuk et al. (2017) suggests that gentrification results from an inflow of capital and people. In addition to natural phenomenon and market forces, gentrification results from government policies shaped and informed by “strong pro-development interests” (Levine, 2004, p. 89). According to Hackworth and Smith (2001), gentrifiers are empowered by government agencies, corporate bodies, and federal administrations. State-led gentrification occurs when state activities and interactions with an industry bring about gentrification. Uitermark et al. (2007) believe such gentrification is caused by a coalition of state and members of the industry. Coalition between the state and industry comes to the fore in the proposed Motion Picture Practitioners’ Council of Nigeria (MOPICON) bill which, it is hoped, will bridge the gap between the state and the industry. Miller (2016) portrays it as a means to an end for both industry players and the state. As a policy document, MOPICON is expected to pacify tensions in the various guilds, enhance state–industry relationship, and formalize and structure the industry, making commodification and taxation possible. Although the sustainability of government’s sporadic investment in the industry remains uncertain, corporate sponsorships are stable and increasing. An example is the Nollyfund, disbursed by the Bank of Industry, which guarantees the filmmaker a maximum of 80% of the total production cost.

Publicity and Distribution

Director Teco Benson (personal communication, April 11, 2016) observes that contemporary Nollywood, represented in the new Nollywood, uses publicity as its major selling point. Besides high production value, new Nollywood filmmakers invest in new media publicity and advertisement. In contrast to old Nollywood’s use of posters and advertisement placements in VHS/VCD/DVDS, publicity for new Nollywood films is a lot more flamboyant and new media inclined. Hence, Websites, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts are created, thrillers are put on YouTube, billboards and banners as well as advertisements through the cinema houses, press previews, televised interviews with film directors, among other options have been explored. Its flamboyance contrasts with what was previously obtainable. Actor Francis Duru describes it as a “trendy red carpet show-off” (personal communication, April 14, 2016). In recent times, advertisements in the form of trailers are carefully constructed to play on the audience’s obsession with novelty, and familiarity (Parkinson, 2012) to lure them to the cinemas. Niyi Akinmolayan’s Kajola (2010) had a teaser so good that Silverbird Television aired it almost every hour for free. At the Silverbird cinema, it was shown before premieres. However, Kajola is conveniently described as a 130-million-naira disaster (George, 2018). Publicity and advertising have become a bedrock for contemporary Nollywood that financiers such as the Bank of Industry map out specific amount for it. Realizing the power of publicity, contemporary high budget Nollywood filmmakers give publicity and advertising serious consideration. Madichie (2010) believes that the industry’s lack of box office appeal stems from poor
marketing communications, publicity, and advertising in addition to poor product quality.

Despite being one of the industry’s major challenges, different distribution channels are being sampled by filmmakers. The short shelf life of straight to DVD production, dishonesty in marketing, the need to protect intellectual property rights, a desire to reach wider, transnational and diaspora audiences, maximization of digitalization, all contribute to filmmakers’ exploration and experimentation with forms of distribution other than straight to video. In other words, the typical scenario where “films are produced in ad hoc fashion, recorded directly on VCDs, DVDs or the VHS tapes and sold in the local marketplaces without recourse to any official distribution strategies” (Uwah, 2008, p. 89) is changing. Although most films are still distributed straight to DVD without strategized distribution plan, large budget filmmakers insist they follow strategic distribution pattern to recoup their investment. The filmmaker’s knowledge equally affects the plans put in place for distribution. Reminiscing on the success of Zeb Ejiro Domitilla (1996) as a result of strategically planned distribution, Zeb Ejiro says,

> I did something unique. I got the partnership of AIT (TV channel) and so the publicity was massive. When I was done with the cinema, I then went on to the DVD after which I went to television. At that point in time the new media was not existing strongly in Nigeria. (Personal communication, April 12, 2016)

For contemporary film projects, Ejiro recommends strategies which put transnational and diaspora audiences into consideration.

In summary, filmmakers influenced by the above gentrifiers are re-considering and re-evaluating their practice. This re-evaluation is transforming a once predominantly informal media economy into a gradually formalizing one. My ethnographic observation of the industry shows that, although previous descriptions of Nollywood as the provider of poor quality entertainment for the masses could still be justified, the industry evidences signs of evolution which are rewriting the history, activities, content, and abilities of the industry. As the gentrifiers evolve, the industry evolves. However, studies on the industry reflect this evolution slowly. From interacting with filmmakers, I discovered that the major reason behind select filmmakers’ embarrassment over linkage to Nollywood stems from delayed re-evaluation of the industry and their practice.

**Living in Bondage and Queen Amina: Stylistic Discourse**

In this section, I consider how the above gentrifiers impact filmmaking practice in contemporary Nollywood. Aimed at re-assessing the dominant image of the industry, this section discusses predominant practices currently observable in the industry. With a focus on two selected films, I evaluate professionalism and organization as against the previously obtainable amateurism and high level of disorganization and informality within Nollywood. As noted earlier, the changes discussed here are not whole and entire, but observable among filmmakers who are revolutionizing the industry and creating a new history for it. These include filmmakers who have access to state and corporate or formalized sponsorships.

As noted earlier, the choice of films and filmmaker selected for this evaluation is informed by knowledge gathered from previous studies. Arguments have risen over the pioneer film or filmmaker of Nollywood (Olayiwola, 2011), but I agree with authors like Onuzulike (2007); Ebewo (2007); Ogundele (2000); and Haynes and Okome (2000) on the choice of Living in Bondage. While not the first video film to be produced during the decline of celluloid filmmaking in Nigeria, Living in Bondage (1992) provides the characteristics that form the paradigmatic qualities that shaped filmmaking within the country over the past 30 years. The get-rich-quick theme of Living in Bondage reflects a slice of the familiar society. Having thus set the standards for future Nollywood productions, Living in Bondage proves adaptable to the discourse of practices of distinction now observable within the industry.

Advancement in technology and availability of resources to the filmmakers have warranted that Nollywood now produces blockbusters that differ remarkably from Living in Bondage. Contemporary Nollywood blockbusters, like Ramsey Nouah’s Living in Bondage: Breaking Free (2019), also differ from Living in Bondage in ways that give a new definition to the industry. To highlight these departures from a specific filmmaker’s perspective, I selected Queen Amina (2017) as a representative of contemporary Nollywood blockbuster. Produced by Okechukwu Ogunjiofor as is Living in Bondage, Queen Amina (2017) represents a flamboyant recreation of Living in Bondage in an age of technological advancement and availability of new knowledge. The 25 years between them notwithstanding, Queen Amina promises the “affective spectacle and the acute reflection of Nigeria’s social, economic, and political climate” (Arthur, 2014, p. 113), the typical defining characteristics of Nollywood films.

**Queen Amina** is a flamboyant story that addresses women empowerment. Titled after the protagonist, Queen Amina tells the story of the first daughter of a legendary warrior and a kingdom builder, Bakwa Turunku, who ruled an empire that stretched across thousands of acres. Tracing her journey from being a girl-child turned warrior to a supreme military commander, the film engages with Amina’s ability to suppress and conquer natural femininity and manifest dominance over 13 emirates. It is an aesthetically appealing film that captures the cultural undertone of Zazzau Kingdom (currently Zaria) in the 16th century. Queen Amina inculcates into the female child the values that could inspire nation building. Despite being born into royalty, Amina must face a world of brutal conflicts, suppressive age-long customs,
scandalized traditions, and heroic exploits to prove herself capable in a male-dominated society. *Queen Amina* offers a tasteful display of battle grounds, spectacular palaces, and royal courts. It is a thrilling epic movie that graphically depicts the contrast between the daily lives of the desperately poor and affluent upper class. *Queen Amina* is a national call to not only celebrate the woman, but to inspire in women heroism and patriotism.

*Living in Bondage* was born out of a desire to find a new and economical way of doing old things. Okechukwu Ogunjiofor recalls the technological history from *Living in Bondage* to *Queen Amina*. Emphasizing that production decisions at the time of the straight to VHS video were inspired by economic survival, Ogunjiofor suggests that *Queen Amina*, shot on an Alexa digital camera, is a return to cinema standard after the creation of the Nollywood franchise. He posits,

the qualities are not the same, but *Living in Bondage* helped to carve out a niche for the industry and when tweaked just a little bit with sustainable financial support and technical knowhow, we will have a brand of filmmaking like the Indians and Americans have. (O. Ogunjiofor, personal communication, August 8, 2016)

Unlike *Queen Amina* which received ready financial support from Bank of Industry and other corporate organizations, *Living in Bondage* was produced at a time when corporate industries neither believed in nor supported filmmaking (especially in the video format). It tells what Ogunjiofor calls a universal story, relatable to by every young man searching for means of survival. It centers on Andy, a young working-class man who consistently makes wrong choices in blind pursuit of wealth. Impatience and worsening financial situation drives him into seeking help from his best friend who lures him into ritual killing for blood money. He sacrifices his beloved wife, Merit, and becomes wealthy. He does not enjoy his ill-gotten wealth as Merit’s ghost haunts him. Produced in two parts, the film finishes in a denouement that sees the downfall of the satanic cult and death of its members. Andy, who becomes mentally deranged, is saved by a former prostitute and taken to church where he confesses to his atrocities.

While *Queen Amina* was researched for over 20 years, had a proper film script and scheduled auditions and specially constructed set pieces, *Living in Bondage*, Ogunjiofor adds,

was not a story written as a script, but a narrative written out in sequence outline. We gathered people (in Lagos) who are fluent in the language (Igbo) and who could interpret the roles. We taught them the scenarios, the idioms and expressions of the language and positioned them to act them out the way we wanted. (O. Ogunjiofor, personal communication, August 8, 2016)

Dialogue for *Living in Bondage* was created spontaneously during rehearsals as the scenarios were being discussed. This style of filmmaking continues to be popular among some Nollywood filmmakers. For instance, while on a Nollywood director’s set in April 2016, he found a problem in his script. Addressing this problem led to an alteration that introduced two additional scenes for which no dialogues were written. The cast was given a half-hour break for briefing, rehearsal, and improvising the needed dialogues before shooting resumed.

**From *Living in Bondage* to *Queen Amina*: Practices of Distinction**

The story of *Living in Bondage* was conceived and written by Okechukwu Ogunjiofor and funded by Kenneth Nnebue. Directed by Chris Obi-Rapu (as Chris Mordi), *Living in Bondage* was produced at a time of “high level of ignorance (informality)” within the industry (O. Ogunjiofor, personal communication, August 8, 2016). However, it benefited from the expertise of its production crew. Director Chris Obi-Rapu’s experience in television and his skill as an actor-director ensured that *Living in Bondage* held a distinctive position in the then emerging video filmmaking. *Living in Bondage* revolutionized filmmaking within the country, setting new standards and providing a cheaper alternative to capital intensive celluloid filmmaking that was on decline at the time. Its limited budget and straight-to-home consumption blueprint serves as the major identifying characteristic for old Nollywood films. According the Haynes (2014), old Nollywood releases new films straight to VCDs, catering to the popular audience who are unable to afford cinema tickets. Advancement in technology is making the VCDs rather obsolete as filmmakers now go straight to DVDs. In a personal interview, (N. George, personal communication, March 16, 2016) Filmmaker Nita George adds that any filmmaker who currently goes straight to VCD does not want his money back.

On the flipside of the old Nollywood is the new. Its large budget, flamboyant story, many years of being researched and by Jedlowski’s (2013) standards, involvement of international crewmembers, fit *Queen Amina* into the new Nollywood class. However, its producer, Okechukwu Ogunjiofor prefers to label it as simply Nollywood. He argues,

If it is a new Nollywood film, its maker pioneered Nollywood, so where will you categorize me? If you talk of old Nollywood, in terms of what I have done, I am the oldest. But here I am today (making) a film that none of them has been able to attempt. . . . I am always a trailblazer. If they say new Nollywood movies are the ones that go on cinemas, well, an old Nollywood person has made a new Nollywood film. That demystifies the new and old Nollywood saga. (O. Ogunjiofor, personal communication, August 8, 2016)

Ogunjiofor’s submission reverberates the argument that was threatening unity within the industry at the time of this research. The question of who or what pioneered Nollywood has been and continues to generate debate within the industry.
While maintaining that such arguments are irrelevant to the development of the industry, this study opines that the duration of one’s existence in the industry does not classify a filmmaker under the old or new Nollywood. As Haynes (2016) clarifies with cited examples,

The director Lancelot Imasuen and the writer/producer Enem Isong are as central in the old Nollywood as anyone can be but are also pursuing New Nollywood strategies and, at the same moment that they are inserting themselves into elite and transnational circuits they are also establishing hyper-local markets for films in their native languages, Bini and Ibibio. (p. 288)

In other words, the old and new Nollywood are about strategies, not the duration of an individual’s existence within the industry. The choice of films for this study is essentially based on their production periods, their production/distribution/consumption strategies, and their linkage to a single strategist—Okechukwu Ogunjiofor. The difference in directors is considered inconsequential since the study is not a content/context analysis, but an interrogation of changing strategies within the industry.

One recurrent question posed to over 20 filmmakers in the semi-structured interviews I conducted was their perception of changes that have reshaped the industry. Responses were diverse but fundamentally included time, technology, knowledge acquisition, understanding and perceptions of the profession and industry, among other things. One significant change is the increasing budget size. While Living in Bondage cost 150,000 naira (approx. $15,136 @ $1=9.91 naira) to make, Zeb Ejiro Nneka the Pretty Serpent (1994) had a budget of four million naira (approx. $179,131 @ $1=22.33 naira) and Amenechi and Emeruwa Brotherhood of Darkness (1995) was produced on an estimated four million, five hundred thousand naira (approx. $205,573 @$1=21.89 naira). As I gathered from my interviews, in the early 1990s, the industry witnessed an influx of television and theater practitioners. This transition resulted from better remunerations from independent productions and the ban on National Television Authority (NTA) staff from participating in such productions; a ban which explains Chris Obi Rapu’s use of a pen-name in the production of Living in Bondage. Opa Williams elaborates, “at that time, I also left NTA. The stars and talents were also those who came from NTA, stars that featured in soaps like Ripples, Checkmate, Third Eye . . . that was how the evolution started from nothing and disarrangement” (personal communication, April 14, 2016).

This evolution regenerated the industry, culminating in the video boom, but it was not sustainable due to certain logistics that were constrained by dishonesty and greed (Haynes, 2007). Inasmuch as marketers have been blamed for the illicit trades that have damaged business in the industry (Bud, 2014; Paulson, 2012), Opa Williams maintains that producers instigated duplicity and distrust by defrauding marketers, diverting film funds to personal use. A possible regeneration of the video industry was halted as video marketers dominated production in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Kenneth Nnewue, the prolific producer/marketer of Yoruba, Igbo, and English video films, for instance, produced over 20 Yoruba films, served as the executive producer/producer of Living in Bondage (1992) and producer of Chiaka Onukwufoor Glamour Girls (1994), among others, and multi-tasked in Kenneth Nnewue The Maid (2004) as the executive producer, producer, writer, and director.

By 2009, Okechukwu Ogunjiofor narrates, “we realised we could not do anything to revive the industry but to go back to the cinema” (personal communication, August 8, 2016). At the time, multiplexes had been opened by Silverbird and filmmakers were gaining further training to improve their craft. Films like Stephanie Okereke-Linus’ Through the Glass (2008), Kunle Afolayan’s The Figurine (2009), and Chineze Anyaene’s Ijè–The Journey (2010) were produced after their graduations from New York Film Academy. This was a prompt for other filmmakers like Obi Emelonye who then believed that “Nollywood was ready to appreciate everything I had wanted to bring on earlier” (personal communication, January 8, 2016).

The filmmaking practice from which Living in Bondage emerged was neither “about making beautiful work, a work for the discerning few nor (one) to be kept in a museum” (O. Emelonye, personal communication, January 8, 2016). The practice was crude and there was ignorance—not ignorance of film business, but of formal filmmaking practice. Ogunjiofor acknowledges that Living in Bondage was an oral transaction with no written agreements, no screenplay (except a sequence outline), and no regard for standard filmmaking practice. Akin to a guerrilla production, the filmmakers gathered actors who could interpret the scripts and are fluent in Igbo language. The industry’s crudeness resulted from the social and economic situation of the country at the time. Shooting on and distributing straight to VHS cassettes was an economic decision that re-defined filmmaking within the Nigerian film industry. It targeted the masses.

The amount of research, budget size, expertise, and planning that went into the creation of Queen Amina substantiates the quest for quality, improvement, flamboyance, and innovation which characterize contemporary filmmaking practice within the industry. Ogunjiofor’s 21-year research on the project brought him into communication with five successive administrations in the Nigerian governments, beginning with General Sani Abacha’s (1993–1998). It connected him with the 12 Northern Emirs who set up various committees to assist him with the research and brought him in contact with researchers from the Washington Research Institute. As a story centered on a wealthy protagonist rather than the typical working class, urban poor or poor rural dweller, Queen Amina required huge budget to portray the affluence she was born into. Unlike Living in Bondage’s minimal budget provided by one investor, Queen Amina required more than Bank of Industry’s maximum loan of 50
million naira. With 86 crewmembers and a large cast of over 520, and requiring a fresh reconstruction of semblances of Amina’s royal dwelling, constructions of props and costumes, the project gave Ogunjiofor a 21-year worth of satisfaction. Shot exclusively in the North and being an adaptation of a story from pre-colonial Hausa history, Queen Amina (2017) is expected to further promote collaborations between the Northern and Southern film industries in Nigeria. While industry players insist that Kannywood in the North and Nollywood in the South are one and the same industry, with Nollywood being the representative name for the Nigerian film industry, some film scholars posit differently. Authors such as Larkin (2008), McCain (2013a, 2013b), and Ibrahim (2019) have explored distinctions as well as similarities between these cinemas. It is therefore hoped that Queen Amina will inspire a breakdown of the dichotomies that have fuelled the “othering” of Kannywood and unify it with Nollywood as are other indigenous language films.

Since making Living in Bondage, Nneka the Pretty Serpent, Circle of Doom, and Brotherhood of Darkness, Ogunjiofor has availed himself of further training in filmmaking at the University of Southern California, a step which he agrees has positively impacted on his creativity and filmmaking skills. Upgrades in camera technology has warranted that pictures can be captured and stored in high definitions. Innovations in editing allow for color corrections and sound filtering. Living in Bondage was recorded on super VHS, a camcorder popular for amateur and semi-professional productions. Justifying the 25 years between them, Queen Amina was shot on an Alexa digital camera with extended capabilities, producing sophisticated image and better noise management. Produced after long and thorough planning as well as research, Ogunjiofor believes Queen Amina will outdo Living in Bondage. In 1992, the target was for Living in Bondage to reach a hundred homes at the cost of 300 naira (approx. $30 @$1=9.91naira). This target was exceeded as Living in Bondage, according to the filmmaker, sold over 20 million naira (approx. $2,018,164) worth of videos. In essence, Living in Bondage, sold directly to the consumers on VHS, reached an approximated 66,667 homes. Queen Amina’s cross-cultural theme, quality as well as the benefit Nollywood now offers as a brand, promises a wider audience. Given the amount of planning put into its production, a wide distribution is expected following the industry’s current pattern of festivals, international and national cinema distributions, Video on Demand (VOD), pay per view TV (PPV TV services), online platform distributions, corporate exhibitions, and perhaps community centers before it eventually gets on the DVD. This distribution pattern purports that unlike for Living in Bondage, mass audiences will have to wait until the film gets on the format they are able to afford. Thankful for mass audience patronage, Ogunjiofor believes it is time to formalize the industry, including film distribution. As at October 2020, Ogunjiofor confirms that Queen Amina is still touring the festivals. And as at June, 2021, no release date has been set for it.

Formalizing production but essentially distribution implies that cinema becomes the first window of distribution. Since the state has not made any provision for cinemas in the rural areas, this will potentially disenfranchise Nollywood’s original mass audience from immediate consumption of films upon their release. Conversely, formalization will warrant that the industry enjoys further interactions with corporate organizations. The involvement of the state and corporate bodies ensures sustained financing. However, this will invariably bring about a regeneration that will further sector the industry or translate to gentrification that may displace informality, filmmakers, and audience members.

Conclusion

The general lack of faith in the Nigerian government explains the film practitioners’ resistance to state interference. Their experiences with government agencies, especially with regard to the protection of intellectual property rights, continue to fall short of expectations. However, the involvement of President Goodluck Jonathan’s administration in the affairs of the industry indicates that state support is necessary for optimum growth. Ganti’s (2014) study emphasized the role of the government in the eventual gentrification of Bollywood. Okechukwu Ogunjiofor’s experiences with Living in Bondage and Queen Amina also proves that such support remains an absolute necessity.

Nollywood has come very far and the transformations in the industry in contemporary times continue to show that industry players are learning more day by day and putting to good use their knowledge. They challenge themselves to make a difference with limited resources and difficult situations. For instance, in May 2020, Obi Emelonye (2020) released Heart 2 Heart, a 7:56 minutes video, shot on phones and remotely directed via Zoom. This may not be a record-breaking achievement, but it goes to highlight the aesthetics and creativity in the industry and the constantly emerging strategies employed to overcome challenges in contemporary Nollywood. For a popular audience-based industry like Nollywood, some contemporary strategies like the return to cinema and online screening continue to disenfranchise a large population of the audience. It is thus pertinent for the state to make provision for the necessary amenities to bring contemporary Nollywood closer to the masses. Private and corporate investors as well as charities and nongovernmental organizations might want to explore the opportunities these new strategies offer to expand the frontiers of Nollywood by bringing cinema to communities.

This study does not intend to argue that any one strategy is superior to the other. It does not project the new and old Nollywood as strict categories for filmmakers; instead, they are presented as filmmaking strategies in contemporary Nollywood. Examining these strategies in the selected films raises some concerns. Living in Bondage was produced in 1992 and in the same year, it was in the Nigerian markets and
homes. Although produced in 2017, Queen Amina is yet to premiere in Nigerian cinemas as at June, 2021. When it eventually premiers, it will follow the usual pattern of new Nollywood films, taking several months or years before it is eventually available on DVD, a format readily accessible to a majority of the Nigerian masses. Ogunjiofor argues, however, that Living in Bondage’s straight to VHS format was a business strategy as is the straight to cinema blueprint adopted for Queen Amina. Because cinemas are still very few within the country and filmmakers have to wait a long time before their films are scheduled, there is optimism that the old Nollywood strategy will continue to co-exist with the new Nollywood. Since this strategy is displacing the popular audiences, is the new Nollywood strategy gentrifying the industry? Is Nollywood returning to that point in its history when celluloid and video co-existed? That is, will new Nollywood become the strategy for professionally trained and seasoned filmmakers while the old Nollywood is left to the inexperienced, amateur and under-financed filmmaker?

These questions indicate opportunities for further studies in this area on the industry. It will also be worth investigating (through a comparative study) how Nollywood transformation, if not gentrification, is reflected in the production of Living in Bondage: Breaking Free (2019).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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