

NO GOING BACK

by Zina Saro-Wiwa (2008)

It was at the start of the millennium when I first began encountering what, for me, was a new type of street iconography. They were declamatory, melodramatic posters that had been plastered onto the alleyways and brick walls of inner-city London. Flyposters that demanded attention as they jostled for space amidst faded adverts for club nights and black haircare products. But these posters, the ones that made me stop and stare, told a story. Each one featured a collision of faces. Snapshots of actors, mid-performance, collaged together. Despairing wives clutched their heads, eyeballs upturned to the skies, imploring God for mercy. Devious Jezebels crouched at the bottom of the posters sporting engine-red Afro wigs and long blonde weaves. Alarming nails and make-up. Ogas in traditional West African attire looked harassed. Businessmen in sharp suits checked the time on expensive watches. Time to meet their mistress? Or time to stab their partner in the back, perhaps? These images often made me laugh but were impossible to dismiss or ignore. I knew nothing of their world but I imagined it to be one of outrage, betrayal, revenge and comedy. A land of devious charlatans, saintly wives, suspect businessmen, scheming mistresses, embattled priests and demonic African spirits. Sturm und Drang pantomime. Extreme soap. I did not know it at the time, but I had been stumbling across posters for the Nigerian video film industry. An industry that was writing itself onto the streets and into the consciousness of people in Nigeria, Africa and the diaspora.

Boasting an estimated \$320,000,000 annual turnover, Nollywood is often claimed to be the third largest film industry in the world after Hollywood and Bollywood. In terms of volume of output it is likely the most prolific film industry in the world with something in the region 1,000–1,500 films being churned out annually. Birthed in Nigeria, Nollywood has erupted into an African cinematic landscape that had hitherto been dominated — at least in the popular realm — by Hollywood, Bollywood and kung fu movies. But Nollywood is the first time a truly popular indigenous cinematic culture has taken hold and, in many cases, supplanted ordinary Africans' taste for foreign films.

Of course there is an existing indigenous cinema of sub-Saharan Africa. It is a cinema characteristically defined by the films made by Francophone West African directors trained in Europe and the Soviet Union in the 60s and 70s. Typically shot on 35mm, financially-backed by the French Ministry of Co-operation & Development (now Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and other European bodies, francophone African films are, stereotypically, introspective meditations on postcolonial identity. A cinematic forum where political and ideological concerns are contemplated seriously. Enveloped in moody silence, the stark Sahelian landscapes in these celluloid tales from Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso,ⁱ become a visual metaphor for all manner of sublimated social and political ideas. And although this is a cinema funded principally by European bodies, the pursuit of an 'authentically African' visual language is assiduously pursued. But these art house offerings find only small audiences at film festivals, embassies and universities. Sometimes referred to caustically as 'Embassy Films', they are rarely seen by the majority of so-called ordinary Africans.

Nollywood could not be more different. If Francophone films prize art and ideas over entertainment, Nollywood's concerns are the inverse. The industry provides low-budget African-authored entertainment that is accessible to all strata of Nigerian and African society. And because Africans are buying these films by the millions, Nollywood has become a financially self-sustaining industry that does not rely on government bodies or European institutions for financing. The films are wordy, improvised, melodramatic morality tales that are often set in shamelessly upwardly-mobile urban Nigerian environments. They are shot on cheap digital technology which has enabled a freewheeling approach to film-making that heavy, expensive 35mm equipment does not allow. These are films made in a hurry. Entire features are shot, cut, packaged and shipped to market in an average of two weeks at a cost of only \$10,000 to \$50,000. They are

not aesthetically beautiful and directors make little attempt at being artistic or subscribing to an intellectual or political agenda. In Nollywood plot and commerce rule. And yet this 'authentically African cinema language', beloved of 35mm francophone African auteurs, is nevertheless achieved. Some images may have been influenced by Western cinema or Bollywood, but Nollywood is encoded with popular mythologies and local concerns. Moreover the hectic and unpredictable Nigerian environment compounded by the necessarily low cost and speed of each film's delivery have, inadvertently, created an aesthetic of circumstance that is uniquely Nollywood.

Although referred to as 'movies', Nollywood films borrow more from TV soap opera in terms of visual style and subject matter. In a sense Nollywood films are the soap operas that should have been churned out weekly on TV but have instead been forced out into the open market to fend for themselves, due to an unfavourable industry environment. Natural selection has seen them mutate into a B-movie species adapted to and employing small-screen conventions. For example, films are often split over two, sometimes four, DVDs making each film feel like feature-length soap episodes. The incidental music tends to consist of dissonant chords and soundscapes produced on synthesisers, reminiscent of the Latin American telenovelas that are still popular in Nigeria. The films are full of indulgent and interminable soap opera close-ups, all the better to see the tears streaming down peoples faces, forcing the viewer to confront the emotions generated by invariably melodramatic plots. Emotions run high in Nollywood and 'good acting' appears to be directly correlated to how loud actors can shout and the intensity of pain they perform. The films' sensationalist titles attest to this intemperate humour: *Blood Sisters*; *Beyond Desire*; *Living in Bondage*; *Testimonies of Pain*; *Deadly Desire*; *Kingdom Against Kingdom*; *Dangerous Mother*; *God, Where Are You?*

But whilst Hollywood and Bollywood films are destined, initially at least, for the big screen, Nollywood films nearly never see the inside of a cinema. Nollywood is a straight-to-DVD industry as there are few multiplexes in Nigeria (cinemas were converted to churches or warehouses in the 80s) and poverty and security issues have militated against a public and communal movie-watching experience. Consequently these films are consumed principally at home but also on public buses and in tiny video parlours that are found on street corners in Nigerian cities and patronised mostly by slum dwellers. But the audience can also be found far beyond Nigeria's borders. Around 600,000 VCDs are pressed daily in Lagos and crates of these films leave on planes everyday for destinations all over Africaⁱⁱ making Nigeria one of the leading digital media content producers and Nollywood films one of Nigeria's most important exports after oil. Nollywood films are on TV in Namibia and are on sale on the streets of Nairobi. In Congo, they are broadcast with the soundtrack turned down while an interpreter tells the story in Lingala.ⁱⁱⁱ You can easily access Nollywood films beyond African shores. Wherever there are Africans in the West one will find Nollywood films, often in corner shops selling African goods and in 'ethnic' marketplaces. Indeed these films are readily available in anyone's home on dedicated satellite channels and on YouTube. And it isn't just Africans watching these films: Caribbeans, African-Americans and reputedly Chinese people have developed a Nollywood 'habit'. Nollywood may not yet have the profile of Hollywood or Bollywood but its addictiveness has seen it seep deeply into the global digital landscape.

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Video films are made all over Nigeria but there are three main centres of production: Lagos, Enugu and Kano. Lagos, a chaotic, sprawling metropolis of an estimated 8 (some say 15) million people is Nollywood's premiere production site, followed by Enugu a smaller city in the south-east of Nigeria. The films emanating from Kano in the predominantly Muslim north of Nigeria plead a separate identity and monicker: 'Kanywood'. Kanywood movies are more folkloric and take their cue from Bollywood featuring song and dance numbers sung in Hausa and Arabic (though there is not the same level of spectacle). But the movies that travel the furthest and, to some extent, define the genre are the English-language films that come from the south of the country where the boom began.

The first Nollywood film was produced by a Lagos-based businessman named Kenneth Nnebue. He was, reputedly, having trouble selling a consignment of blank VHS tapes from Taiwan and thought he might shift the tapes quicker if there were something on them. Inspired by an existing informal film industry that

consisted of amateur VHS recordings of the performances of Yoruba theatre troupes and also, perhaps, inspired by the existence of a nascent Ghanaian video film industry, Nnebue decided to have a go at making a video himself. His first film titled *Living In Bondage* was released in two parts in 1992 and sold an unprecedented 500,000 copies.

In retrospect it comes as no surprise that *Living In Bondage* was so popular. Nigeria was being sold a (sensationalist) story of her own modern urban reality, packaged seductively in the same cellophane-wrapped manner of imported movies. Furthermore the plot truly spoke to Nigerians: Andy, the protagonist, eager to make it in the city of Lagos, gets sucked into a cult that demands the ritual sacrifice of his wife in exchange for riches. He eventually makes his millions only to be haunted by the ghost of his wife. Ultimately, he seeks and finds salvation in the church. The horror of ritual murder, the fall into vice and the redemption provided by Christ are all themes that resonate in a society with great inequality of wealth. For although one of the largest oil producers in the world, Nigeria's economic growth and rapid urbanisation has not been accompanied by a decline in unemployment or poverty. Indeed over half the population still live on a dollar a day. In addition, inept, kleptomaniac rulers have sown an atmosphere of frustration, desperation and corruption resulting in an ingrained disbelief in the possibility of a natural ethical order. For this reason the pursuit of money and status and the pivotal role of supernatural forces within this chaos provide potentially resonant narratives.

The pre-dominant focus on the urban experience is perhaps the subliminal captivating factor of Nollywood. Urbanisation is Africa's biggest macro-economic and socio-political drama, the great untold story of the continent. The foreign media focus primarily on rural poverty and have little-to-no sense of African urban culture. EU-funded francophone African film-makers have been forced to display a similar myopia as the overall funding criteria and subject matter for their films have been determined by their European benefactors who broadly deem urban Africa 'inauthentically' African and rural Africa 'pure' or 'untainted'. Africa now has the highest rate of urban growth in the world (4.4% against a global average of 2.5%)^{iv} and will enter its urban age in 2030 with around 760 million people - half of its total population - living in cities.^v Indeed Lagos is reputedly on course to becoming the third largest city in the world by 2015.^{vi} The city is inventing Africa and Nollywood is one of the few industries providing narratives that navigate this radical, ongoing shift.

It is no surprise then that Nollywood is, for the most part, an urbane and aspirational televisual culture whose principle theatres of action are the homes, offices and universities of Nigeria's urban middle classes. (Some would say that to be 'authentically' Nigerian is to be aspirational). It is within these, sometimes opulent, walls that popular urban romances and family melodramas unfold. (Nollywood stories are rarely about federal politics. The politics is local, moral and emotional). In *Beyonce & Rihanna*, for example, the two female protagonists vie for the attention of music producer Jay Jay in his palatial home as well as in African Idol-style singing contests. Who will he choose? Love and hate is also explored in family melodramas. In *Caught in the Act I and 2*, a woman (played by Nollywood's premiere actress Genevieve Nnaji) is wrongly accused of abducting her own child and is sentenced to death whilst the over-possessive mother-in-law (resplendent in burgundy painted eyebrows, flamboyant clothing and terrifying glare) delights in her daughter-in-law's fate as it allows her to maintain a close relationship with her son. It is in fact the daughter-in-law's long-lost twin sister (also played by Nnaji) who has become a prostitute and child trafficker that is behind the abduction.

Human trafficking and prostitution form the meat of the so-called 'City Girl' video. Kenneth Nnebue's second film *Glamour Girls* initiated this genre and was the first video film to address the rise in child-trafficking and prostitution amongst young, even educated Nigerian females. In the film, four innocent girlfriends are lured unknowingly into prostitution. All end up running their own successful women-trafficking syndicates. But greed and jealousy set in and the women destroy one another. (Women are prominent in Nollywood but suffer from stereotyping. They are the wicked stepmother, the wealthy but predatory urban spinster, the saintly wife, the Madonna or the whore).

The corruption of urban Nigerian life is also explored through gangster movies. Though inspired by Hollywood and kung fu movies, there is little money for major action sequences. But car chases and fights make up for the lack of explosions and hi-tech stunts. A uniquely Nigerian sub genre of the gang movie

would be the ones that highlight the 'campus cult' phenomenon. Since the 1990s Nigerian universities have found themselves under the grip of gangs or 'cults' whose objective is to control the universities and secure good degree results using extortion, robbery and sometimes rape. Films like *Campus Queen* and *Campus Lords* reflect the rise in this very real terrorism.

The ever-pressing concerns about the moral degeneracy in Nigerian society and the growing role of the church in dealing with the malaise has seen the rise of so-called 'hallelujah' movies. The popularity of this category of video film has soared mostly due to the depleting economic resources of many Nigerians who now seek solace [in droves] in the promise of a heavenly polis of bliss and eternal happiness.^{vii} Very often churches themselves will produce such films in a bid to attract larger congregations.

It is not, however, all doom and gloom. Nollywood does a brisk trade in comedy. A prominent strand of these comedies feature the popular duo Chinedu Ikedieze and Osita Ireme (adult actors that suffer from a rare type of dwarfism that makes them look like children) who cause all sorts of mayhem in films like *Daddy Must Obey*, *Reggae Boys* and *Tom and Jerry*. And at the start of the industry there was a salacious strand that featured women with extremely large breasts. Farcical storylines were woven around them and their mammaries. The notion of political correctness, you will find, does not trouble Nollywood. But the most popular of all the genres is the 'voodoo horror' or 'Juju' video. These feature dramas about ritual killings carried out for financial gain and also supernatural thrillers involving spirits, vampires and ghosts. Juju films kicked off the Nollywood industry back in 1992 and have endured. There are many reasons for their popularity but one is tempted to cite the fact that belief in the spirit world is always very close to the surface of Nigerian life despite the firm grip of Christianity and Islam (as a glance at Sunday tabloid papers will attest). The Juju videos visualise what people secretly suspect is always there and provide emotionally-satisfying explanations for wealth inequalities or injustices that abound in Nigeria.

To my mind, the Juju movies provide the most entertaining visual dramas. Occult forces in Nollywood films can appear in highly traditional tribal raffia skirts and face paint. Sometimes the evil forces are represented in a way that seems vampire-like or just downright bizarre. In these cases the costuming and make-up seems more suited to the theatre and wouldn't look out of place on the stage. Despite the amateur dramatics approach to costuming, the aesthetic visualisation of the occult in action draws on science-fiction: knives fly magically through the air and evil spirits fire killer laser beams from bright green eyes. Spirits appear and disappear using basic camera techniques of stopping the camera. The rudimentary special effects appear farcical but are very Nollywood and constitute some of its most memorable and unique sequences.

But not all Nigerians are enamoured with the genre and this focus on the occult has, since the beginning of the industry, inspired anger and opprobrium in Nigeria. Juju films are thought to tarnish Nigeria's image even further and are seen as bad for the nation's moral health. Indeed the industry as a whole presents a paradox: Nigeria is at once fiercely proud and yet utterly ashamed of Nollywood. Proud of the fact that Nollywood is a Nigerian-run global industry but ashamed that the content is so under-contemplated and ashamed that after 20 years the production quality is still so abysmal. Extremely poor sound is a major complaint. Frequent changes in recording levels take place from scene to scene. Sometimes the dialogue is so quiet it is drowned out by the incidental music while at other times the dialogue is recorded so loud the boom microphone buzzes and the sound distorts. The over-simplicity of conflict resolution can be preposterous, unrealistic characterisation alongside a general lack of emotional truth can grate and then there is the terrible dialogue which simply does no justice to the natural lyricism and wit of Nigerians. A scandal for a nation that has produced some of the world's greatest writers and whose oral culture is so rich.

But the perceived thematic and aesthetic limitations of Nollywood become more understandable when you consider the conditions under which Nollywood films are made. Time and budgetary constraints are the biggest problems for Nollywood film-makers. Producers are often not able to finance their films from banks, sponsorship or government loans. Their films are generally financed by the producer/director's pocket or by those marketing the film. A less-than-perfect distribution system and rampant piracy make large investments in single films risky meaning that budgets are kept low at around \$20,000.^{viii} Because the budgets are so low and time being of utmost importance to film-makers using their own money, shooting

must be quick. This gives rise to a host of short cuts on the production. Time is also compromised by the everyday frustrations of Nigerian life that would challenge the sanity of most non-Nigerians. Power cuts — a several-times-daily occurrence in Nigeria — delay filming and the private generators that kick in when the national grid has failed are so loud it can drown out dialogue making shooting near impossible. Actors working simultaneously on other projects may turn up late. And then there is the traffic - notoriously bad in Lagos — which also makes it difficult for crews to get to the set on time. Where time has been lost, emphasis is placed on moving the plot forwards so the script, often minimal in the first place, ends up being improvised as scenes are slashed on the spot. This is film-making at its most pragmatic.

But, it is argued (vigorously on Nigerian blogs), that many a great film has been made on a small budget without the same basic mistakes. The reason for Nollywood's apparent amateurism is precisely because Nollywood is comprised of untrained amateurs, learning on the job, buoyed not by artistic merit, but sales. Businessmen and marketers trying their luck at the latest method for making a buck. Indeed the stasis — both thematically and aesthetically — of Nollywood is blamed mostly on the marketers of Nollywood movies. Marketers bankroll the movies while the creative personalities who lack the necessary funds are forced to defer to them. Businessmen first and foremost, they make sure they only fund movies they are sure will become commercial successes. These, sometimes illiterate, marketers not only set the theme, budget and delivery date but they also dictate the script and cast. Some marketers have even tried their hand at directing movies. This have-a-go approach is laudable in one sense but has left us with films that can beggar belief in terms of production quality. As veteran Nollywood director Charles Igwe has pointed out: *“Our people took a jump off of a cliff and landed in the middle of the ocean. Then we started building the boats while we were in the water.”*

Nollywood breaks many film-making rules and does not often get away with them. But whilst a few of the films are almost unwatchable there are many that are genuinely entertaining on a variety of levels. These films occupy an intriguingly ambiguous realm that is between self-consciousness and naivety. Between the hyper real and the totally unrealistic. The low budget aesthetic (like that other cheap, straight-to-video film industry: the porn industry) invites voyeurism. Like watching couples argue on a street, it feels free of convention, as if anything can happen. And often it does. The plots can be wonderfully involving. Often beginning with a dramatic turn of events: a murder, a room full of children with their mouths taped up, a car-jacking, one is immediately drawn in as one wants to know why and what happens next. The better movies feature genuinely surprising plot twists that leave you watching silently like a child being told an absorbing bedtime story. The poor production becomes a mere detail. And even if you are left spluttering in disbelief at the ending or feel cheated by the unsatisfactory resolution of a conflict you are more than ready to try your luck with another title in the hope of exorcising the last.

There are occasional flashes of brilliance in these films: some of the acting when in the hands of the right director can be very convincing. You can also come across genuinely funny (and not merely inadvertently funny) dialogue. In the historical films I have come across wonderful Yoruba aphorisms that have had me reaching for a pen and paper to scribble them down. And for many Nigerians, part of the joy of watching these films is simply seeing Nigeria reflected back at them. Nigerians in the diaspora often watch these films to learn about what is going on in Nigeria and to provide a cultural connection to children that may have been born and brought up in the West. The subject matter is often taken from newspapers and shoots take place in people's actual homes and offices. In many ways one is truly watching Nigeria.

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Nollywood has much to offer but it is currently an industry in peril: revenues are down, costs are rising and fewer films are being made. The arrival of the African movie channel Africa Magic has caused much upset in the industry as it is claimed that they do not pay proper exhibition or royalty fees and people are now able to watch Nollywood movies for free. There is the hope that Nollywood will follow the same evolutionary path as the music video industry. Nigerian music videos were amateurish and of poor quality, hampering the sales of the artists as they were unable to get onto the new African MTV station and Channel O. But as soon as they raised their game, they were able to appear on these channels enabling Nigerian music stars to achieve international recognition. Unless distribution channels can be improved then there is little likelihood a similar shift will happen in Nollywood and the quality of these films will simply never

improve. But the mood within the industry is that of impatience with the poor quality so this crisis point may yet beget a new and more interesting phase in the life of Nigerian film.

Nollywood deserves to thrive. For all its failings, this industry provides a vision of Nigeria and Africa that has been wrested from the ideologies of foreign bodies and distributors that want to impose their own vision of Africa. And this is a wonderful and long-overdue turn of events. For the first time and in the purest, rawest form, Africa is representing and interpreting Africa. Nigeria is pumping out her own stories and inspiring other African countries to do the same. Nollywood has allowed Africans to dream in Africa and find release in their own continent. Africans no longer need to worship Jackie Chan, Bruce Willis or Amitabh Bachchan, they can look to their own screen idols: Peter Edochie, Francis Duru or Genevieve Nnaji if they so wish.

And even if you are underwhelmed by the films, the tenacity and sheer guts of the film-makers themselves cannot fail to impress and their work offers up a fascinating and humbling lesson for film-producers the world over who are easily cowed by supposedly trying environments. This story of Nigerian agency encoded in the story of the industry is a powerful and important narrative in itself for Nigeria and Africa. In a country where the petroleum-led economy has made trillions yet has improved scandalously few lives, Nollywood has allowed Nigerians, Africans and the world to observe an African-led industry offer creativity, remuneration, community development and even stardom to anyone with flair and an entrepreneurial spirit. It is a phenomenon with powerful implications for the cultural and ultimately economic development of Africa.

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Videography:

- Beyonce & Rihanna 1-4* dir. Afam Okereke
Kingdom Against Kingdom 1 & 2 dir. Ugo Ugbor
Akinko, dir. Sylvester Ogbolu
Tom & Jerry dir. Kenneth Egbuna
Caught in the Act 1 & 2 dir. Charles Inojie
Blood Sister 1 & 2 dir. Chidi Chikere
Peace Mission dir. Dorothee Wenner
Welcome to Nollywood dir. Jamie Meltzer
A Brief History of Nollywood dir. Awam Amkpa

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