When the Nigerian video film industry became "Nollywood": naming, branding and the videos' transnational mobility

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Abstract

While conducting my research on the Nigerian video industry over the past few years, I often had the impression to find myself in front of an object of study that implicitly resisted definition. While, on the one hand, one could say that all research object challenges and resists the researcher's attempt to classify and encapsulate it in theoretically coherent discourses, in the case of the Nigerian video industry I had the feeling that discursive practices were playing a particular role. Throughout my research I in fact observed a particular tension between the way the video industry was discussed and represented, both locally and internationally, and the way the industry itself was evolving and transforming over time.

In this article, I analyze this dynamic by looking at the genealogy of the name "Nollywood" and by analyzing the role that this term has played in articulating the tension between discourses and practices within the industry's context. My intention is to understand how the discourse about the video industry that developed around the use of the term "Nollywood" has progressively polarized diverging tendencies already existing within the industry and within the Nigerian public sphere. On one side, we can observe a tendency toward internationalization and globalization, which responded positively to the introduction of the word "Nollywood" and which participated in transforming it into a self-sufficient commercial brand. On the other, we can observe a tendency which points its attention toward the internal differentiation of the video industry and toward the specificity of the Nigerian media environment. As I will argue in this

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article, these two opposite poles have created a specific field of tension within which most "Nollywood" practitioners had to position (explicitly or implicitly) their work. These two opposite discursive constructions have thus importantly influenced the evolution of the video industry by providing both criticism of the status quo of the industry, and new models for future transformations.

Key-words: Video Industry, Globalization, Nigerian Culture, Nollywood.

Introduction

While conducting my research on the Nigerian video industry over the past few years, I often had the impression to find myself in front of an object of study that implicitly resisted definition. While, on the one hand, one could say that all research object challenges and resists the researcher's attempt to classify and encapsulate it in theoretically coherent discourses, in the case of the Nigerian video industry I had the feeling that discursive practices were playing a particular role. Throughout my research I in fact observed a particular tension between the way the video industry was discussed and represented, both locally and internationally, and the way the industry itself was evolving and transforming over time. While the discursive constructions that I observed (academic and newspaper articles, international documentaries, fanzine magazines and internet platforms dedicated to the video industry) tended to produce a rather static and rigid definition of the industry, the reactions to them that I witnessed seemed to emphasize the strong fluidity of the video industry and its implicit resistance to definition. During my research, the tension existing between these two poles (the fluidity of the industry's reality and the rigidity of the discourse about it) appeared to have an interesting role in propelling and shaping the transformations that the industry itself was facing, as I observed elsewhere (see Jedlowski forthcoming) were progressively pushing the video industry from the informal to the formal sector of the local economy and from local to transnational and global networks of circulation.

As Greg Urban (2001) has pointed out, it is possible to identify numerous ways in which cultural production interacts with the discursive

practices formulated in relation to it. In his words, "metaculture", that is, the discourse about a specific cultural object, is particularly significant "because it imparts an accelerative force to culture. It aids culture in motion through space and time. It gives a boost to the culture that it is about, helping to propel it on its journey" (2001:3). The discourse about a cultural object, in fact, often precedes the object itself and opens for it new paths of circulation. But while doing this, it also defines the direction and the horizon that these paths will have to follow. For this reason, metaculture has both accelerative and restraining effects on cultural objects' motion: while on the one hand it pushes the object toward new frontiers, on the other it creates the structures of knowledge that will guide (and limit) the reception of the given cultural object within a new environment. As Urbans underlines,

> the culture of the object moves into the response, which in turns determines […] what new objects will be produced. Culture here travels from the original object to the new one via the response. In other words, the pathway of the motion is: cultural object > metacultural response > new cultural object. (2001, p. 240)

In this perspective, metaculture becomes the bridge that connects a cultural object to its successive manifestations. It is in fact by responding to metaculture that the cultural object transforms itself and acquires new forms and cultural meanings.

The theoretical framework that Urban offers is useful to analyze the dynamics that traverse the Nigerian video industry's environment and that define the relationship between discourses and practices within this context. In this article, I analyze this dynamic by looking at the genealogy of the name "Nollywood" and by analyzing the role that this term has played in articulating the tension between discourses and practices within the industry's context. My intention is to understand how the discourse about the video industry that developed around the use of the term "Nollywood" has progressively polarized diverging tendencies already existing within the industry and within the Nigerian public sphere. On one side, we can observe a tendency toward internationalization and globalization, which responded positively to the introduction of the word "Nollywood" and which participated in transforming it into a self-sufficient commercial brand. On the other, we can observe a tendency which points its atten-

tion toward the internal differentiation of the video industry and toward the specificity of the Nigerian media environment. As I will argue in this chapter, these two opposite poles have created a specific field of tension within which most Nollywood practitioners had to position (explicitly or implicitly) their work. These two opposite discursive constructions have thus importantly influenced the evolution of the video industry by providing both criticism of the status quo of the industry, and new models for future transformations.

The "Nollywoodization" of the Nigerian video industry

The name "Nollywood" appeared in Nigeria for the first time in a *New York Times* article by Norimitsu Onishi in September 2002 and was republished by the Nigerian newspaper *The Guardian* few days later. As Jonathan Haynes (2007) has underlined, it quickly became irresistible for the local press and fans who started using it ubiquitously. By the beginning of 2003 the Nigerian newspaper *Daily Times* already had a week-end column called "Inside Nollywood" and around the same period the term started appearing consistently on numerous internet sites and forums. While suggesting this name, Onishi's article explicitly made reference to Bollywood and Hollywood ("Step aside, Los Angeles and Bombay, for Nollywood", is the title of the article), giving a voice to those that in Nigeria and elsewhere were asserting the global influence of the video phenomenon. By doing that, the article also created a brand that quickly became a tool to commercialize the video industry transnationally.

It is important to note, however, that the formulation of the term "Nollywood" does not represent the first time in which the Nigerian video film industry was compared to other film industries in the world. And it does not represent the first attempt of giving it a "–hood" attribute either. Already in 1996 a diasporic Nigerian cultural entrepreneur created in London an award ceremony to celebrate the achievements of what he called "Afro-Hollywood" (ODJEGBA, 1996). And in 1999 a Hausa newspaper proposed to define the northern Nigerian branch of the industry "Kannywood" (see ADAMU, 2007). In fact, the local discourse around the video production was, almost since the production of *Living in bondage* (1992), considering the video phenomenon in terms of "film industry", something that would have soon been able to rival its Indian or American counterparts.

Compared to these early discursive constructions, the word "Nollywood" was able to better capture and amplify the wide popular success

that Nigerian videos were encountering both within and outside the African continent. Hence, it was able to give an expression to the sense of achievement and enthusiasm this success had generated. The term "Nollywood" could easily resume in one word all the claims emerging within the video environment: the fact that the video phenomenon should be considered "a film industry"; that this industry had a transnational, if not global, impact (resumed in its acquired "–hoodness"); and that, because of the combination of these attributes, it deserved to be compared to the two most successful film industries in the world, Hollywood and Bollywood.

While many rapidly embraced the new name, a number of people within the industry opposed its introduction. As postcolonial criticism has emphasized, the act of naming is in itself an act of symbolic control. Some of the people that rejected the name thus did it to refuse the imposition of a foreign label on a local phenomenon, a semiotic violence that the history of colonialism had made intolerable to many. As Olushola Oladele Adenugba underlined in a blog article on this topic, "many are opposed to the appellation because, according to them, it is a form of neo-colonization, another Western propaganda. They wonder why a film culture that has built itself by itself must be labeled after Hollywood" (ADENUGBA, 2007, quoted in SHAKA, 2011).

In one of the few academic interventions in this debate, however, Jonathan Haynes has evidenced how "some of the objections one hears to the term 'Nollywood' are less important than they may seem" (2007:106). Even if the term has a foreign origin, it is "here to stay" (*ibid*), and the people who today use it the most are Nigerians themselves. Furthermore, its direct reference to Hollywood and Bollywood does not position it inevitably on an inferior rank, "it points rather to the fact that we live in a multipolar world where the old patterns of cultural imperialism have changed and viewers have a much greater choice in the media they consume" (*ibid*). As I mentioned above, this is a term that managed to situate itself at the height of the Nigerian video industry' aspirations, and probably for this reason it was very successful as a commercial brand. In fact, in the years that followed its appearance, the name "Nollywood" progressively began to live an autonomous life and became the sign for a large number of profoundly different signifiers.

I will explore in more details the history of the circulation of "Nollywood" as a brand in the following sections of this article. Before that, however, even while

accepting and embracing Haynes' skepticism about "name" controversies, it might be useful to further discuss the theoretical debate existing around the power implicit in the act of naming. In Jacques Derrida's words:

> to name, to give names, […] such is the originary violence of language which consists in inscribing within a difference, in classifying, in suspending the vocative absolute. To think the unique *within* the system, to inscribe it there, such is the gesture of the arche-writing: arche-violence, loss of the proper, of absolute proximity, of self-presence, in truth the loss of what has never been given but only dreamed of and always split, repeated, incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance. (1976, p. 112)

As this excerpt evidences, the act of naming hides a complex and dense process of intervention on and transformation of the object itself. The object is "inscribed within a difference", it is classified and thus put in relation with other names, other objects. This is an inevitable process of abstraction and generalization that relates to the implicit impossibility of a total correspondence between the word and the object the word is supposed to signify. To speak is to pronounce names, and each name is inevitably the result of an act of reduction and generalization. However, when the name has a social, cultural and political provenance different from the one of the object, the act of naming can be charged with specific hegemonic connotations. This is true particularly in colonial and neo/post-colonial contexts. As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have suggested, "hegemony" should be understood as a process rather than as a fixed social reality. It is a political type of relationship that has to be traced following its articulation through "a variety of hegemonic nodal points" (1985: 137). The act of naming, as well as the act of canonizing, are both nodal points in the articulation of hegemonic processes. They establish the system of relations and the horizon of meaning that frame the interpretation and the transmission of a specific cultural enunciation.

At the same time, as Derrida also points out, the act of naming generates a sense of loss, a sense of distance from the "original", from the "true reality" of the object. But this reality is in itself an illusion, something "incapable of appearing to itself except in its own disappearance". Thus, the act of naming, in Derrida's analysis, rather than hiding the "vocative absolute" (the essence of the object), creates the illusion of its existence.

The introduction of the term "Nollywood" operated a generalization, an essentialization of the video phenomenon. It reified the basic features of the video production, creating a "catchy" brand. At the same time it produced an illusion, the illusion that something different, something original and "pure" existed behind and despite the label.

This is in my view an important point, because it highlights the ambiguity of the process this article is looking at. The "nollywoodization" of the Nigerian video industry operated on two diverging and partially contradicting levels, which will be analyzed in the following pages. On one side, it operated an abstraction, whose result ended up becoming an autonomous object, the brand "Nollywood". On the other side, it generated a sense of loss related to the obliteration of different instances of Nigerian filmmaking into a single homogenous definition. The existence and peculiarity of these instances however are defined precisely in relation to "Nollywood" itself. To be more precise, the second level of effects the act of naming provokes can be observed, within the context of this research, by looking at the way a number of Nigerian directors, as well as the branches of the industry producing films in local languages, claimed their distance and difference from "Nollywood" (see below for precise examples). The act of differentiation produced in these cases is operated precisely in relation to the name whose legitimacy is negated. To summarize, we can say that the act of naming has, then, a double productivity. It produces both reification and its opposite, that is, fragmentation and differentiation. The process of "nollywoodization" of the Nigerian video industry thus evidenced two diverging dynamics within the industry itself: a tendency toward the general, the global, the transnational; and an opposite one, pointing toward identification, singularization, differentiation.

Nollywood as a brand: commoditization and discursive mobility

For many years the Nigerian government barely dedicated any interest to the video phenomenon, but throughout Olusegun Obasanjo's two terms presidency (1999 – 2007) the idea that Nollywood could become an instrument to rebrand Nigeria internationally became common within the Nigerian political establishment. It is during Obasanjo's presidency that the name "Nollywood" was first introduced by the foreign press and that a first report classifying Nigeria as the third largest film producing nation in the world appeared (VASAGAR, 2006). It was as well during the early 2000s that the international interest on the video industry started to grow consistently.

The academic production about the phenomenon started to develop, numerous international film festivals dedicated a retrospective to Nigerian videos, and some documentary films about the video phenomenon were shot. And, again around this period, a campaign titled "Nigeria Image" (later renamed "Heart of Africa") was launched by the Minister of Information and National Orientation (NWORAH, 2006). One of the main axes of this campaign was to promote a new image of Nigeria and to attract international investments and tourism using the video industry as a tool to achieve these goals.

As Melissa Aronczyk has emphasized, processes of local and national branding have become particularly influent in global politics.

> As national leaders try to re-assert their jurisdictional boundaries they have drawn heavily on their countries' cultural identities to promote their constituencies as exemplars of both domestic distinction and international fitness. [In this context] a country's intangible wealth — its "good reputation" — is increasingly evoked as a means to gain the most prominent seat at the appropriately high-stakes table. (Aronczyk 2009, p. 291)

Unfortunately for the video practitioners, the Nigerian government's interest in the phenomenon quickly manifested itself as superficial and instrumental. Obasanjo underlined in several occasions that the industry "was too important to be ignored" (AKPOVI-ESADE *et* ONYEDIKA, 2006). He often paternalistically repeated to the video community: "You have done well as number three in the world, but I want you to do me a favor, move up to the number two position so that we know it is only America that we have to contend with" (AYORINDE, 2005 – for more details on the ranking of Nigerian video industry's productivity see below). But behind these statements, only a small number of episodic and highly mediatic initiatives to support the industry economically and logistically were taken. Most of them appeared to be tools of political propaganda rather than sincere attempts to sanitize the industry's economic environment.

The government's attempt to use the video industry's as a strategic instrument of propaganda was the result of the acknowledgment of Nollywood's international success. The story of a video film industry born out of an economically ravaged post-Structural-Adjustment society and, only a few years later, worth hundreds of millions of dollars had by then made the round of the world. In the international discourse, the video

industry was mostly considered as an interesting phenomenon (or worse, a curiosity), whose important aspect was its trajectory of success within a continent humiliated by poverty and corruption. Rarely would the interest go beyond this line, and deep enough to observe the internal differentiation of the video industry, the trajectories of its development and the challenges of its everyday survival. The Nigerian government mostly aligned itself with this position. As I will better highlight below, this orientation participated in creating a discrepancy between the idea represented by the word "Nollywood" (a symbol of Nigerian potentialities, a successful brand to export the country's image and to attract investors) and the complex "reality" of the video phenomenon (a fluid, highly transformative and hardly controllable expression of popular culture). This discursive disjunction, and the conflicting "metacultures" (Urban 2001) of Nollywood existing behind it, have interacted in multiple ways with the transformations that the video industry have undertaken over the past few years (see Jedlowski forthcoming). It is in fact in the hiatus existing between these two opposite discursive representations of the video phenomenon that the industry's practitioners had to operate.

The "Nollywood" discursive construction that I just outlined had a widespread circulation both in Nigeria and amongst Nigerians in the diaspora, where the term was quickly, and often proudly, embraced as a symbol of belonging and as a highly valuable commercial brand. As Anandam Kavoori and Aswin Punathanbekar emphasized introducing Madhava Prasad's article on the genealogy of the name "Bollywood", the term "carries the weight it does because of its pivotal role in articulating definitions of national identity to the figure of the Non-resident Indian" (2008: 7). It is possible to suggest that a similar dynamic surrounds the extensive reproduction and commoditization of the word "Nollywood" in the diaspora, as well as in Nigeria itself. The term "Nollywood" stands, in fact, as one of the few positive things a Nigerian can identify with to represent his national identity, both in the diaspora and back home. A few examples might be useful to support this argument.

Some time ago, while I was in Germany for a conference, I found myself in front of a Nigerian restaurant, in the neighborhood of Frankfurt's main train station. Beside the door there was a shining green sign: "Nollywood restaurant, Westafrikanische Spezialitäten" ("Nollywood restaurant, West African food" - see image I). At first this image made me smile, but later I could not avoid thinking at the way it perfectly represented

the transformation of "Nollywood" into a self-sufficient brand. The restaurant had in fact no specific reasons to be named after the video industry. The owners had never shot a film, nor acted in any video. But they had other good reasons to appropriate the brand. Firstly, they identified themselves with what the term "Nollywood" represented, a truly Nigerian and globally recognized story of success. Secondly, they sought in the term one of the few Nigerian cultural exports that a passing-by customer could recognize, and eventually patronize. Aguele Renatus Imhafidon, one of the owners, confirms this point in a recent interview for a Nigerian internet site. In the interview he explains that he choose to name the restaurant after the video industry because "it's something to identify us with Nigeria. Once a Nigerian or African visiting Germany or Frankfurt sees it, he would know that this is home. And we've also had customers who, on passing by, identified us as a Nigerian restaurant because of it" (AKAEZE, 2011). But, as the Nigerian journalist that made the interview disappointedly underlines, the restaurant, which is popular amongst both people of African and European descent, does not even show Nigerian videos or music clips.

Image I: Frankfurt: Nollywood restaurant

This experience helped me in interpreting a few other episodes I experienced during my fieldwork. In the previous months I had bumped into a series of products and trademarks that were explicitly referring to "Nollywood" to commercialize objects that had little or nothing to do with the Nigerian video industry itself. In Lagos, while walking around in the Silverbird Galleria's bookshop in Victoria Island, I found a comic book whose title was *Nollywood's finest* (image II). I bought it, expecting to find in it some form of fictional reinterpretation of what is normally the content of fanzine magazines: stars' private life spiced up with some gossip. To my surprise the comic was nothing like that. It told instead an original story, that of a young Nigerian girl, Sessi George, who works as ghostwriter

for a Nigerian newspaper and struggles to make her living in Lagos. The story was well written and the drawings beautiful. However, apart from a distant inspiration it drew from Nollywood melodramatic narratives, the comic had little connection with the video industry. A similar thing can be said about the South-African publishing house *Nollybooks* (image III) I found out about a few days later. In this case probably the "nolly" attribute directly referred to the idea of "African melodrama", the series being a sort of South African version of "Harmony". In both cases, however, I could see a mixture of the two feelings I outlined above, the aspiration to belong to the story of success represented by the Nigerian video industry, and an explicit and conscious use of its commercial success.

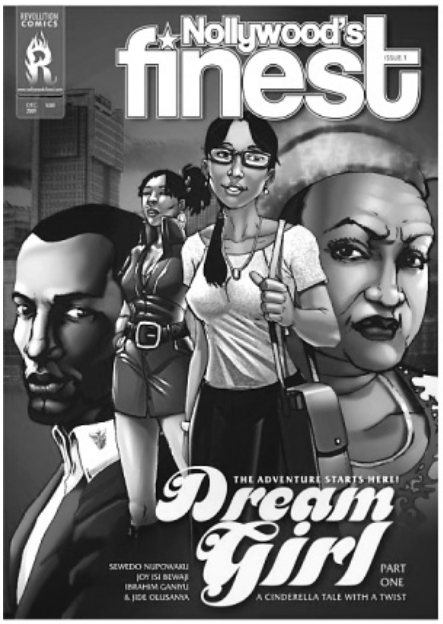

Image II: the cover of Nollywood's finest nº.1

Image III: the cover of the Nollywbooks novel

Beside these examples of disconnected use of the "Nollywood" brand, we can observe a number of more coherent uses. For instance several Nigerian production companies in the diaspora used the term "Nollywood" to gain legitimization, in some cases putting it also in their official name. This happened even if many of these production companies can hardly be considered to belong fully to the Nigerian video industry. Similarly, the

brand invaded the internet, where one can find countless sites that contain the name "Nollywood" in their title.[1] Most of them are fan forums and file sharing platforms which gain reasonable (in some cases remarkable) amounts of money by selling advertising space on their pages. As one can easily imagine, the advertising space's price is directly connected to the daily number of accesses to the site, which partially depends on the site's name itself. In fact, while some people may decide explicitly to enter the site, many do it by accident while searching for information on Nollywood or while trying to access other Nollywood platforms.

As these examples show, "Nollywood" has thus become a partially autonomous sign that signifies different things in response to variable cultural and commercial motivations. As Paul Manning has emphasized, "because brand is […] everywhere, and yet nowhere, the phenomenon comes to be represented as an essentially immaterial form of mediation, a kind of globalized interdiscursivity, an indexical icon of the virtual nature of the global capitalist economy itself" (2010: 35). "Nollywood" as a brand has become an element of mediation between different instances of modernity and globalization. It exemplifies the gap existing between two distinct and diverging orientations within the Nigerian public sphere. On the one hand, a position that sadly looks at the reality of the Nigerian society, the depth of Nigerian population's disillusionment and the violence of Nigerian politicians' voracious patrimonialism. On the other hand, a position that proudly nourishes the ambition of transforming Nigeria into the leading African country for the achievement of a non-Eurocentric project of modernity and globalization. For those who support and embrace the brand, it comes to represent specific expectations of success and international recognition. While, as I will better show below, for those who reject it and take a distance from it, it is a symbol of mystification, a kind of opium for the masses, something that give the illusion that Nigeria and its popular culture have gained a place in the world's encyclopedia of cinema culture while, on the contrary, the video industry continues to deal with profound economic instability and widespread lack of professionalism. The fact that "Nollywood" is a brand that does not belong to anybody (the term is in fact not registered as a trademark), leaves the brand open to constant processes of re-signification. The debates that in Nigeria have surrounded the definition of what "Nollywood" actually is, can offer meaningful examples to understand this dynamic.

[1] Just to name few of them: www.nollywood.com; www.nollywood.net; www.nollywoodmovies.com; nollywoodlove.com; nollywoodforever.com; nollywooduncut.com; www.nollywoodwatch.com.

Behind the brand: the controversies that surround the Nigerian video industry's success

The international circulation of the "Nollywood" brand and the use people have made of it progressively created and reinforced the discrepancy existing between the idea of what "Nollywood" could represent and the "reality" of the video phenomenon. While on one side, as I showed above, the idea of "Nollywood" as a highly successful enterprise became reason of pride for many Nigerians, the actual representation of Nigeria that films were offering and the international reactions this representation often provoked generated a complex debate within the Nigerian political and intellectual environment (see also OKOME, 2010). As several examples from fieldwork researches in other African countries showed (DIPIO, 2008; ONDEGO, 2005; PYPE, forthcoming), Nollywood videos' representation of Nigeria reinforced already existing widespread stereotypes about the violence, the corruption, the moral and political disorder of Nigerian society as well as about the influence played on it by witchcraft and occult rituals. While Nigerian videos became extremely popular in many places exactly for their "transgressive" contents, they also came to represent Nigeria as the "hell" on earth. As Katrien Pype (forthcoming) has emphasized in relation to the consumption of Nigerian videos in Kinshasa, for instance, in Congolese Pentecostal audiences' eyes Nigeria became a land of intense "spiritual battle" between God and the Devil, a nation where the presence of magic and evil is "overwhelming" and thus requires the constant intervention of God. Similar interpretations of Nigerian videos' contents became common above all amongst religious audiences, and they provoked a growing concern amongst Nigerian intellectuals and politicians, fueling the emergence of numerous debates within the Nigerian public sphere. Some examples can be useful to understand the arguments these debates were and are built upon.

The first example refers to the diverging positions assumed in relation to the video industry by two prominent Nigerian intellectuals, Femi Osofisan and Odia Ofeimun. The position kept by Osofisan over the past few years is clearly expressed in a keynote address he wrote on the occasion of the 6th Independent Television Producers Association of Nigeria (ITPAN)'s meeting held in Lagos in 2006. In this text he recognizes the popular success of the video industry, acknowledging the influence videos play on people's imagination and, more generally, on the representation of Nigeria at both local and global levels.

Precisely because they have deservedly won ovation everywhere the Nollywood films have come to assume an authority over our values and our lives, such that what people see in them comes to be taken not as just a fictional projection by one imaginative consciousness, but as the true, authentic mirror of what we really are, as a veritable marker of what our society represents, and much worse, of the ideal that we aspire, or must aspire, towards (OSOFISAN, 2006, p. 2).

If this is the case then, Osofisan suggests that Nigerians should pay careful attention to the contents these films circulate, because from them partly depends the future of the nation, of its international reputation and of its people's dreams and moral aspirations. Here, he underlines, lies a dilemma of great concern for all those who care about the future of Nigeria, because, as he underlines,

> we cannot but remark that [...] the picture that the majority of them [the videos] present of our world is one that we must not only interrogate, but indeed reject very strongly. [...] They show us scenarios where the brutish African cults and priests are overpowered and devastated by the agents of Christianity! Thus one mythology replaces another – this time the one imported from abroad simply replaces the barbaric local variant. Tarzan is reborn, only this time in black skin, and wearing a cassock! And it is a sign of the deep damage done to our psyche and our consciousness by decades of European proselytizing that the filmmakers themselves are blissfully unaware of the racist and cultural implications of this fare they offer to the public. (*Ibid*)

According to Osofisan, Nollywood videos have internalized the worst stereotypes and exotic interpretation about African cultures produced by centuries of Christian and colonial propaganda. This uncritical acceptance of a Western perspective on Africa and its progressive internalization are, in Osofisan's eyes, extremely dangerous processes, which Nigerian intellectuals should feel compelled to fight. A way to correct this alarming situation is, in Osofisan's opinion, the implementation of the collaboration between Nigerian writers and filmmakers. Hence the quality of the stories the videos tell and their moral value, as well as the representation of Nigerian culture and society they circulate, would become acceptable. In this way, Osofisan implicitly suggests, the successful story that Nollywood represents would be matched by an equally commendable representation of

Nigeria. The "reality" of the videos could thus coincide with their idealized image, the globally successful brand "Nollywood".

In relation to these issues, Odia Ofeimun's position is profoundly different. He has expressed his feelings about the Nigerian video industry on numerous occasions. The keynote he presented at the 2nd National Film Festival in 2003 is probably the clearest amongst them. In this text, after tracing the history of cinema in Nigeria, Ofeimun underlines that, whatever one may think about the videos' contents, "it is sometimes better to tell your story even incompetently and badly than for it to be mis-told by others" (2003: 9). Furthermore, he argues that Nollywood videos, even if often in imprecise or unrefined ways, do express a profound truth about the Nigerian society:

> love it or hate it, there is a super-logical rendering of the way we are, the way we live, the messiness and high tension of our dream-seduced realities in the rhetoric of the home video. [It does] represent a deep psychological implant pressed into place by so many untold and even unspeakable events in our history. It looks like an underdeveloped prong of the collective mind of a whole nation. (2003, p. 11)

The Nigerian society, Ofeimun emphasizes, is as violent and messy as the one the videos portray, if not worse. And video films are "giving back" Nigerians a "mirror image" of the way they are while also "reflecting the difficulties" they have "in admitting it" (2003, p. 12, 13). The central question to ask thus become related, in his analysis, to the hidden agenda of the people that do not want this image to circulate. As he emphasised, "rather than seek to change the society so that the untoward elements that figure in home videos may be removed there seems to be too much of an attempt to create a consensus around the need to make things look better in the films than they are in real life" (2003, p. 13).

Ofeimun's point directs again our attention toward the distance between what some people, and especially the political establishment, want Nollywood to be (a symbol of Nigeria, a successful brand to export the country and to attract investors), and what the video phenomenon is (an expression of popular culture, a controversial mirror of Nigeria's potentialities and problems). Another example may be useful to further develop this argument. Throughout the recent history of the video industry, Nigerian newspapers have hosted a debate that has opposed two generations of Nigerian

filmmakers and two different conceptions of cinema. On one side stands the so called "first generation" of filmmakers, composed by Nigerian directors such as Ola Balogun, Eddie Ugbomah, Ladi Ladebo and others. These are those that used to produce their films in celluloid and that were ruled out of business by the economic crisis provoked by the application of Structural Adjustment policies in the mid 1980s. On the other side stands the "new generation" of Nollywood video filmmakers, people whose approach to filmmaking has been filtered by the introduction of digital technologies and that thus developed a profoundly different conception of what cinema is or is not.[2] This debate has often assumed very nasty tones, but it can equally be considered useful to describe the conflicts existing behind the definition of "Nollywood" and of the video phenomenon in general.

Image IV: *The Guardian Nigeria* 29/09/01

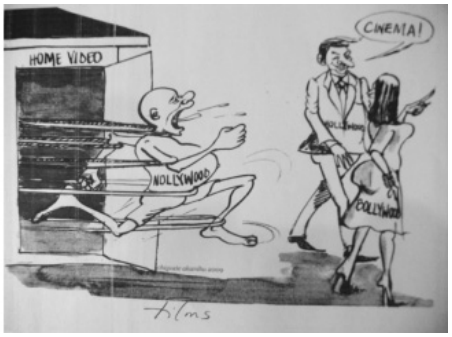

Image V: *The Guardian Nigeria* 01/02/09

The most visible representatives of the first generation's point of view are undoubtedly Ola Balogun and Eddie Ugbomah, even if the latter has, over the years, decided to adhere to the video phenomenon and had since become an active, as much as controversial, member of many video industry's associations.[3] In their view the video phenomenon can by no means be labelled as a film industry. "The word industry – Ugbomah is reported to say in an interview in 2000 – is too big for us. [...] There is nothing called Nigerian

[2] The definition of these two generations is particularly rigid. The only remarkable example of a director who managed to occupy a flexible position between the two generations is Tunde Kelani. Trained as a cinematographer in the late 70s at the London Film School, he participated actively in the production of many Nigerian celluloid films of the first generation. When the digital technology took over, he created his own production company, *Mainframe*, and produced several video films that managed to circulate largely outside Africa. For a discussion of his position in relation to the use of the word "Nollywood" see below.

[3] Eddie Ugbomah, after many years in which he harshly criticized the video industry (he often defined it as "nothinghood"), finally decided to join the video phenomenon around the early 2000s. As he explained in an interview: "I was accused by some young people who said I should show an example rather than continue to criticize" (Iwenjora 2004b).

film industry. We just have video film producers. Before we used to have Nigerian film makers" (Mentor and Kolawole 2000). A similar position has been expressed several times by Ola Balogun (2001, 2005). "Does Nigeria actually have a film industry or not?", he asked repeatedly in his articles, and he concluded: "there is something going on that can be located somewhere in-between a purely commercial trading activity based on recycling easily predictable story formulae on video format and a loosely organized manufacturing pattern centring on video" (2001). In both Balogun's and Ugbomah's point of view, what defines a film industry is first of all the format (celluloid), then the level of organization of the production, the system of distribution in place (particularly the existence of cinemas) and the availability of funding. In their perspective, then, the Nigerian phenomenon does not match any of the required standards that define a film industry. A number of Nigerian newspaper columnists had supported this position over the past few years, criticizing the industry for the quality of the video produced, for the incapacity of reaching non-African audiences and international festivals unless as a curiosity, and for sticking to a format, the video, generally considered as an inferior variety of the one used by other film industries (cf. AZUAH, 2008; IROH, 2009; JIDEONWO, 2006; OBI-UCHENDO, 2007). The vignettes reported in image IV, V, VI and VII, published in Nigerian newspapers in the past few years, give a visual representation of this kind of criticism.

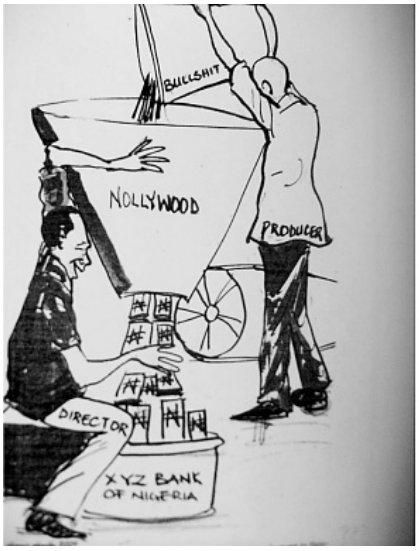

Image VI: *The Guardian Nigeria* 11/01/09

Image VII: *The Guardian Nigeria* 24/05/02

The position of the first generation directors has inevitably produced a reaction in the video industry expressed by numerous directors and actors, a reaction that often assumed the shape of a generational conflict. One of the most clear and explicit replies has been the one expressed by a very popular Nigerian video-maker, Charles Novia: "I'm sick and tired of the 'first generation' filmmakers (men of Dr. Balogun's geriatric age range) telling us that what we produce and show to the world in our home videos is all crap" (2005). First of all, Novia suggests, the digital format is today recognized by most film industries in the world as equally acceptable as the celluloid one in terms of quality and visual definition. In this sense, Nollywood represents an avant-garde of the digital revolution that is happening in the global world of movie production. Secondly, Nollywood videos, contrary to Nigerian and more generally African celluloid productions, are produced autonomously, that is, without any governmental or international economic support. Even while in this situation, the industry managed to produce a large economic turnover and create thousands of job opportunities for young unemployed Nigerians.

As Novia emphasizes in another article,

> critics, more often than not, quickly compare Nigerian movies to American movies and summarize by saying we still have a long way to go. Therein lies the problem. There is no basis for comparison whatsoever. Can you compare banking or even the legal profession in America to what obtains in Nigeria? Nollywood never started with the intention to ape or rival Hollywood (2007).

Once again, through this debate, we can see the tension existing around the definition of what "Nollywood" represents or should represent, what the video industry is or should be. Novia's emphasis on the radical incommensurability between Hollywood and the Nigerian video industry seems to be the nodal point. At the same time, as an analysis of the debates on Nollywood existing both within and outside Nigeria shows, the radical difference existing between the Nigerian experience and the one of other film industries in the world seems to be often understated. As I have discussed elsewhere (Jedlowski forthcoming), the success of the Nigerian video industry lies in the specificity of its format, what I defined as the "small screen cinema" format. It is in fact largely thanks to the original way in which Nigerian entrepreneurs have remediated pre-existing media

experiences into a new format that Nollywood has managed to establish itself as the main entertainment media product in the continent. But as the debates reported above testify, the ambiguity of Nollywood's format and contents continues to generate some confusion. Probably a considerable percentage of the responsibility for this misunderstanding lies in the name itself, "Nollywood", which inevitably put the Nigerian video industry on a comparative level with Hollywood and Bollywood.

It is important to consider, however, that this confusion is not only a problem characterizing the journalistic discussion around the video phenomenon. It is also fed by international agencies like the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, whose report on global film industries' output published in 2009 classifies Nollywood as the second largest film industry in the world in term of the sheer number of films produced. Even if the report underlines explicitly the countless difficulties of conducting such a census in non-Western countries where local figures about media industries are hardly available, it nevertheless proposes a number of general conclusions that have been reported by major newspapers around the world (KRAHE, 2010; MACKAY, 2009; ONANUGA, 2010). To cope with the challenges created by the incomplete and often contradicting data collected, the report uses ambivalent criteria of calculation, which do not follow universal principles for all the countries under scrutiny. For instance, in the analysis of the Nigerian context the report recognizes the statistics produced by the Nigerian Censors Board which lists all videos produced in the country (872 productions in 2005). On the contrary, in the case of the United States, the report takes into account only the figures produced by the Motion Pictures Associations of America (MPAA), and thus excludes from the statistics the independent productions that are not listed in the MPAA's figures. As a result, the UNESCO report lists the United States behind Nigeria with "only" 485 films produced in 2006.

Furthermore, for Nigeria and some other countries such as China and South Korea the report's statistics acknowledge the growing rate of digital production, while the same format is not taken into account for other countries included in the report like Cameroun, Philippines or Mexico, where independent digital production is equally active. This difference depends on the data that each country provided to the Institute of Statistics, and these data do not seem to follow equivalent criteria of enquiry. For the same reasons, also the number of public screening venues by country counted in the report is problematic. In Nigeria the report registers 4,871

"cinemas" (more than Japan and the Russian Federation), while in Burkina Faso only 19 (UIS 2009, p. 12). Even if the authors underline that in Nigeria "99% out of 4,871 cinemas are 'video theatres'" (UIS 2009: 2), it is not clear why this category of screening venues is not taken into account also for Burkina Faso and for the other sub-Saharan African countries that the report includes in the analysis. If informal venues were counted also elsewhere, probably each of these countries would easily count more the 500 screening venues. As these examples show, the report's writers wanted to acknowledge the undeniable continental influence of the Nigerian video industry. But to do so, they made the entire report hardly acceptable on a scientific level.[4]

"Nollywood" and the Nigerian video industry's internal differentiation

My report on these debates emphasizes the level of indeterminacy that surrounds the meaning of the term "Nollywood" and of its definition in relation to other instances of filmmaking in the world. While on a general level (that of "Nollywood" as a brand) there is a general agreement around the positive character of the phenomenon and its importance for Nigerian cultural reputation, a number of problems arise as soon as the analysis reaches deeper levels. Furthermore, within the Nigerian video industry's environment, the degree of inclusivity of the "Nollywood" brand seems not to be clear, and many people play strategically with it, counting themselves in or out according to the context in which they are.

The growing debate on the internal differentiation of the video industry can be taken as an example here. On a general level, the northern branch of the video industry, which produces videos in Hausa, tends to differentiate itself by the use of the term "Kannywood" (ADAMU, 2007; MCCAIN, 2011). Similarly, the term "Yoruwood" or "Yorubawood" have appeared on the internet and in Nigerian newspapers to refer to the branch that produces videos in Yoruba (NUABUIKWU, 2010; OLUPOHUNDA, 2011). Both these branches of the video industry developed a complex relationship with the Nollywood phenomenon. While, on the one hand, they are jealous of the wide transnational circulation and global

[4] It must be recognized that the problems emerging from the report reflects the difficulties in defining what cinema today is or is not, a definition that has become much harder to draw because of the introduction and the constant improvement of digital technologies in recent times. As John Caldwell has emphasized in a recent presentation, his fieldwork research in Hollywood made him appreciate how much the introduction of digital technologies have transformed Hollywood's modes of production (2011). In his description, Hollywood's modes of operation sound to be today much closer to Nollywood's than they used to be at the time of celluloid predominance. Informality is assuming a new role in filmmaking and the introduction of digital technologies has a great responsibility in this transformation.

recognition that southern Nigerian videos in English managed to achieve, on the other hand, they proudly affirm a different ethical and cultural orientation, which supposedly gives them a higher level of legitimacy as spokesmen of their respective ethnic groups. Furthermore, both of them claim to have emerged earlier than the English-language branch of the industry and thus consider themselves to be the "true" (but often unrecognized) initiators of the video phenomenon.[5]

Beyond the general controversies that I just evidenced, on the individual level a number of directors have clearly stated their unease towards the meaning the term "Nollywood" has come to assume. Tunde Kelani's position is a good example in this context. As I underlined earlier, Kelani is an in-between character in the Nollywood landscape. He studied cinematography in London, he worked in many celluloid production throughout the late 1970s and all over the 1980s and, when celluloid production collapsed, he moved to the video format and produced several video films. Because of Kelani's professionalism and technical expertise his films are some of those with the highest production values ever produced in Nollywood. For this reason he has often been invited to festivals and retrospectives around the world as a representative of the video industry.[6] His work is in fact often considered by foreign festival directors and curators as more acceptable to Western audiences' taste. However, as he has clearly stated, his work is "different from mainstream Nollywood production" (Kelani, pers. comm., January 15, 2010). He pays deep attention to the Yoruba cultural tradition and thus most of his films are shot in Yoruba and are adaptation of Yoruba novels or theatre pieces. He spends a long time on pre- and post-production work and the average technical quality of his films is therefore higher than mainstream Nollywood videos (LEU, 2010). However, he recognizes the merits of Nollywood as a phenomenon, its capacity of creating the infrastructures (even if informal) for the growth of a local film market, and consequentially its ability in raising a loyal and affectionate local audience (Kelani, pers. comm., January 14, 2010).

[5] As shown by numerous scholars (see BARBER, 2000; OGUNDELE, 2000), the origin of the video phenomenon can be connected to the progressive remediation, throughout the 1980s, of Yoruba travelling theatre plays from the stage to celluloid film, and later from film to television drama and video tapes. Yoruba videos are thus undeniably the forerunners of both Igbo and English language films that started emerging in early 1990s. In what concern Hausa productions, the first Hausa video film (*Turmin Danya*) was shot in 1990 (see ADAMU, 2007), thus two years before the Igbo/English video film (*Living in bondage*) that is normally mentioned to sanction the birth of the video phenomenon. In this sense, the emergence of the Hausa video industry seems to be a rather autonomous phenomenon, which resulted from the interception of local theatre and television experiences.

[6] The New York African Film Festival, for instance, invited him several times and in 2004 dedicated a "mid-career" retrospective to his work (OKOLI, 2004). He was also invited at the Rotterdam Film Festival (in 2002 and 2004), at the London Film Festival (in 2009), and at other film retrospectives around the world.

Kelani's position, like that of numerous other directors in Nigeria, fluctuates between the acceptance and the refusal of the Nollywood label. On one side, "Nollywood" is accepted as a brand by Kelani particularly outside Nigeria or when talking to non-Nigerians. The brand is, in these cases, considered as a symbol of something good happening in the Nigerian mediascape, something that is revolutionizing the world of film production in the continent. On the other side, the label "Nollywood" is refused when it is a synonym of cheap contents and poor production values. In this case, the prevailing attitude is one of differentiation and singularization.

Other directors positioned themselves along Tunde Kelani's line. For instance, Kunle Afolayan, one of the most successful Nigerian directors in recent times, explicitly expresses the ambiguities he sees in the use of the term "Nollywood":

> all the people that are doing something different will tell you that they are not Nollywood... so, then, what is Nollywood? I don't know myself! The entire Nigerian industry has been called Nollywood, but if Nollywood comes to mean something inferior, if Nollywood is only three lights and a cheap video camera, then I'm not Nollywood, because I don't do that. If the definition of Nollywood has to do with the contents I'm not within it, I'm just a Nigerian filmmaker who is doing his own work. But if Nollywood is just a name, that has nothing to do with the content, I'm fine with it. (pers. comm., January 15, 2010)

As Afolayan's words evidence, the definition of what the Nigerian video industry is and of what the term "Nollywood" means are enveloped in a general atmosphere of indeterminacy. Within this context individual strategies of self-positioning have acquired a particular importance. The conflicting discourses on the Nigerian video phenomenon that I highlighted in this article have importantly influenced the work of numerous Nigerian video entrepreneurs, pushing them toward more conscious and explicit choices.

The hiatus existing between what I labeled throughout these pages as the "reality" of the Nigerian video industry and the ideal represented by the term "Nollywood", is the space within which the Nigerian filmmakers operate. These two diverging metacultures, the one of "Nollywood" as the second largest film industry in the world, and that of the Nigerian video industry as a cheap and disorganized business, have both interacted

with the way the industry has transformed over the past few years. Many directors in fact consciously aspire toward making the "reality" and the ideal fit together. On one side, they are constantly challenged by the kind of criticism I discussed in the previous sections of this article, and on the other they are inspired by the ideal they see in the international and local acceptance of "Nollywood" as a symbol of success. The metaculture of "Nollywood" as a successful brand and that of Nigeria as the second largest film-producing-nation in the world established themselves internationally more rapidly than the video industry itself. The "reality" of the industry seems in fact to be few steps behind what the label "Nollywood" make people imagine in terms of both the industrial infrastructures in place and the average quality of the films produced. But many within the video environment are conscious of this discrepancy, and they are doing their best to fill it. The discourse around the video industry is then actively propelling the industry forward by providing, on one side, radical criticism and, on the other, seducing ideals of achievement.

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