

GLOCAL NOLLYWOOD: THE POLITICS OF CULTURE, IDENTITY, AND MIGRATION IN AFRICAN FILMS SET ON AMERICAN SHORES

T. OMEGA ARTHUR

*Department of Journalism and Media Communication
Colorado State University
arthurtomega@gmail.com*

Abstract: Since its inception in 1992, Nollywood, the Nigerian film industry, has grown into a transnational cinema and the second largest film industry in the world thanks in large part to the popularity of the highly affective and dramatic narrative conventions the industry has perfected. In the last decade, Nollywood filmmakers have produced films that depict the African immigrant lived experience in American cities like New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Atlanta. These films are glocal in nature; while set in the United States and featuring African characters, the films combine both local and global settings, cultural attitudes, identity politics, and the protean nature of everyday life in America. By examining the films *Anchor Baby* and *Baby Oku in America*, this article analyses how Nollywood filmmakers employ the industry's affective and melodramatic narrative practices to show African immigrant characters' complex emotional, epistemological, and phenomenological responses to both the urban spaces they inhabit and the African spaces they left behind.

Keywords: Nollywood, Transnational Film, African Immigrants, Affective Narratives, Melodrama.

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of Ben Addelman and Samir Mallal's 2008 documentary film *Nollywood Babylon*, director Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen leads the cast and crew of his 157th film *Bent Arrows* in a hymn and prayer prior to shooting. Imasuen, calling on his and his team's Christian faith for support, is resolute. The film will be shot on the Nigerian streets and edited within a two-week time frame; another film awaits Imasuen once *Bent Arrows* is complete. It, too, will be filmed, edited, and released within a period some Western filmmakers may find impossible and perhaps ill advised. However, the documentary makes it clear that this pop-pop-pop street production model and Imasuen are Nigerian examples of African ingenuity and in Nigeria, films materialise in mere mo-

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ments¹. Born out of the resourcefulness of a Nigerian businessman seeking to sell large piles of videocassettes, the Nollywood film industry incorporates global aesthetics and African tradition to tell stories of the African experience. Imasuen, whose success as a director has landed him international recognition, says in the documentary, “Nollywood has practically become the voice of Africa, the answer to CNN” (Addelman and Mallal 2008).

Indeed, Nollywood’s reach extends as far as CNN’s. Tambay Obenson notes, “there’s an audience for Nollywood cinema, all over the world” (Obenson 2013). Nigeria produces around 2,000 films each year and has become the second largest film industry in the world behind India’s Bollywood and ahead of Hollywood in the United States (Krahe 2010).

Nollywood’s birth in 1992 and maturation since its inception mark it as a distinct transnational cinema that has altered itself as Nigeria moved from dictatorship to democracy in the 1990s. Though the name Nollywood suggests that the Nigerian film industry is an illegitimate Nigerian Hollywood, industry producers and directors are not necessarily interested in replicating the Hollywood model of film production. Nollywood is Nollywood and Nollywood is African; it does not attempt to be anything else. Actress Uche Jombo says in *Nollywood Babylon*, “Nollywood is a child of circumstance, because Nigeria at this stage is cut across a bridge with the Western world and tradition, so, it’s basically just Africans telling African stories”. Jonathan Haynes argues that the term “Nollywood” obscures the ingenuity within the industry and that the films are unique cultural productions based within an informal (street) business and production model that became necessary considering Nigeria’s lack of an established film industry and government support in the early 1990s (Haynes 2014: 53). Nollywood emerged out of dire socioeconomic and political crises that ended film production and closed movie theaters in Nigeria. This led to the need for new methods of film production and consumption that transcended economic crises and existed despite political volatility. The methods that developed have become the norm and Haynes contends that Nollywood’s rapid fire production style and the industry itself are permanent fixtures in Nigeria and beyond:

Nollywood is here to stay because the term is irresistible to journalists and, more importantly, because it neatly expresses powerful aspirations by

people in the video film industry and by their fans to have a big, glamorous entertainment industry that can take its place on the world scene and appeal to international audiences. The export of Nigerian films has been remarkable (Haynes 2007: 106).

What makes Nollywood unique is the fact that, as a child of circumstance born during dictatorship when the import of foreign film into Nigeria was sharply limited, the industry has survived and will continue to thrive in the systemic political, economic, and social instability that has become Nigeria's milieu after independence from Great Britain in 1960. Many of the films, like those Imasuen has created with great success, are inexpensively produced direct to video releases that are sold on street corners, in shopping complexes, and African markets around the world. As Alessandro Jedlowski states, "the success of the Nigerian video phenomenon has in fact been based on its capacity to interpret the dreams, fears, and expectations of its local popular audience" (Jedlowski 2012: 40).

More African nations like Liberia, Tanzania, and Ghana capitalise on Nigerian video-film production models; thus, Nollywood is becoming increasingly transnational. The industry's existence in the digital realm has increased its transnational mobility. Nollywood movies are available to the African diaspora and other fans online through YouTube and through online subscription streaming services such as IrokoTV, an online platform devoted to Nollywood films that launched in December of 2011; Netflix, which began offering Nollywood films in mid 2014; and, Amazon Prime, which began to include Nigerian (and other African) movies between 2013 and 2014 for consumers to digitally buy, rent, or stream for free as a part of their Prime membership². Nollywood's global reach is undeniable and Jombo's statement perfectly captures the essence of what ultimately defines Nollywood as a transnational cinema.

In addition, the industry's focus on narratives produced by Africans to be consumed by Africans is evident in the phenomenon of transnational Nollywood filmmakers' creating films set not only in the streets of Abuja, Lagos, or Port Harcourt, but also in the United States. As African citizens migrate west to escape political instability and in search of economic and educational opportunities unavailable to them in their home nations, filmmakers have taken

to the streets of New York City, Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Chicago to produce films that speak to the experience of the 1.8 million African immigrants living in America, a number that has increased exponentially since the beginning of the twenty-first century³. These films, such as Andrew Dosunmu's *Mother of George* (2013); Uche Jombo's *My Life, My Damage* (2012); Sola Osofisan's *Missing in America* (2004); Linda Obasi's *Overseas* (2013); and, Ayo Makun's *Thirty Days in Atlanta* (2014), represent a straddling of cultures. The films and the stories they tell are cultural hybrids. While set in the United States, they often depict what happens when the African meets America and must contend with the myriad cultural differences that can cause emotional and intellectual ruptures. Chris Barker states that "patterns of population movement and settlement established during colonialism and its aftermath, combined with the more recent acceleration of globalisation, particularly of electronic communications, have enabled increased cultural juxtapositioning, meeting and mixing" (Baker 2004: 76). Straddling cultures is a game of meeting and mixing and transnational Nollywood films set in the United States represent the cultural juxtapositioning African immigrants undertake upon arrival in America, especially those from nations south of the Sahara. African immigrants straddle the Atlantic; one foot is situated in the United States and the other extends back to their African home nations. These films represent how immigrants revise their behaviors and bodies in America using African cultural markers that enable them to maintain the familiar in a foreign place.

Nollywood films set in the United States are examples of the potentials of glocalisation, which encompasses the global production of the local and the localisation of the global in a process that values the old while embracing the new. Containing glocalised elements from diverse media cultures from Bollywood in the east to Hollywood in the west, Nollywood has become a transnational cinema that continuously moves and is made local around the worldreaching broad African diaspora communities in the twenty-five years since it began in 1992. This study explores how some Nollywood filmmakers have combined the highly affective and dramatic narrative conventions the industry has perfected with American urban landscapes to depict the difficulties immigrants may face in the United States. Consequently, this study uses a nar-



rative analysis approach steeped in theories of transnational cinema, which focus on the politics of representation for kinetic communities attempting to assert cultural identity in nations complexly affected by the processes of globalisation, to examine Lonzo Nzekwe's *Anchor Baby* (2010) and Ikechukwu Onyeka's *Baby Oku in America* (2013). These films explore the variegated phenomenon of pregnant women who seek to give birth in the United States so that their children can possess American citizenship. Thus, I analyse how *Anchor Baby* and *Baby Oku in America* show African immigrant characters' complex emotional, epistemological, and phenomenological responses to both the urban spaces they inhabit and the African spaces they left behind. Ultimately, the films interrogate what it means to possess a transnational identity that juxtaposes traditional African values with the unfamiliar culture of the United States.

NOLLYWOOD'S ORIGINS: THE MAKING OF AN AFFECTIVE TRANSNATIONAL CINEMA

Melodrama is a major component of Nollywood films and has been its primary aesthetic and narrative focus since the industry's beginnings and rise as a transnational cinema with the release of a film that keenly epitomises Nigeria's socioeconomic culture in the early 1990s. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue that while Nollywood clearly reflects Nigeria's and Africa's postcolonial situation on screen, the films "are less anti-colonial than paracolonial" (Shohat and Stam 2014: 397). By using the term paracolonial to refer to Nollywood narratives, Shohat and Stam refer to the political, cultural, and economic machinations of domination that reach beyond colonisation. Thus, Nollywood exists to explicate the historical and cultural merging of African tradition with that of the colonising nation. Paracolonial film reflects the creation of multidimensional histories of events and experiences not limited to or defined by the colonised society's reactions to or resistance to colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial rule. Instead, Nollywood offers symbiotic representations of the complicated neocolonial and postcolonial African experience rooted in the processes of globalisation and deterritorialisation. While postcolonial cinema theory posits that film narratives are often anti-colonial in thrust

and provide critiques of the postcolonial political milieu of specific nations, this theory does not provide the most precise theoretical framework for analysing Nollywood cinema because the industry mainly focuses its lens on the plights of individuals and communities without clearly commenting on the nation's history or political atmosphere. Because Nollywood is transnational and diasporic, it must be viewed outside the postcolonial theory that structures postcolonial African cinema as auteur based “‘embassy films’ more appealing to the international festival circuit than to African audiences, which rarely saw the films” (Shohat and Stam 2014: 397). Transnational cinema theory that considers the politics of identity and autonomy in a globalised world offers a more resonant means for analysing Nollywood film; the films are “political largely in terms of addressing immediate topical concerns such as HIV AIDS or, corruption, rather than in terms of advancing grand historical claims” (Shohat and Stam 2014: 397). As such, Nollywood's origins can be situated within a transnational and par-colonial context.

Indeed, the production of *Living in Bondage*, the first film attributed to the industry, is a tale of Nigeria's specific and Africa's general parcolonial climate, the economic and social situations of the continent's people in the years following decolonisation movements, and the efforts of creative individuals to use film production to eke out a living. Kenneth Nnebue's *Living in Bondage* (1992) is the tale of an Igbo man named Andy who gains power and wealth after he kills his wife Merit in an occult ritual⁴. The film follows him as he rises to power and prominence in his Onitsha community, but his rise is not free of torment. After suffering through months of his wife's ghost haunting him, Andy is redeemed spiritually and emotionally when he repents and asks his evangelical Christian community to forgive his murderous act. *Living in Bondage* was a huge local success in Nigeria and many Nollywood insiders, journalists, and Nigerians believe it set the standard for all future Nollywood productions like those from Imasuen and Ejiro (Krahe 2010).

Nnebue's great success with *Living in Bondage* and the film becoming the model for Nollywood as a transnational cinema can be attributed to four important factors: 1) the lack of a local film culture prior to *Living in Bondage*; 2) the socioeconomic plight of Nigerians at the time the film was produced; 3) the ways the film

reflected conditions at the time; and, 4) its glocalised storytelling conventions. Film viewing in Nigeria began during British colonial rule; Brian Larkin notes that colonial leaders imported Western films into their African colonies and staged public exhibitions for British settlers and African subjects as a method of maintaining control over the people (Larkin 2008: 158-159). For example, documents between British administrators and officials in London show the colonial government's efforts to use film as a civilising force using American films to educate Lagos schoolchildren on European social mores. The Secretary of State Malcolm MacDonald notes:

The manners and social poise of the young African are improving as a result of attendance at the cinemas. Very many of our children come from houses which are dirty squalid and poverty stricken in the extreme: it is inevitable that the films should encourage a demand for a better standard of living (MacDonald 1940)⁵.

The report goes on to state that the quick and clever nature of short films and cartoons perplexed the schoolchildren, but they adjusted well to viewing long form Hollywood films like *Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Mutiny on the Bounty*. Not surprisingly, both films are ultimately treatises about the triumph of good over evil and adherence to prescribed orders and authorities. The films served the purpose of civilising and disciplining schoolchildren who the colonial powers hoped would become compliant adults. Colonial rule was predicated upon the “symbolic constitution of boundaries placing ruler and ruled, white and nonwhite, in carefully demarcated positions” and film exhibition in public spaces in colonial Africa was a “performative social event in which the semantic relay of meaning between film and audience was shaped by the precise conjuncture of racial, and political relations that preconstituted citizens and subjects” (Larkin 2010: 158-159). Chukwuma Okoye frames film exhibition and viewership in the African colonies as a mechanism for the complete colonisation of the African mind as films were chosen to glorify whiteness, deify the coloniser, and demonstrate the coloniser's superior technological inventiveness (Okoye 2007: 22).

After Nigeria gained its independence from Great Britain in 1960, Nigerian themes and performance styles began to enter

films, particularly Yoruba cultural elements such as the musical forms like *fuji* and *jùjú*, and plotlines from familiar Yoruba traveling theater productions that transitioned from the stage to film⁶. Ola Balogun, Adeyemi Folayan, Chief Hubert Ogunde, and Moses Olaiya Adejumo are considered the first filmmakers and theater producers to film full Yoruba theater productions beginning in 1975; Balogun produced *Amadi*, the first Nigerian film in Igbo, one of Nigeria's indigenous languages (Ogundele 2000: 90-100). The "involvement of the Yoruba travelling theatre practitioners in motion picture production was perhaps the most auspicious single factor in the evolution of an indigenous cinema in Nigeria" (Adesanya 2000: 38). The films' "localised filmic identities endeared them to popular audiences in Nigeria. This was to be expected since the masses now had the opportunity of seeing themselves, their every day conditions, beliefs, fears and hopes in moving pictures" (Ajibade 2007: 3). Ultimately, the filmmaking of Yoruba theatre practitioners contributed to celluloid film production as they utilised "the cheapest possible way of producing audiovisual material for projection to an audience" (Haynes and Okome 2000: 55).

Yet, cinema houses in Nigeria were not in large number and existed only in major urban areas; those that did exist mainly screened films imported from America, Europe, and India. However, as Noah Tsika points out, the destabilising effects of civil war in the late 1960s and early 1970s, followed by a great petroleum boom that eventually burst, and the Motion Picture Association of America's 1981 moratorium on film distribution in Nigeria thanks to widespread charges of corruption created a film vacuum in the nation (Tsika 2015: 3). Tsika argues:

Complications included the confusions engendered by successive military governments, which tended to swing precipitously between rejecting the significance of cinema and embracing documentary as the filmic mode most apt to glorify their regimes... a steep rise in urban crime discouraged millions of Nigerians from visiting cinema houses, especially during evening hours; more than simply expensive and imperialistic, celluloid films required darkened public spaces that proved physically dangerous to spectators (Tsika 2015: 3).

With the rise of the state funded *WNTV*, the first television broadcast station on the African continent, that broadcast import-

ed television programs from the West along with Yoruba theater productions and enjoyed broad viewership; the high cost of production; international freezes on film exports; increasing economic strife in the 1980s after failures in the oil industry; and, security concerns during the revolving door of dictators in the 1980s and 1990s, Nigerians stopped going to the movies (Tsika 2015: 3-5).

In the early 1990s, Kenneth Nnebue, looking to sell a large batch of imported videocassettes he thought Nigerians would purchase to record television programs on their VCRs, recognised how well they would sell if there was something on the tapes. *Living in Bondage* emerged from Nnebue's desire to make a living, something many (if not most) of his contemporaries would have understood. The socioeconomic plight of Nigerians at the time the film was produced is starkly represented in the film. When *Living in Bondage* was released, the nation was mired in General Ibrahim Babangida's military dictatorship, poverty was widespread, and unemployment was high in large part because of World Bank/International Monetary Fund structural adjustment programs which Babangida championed during his rule. The structural adjustment programs (SAPs) consisted of loans that were intended to mitigate the nation's failing economy and set it up for long term economic growth; however, Nigeria's economy did not rebound, causing widespread financial suffering throughout the nation (Monga 2006: 228). The social conditions prevalent in *Bondage* were highly relevant and resonant. The film's opening scene is of the protagonist Andy, in soliloquy, announcing that he has quit his job at a bank because the salary was not enough to allow him to survive.

Andy states that he has worked for four companies and even started a trading business, but has not ascended to the level of economic and social success of friends and classmates who began trading businesses. Andy eventually says he believes someone has bewitched him and this is the reason for his financial despondency. His wife, Merit, who has been listening off screen, enters the room with his meal and tells Andy that he has not been bewitched and that he should not have negative thoughts about money because many of his peers have not yet had their first job. She also mildly scolds him for quitting his job with the bank against her wishes. Merit later confides to a neighbor that she is concerned about Andy's proposal to invest the 20,000 *Naira* (about \$909 in



1992 and about \$50 in 2017) she borrowed from her father to cover their basic household needs. Inevitably, Andy loses the money in a bad business exchange. Much like the aging Faust, who sold his soul to the devil Méphistophélès to reset the life he viewed as a failure, Andy murders Merit after joining a demonic cult to reset his own life and acquire the riches he believes he justly merits.

Ideas about money, survival, and the unsavory means to acquire and/or maintain both would have been keenly affecting for many of the Nigerians watching the narrative unfold, producing affective responses to the film. Affect is not solely linked to emotions or feelings, but also to existence, experience, and temporality and can be transmitted just as readily through televisual methods as through contact with other human beings (Brennan 2004: 5-7). Carl Plantinga notes, “when emotions, affectively charged qualities, and the cognitive processing of narrative information work together [...] a film can induce striking moods in spectators in an orchestrated and constantly evolving temporal experience” (Plantinga 2012: 455). The narrative within *Living in Bondage* created an affectivity where the relationship between Nigerian viewers and the film’s images worked to situate the viewer and film in an exchange of ideas where judgments were made about the images on the screen *and* the state of the viewers’ lives.

Nigerian audiences would have been aware of the double entendre within the title *Living in Bondage* as many lived in economic bondage and would have been fearful of living in the sort of supernatural bondage in which Andy lives after he sacrifices his wife. Lindsey Green-Simms concurs with Larkin’s argument that Nollywood films create an “‘aesthetics of outrage’ designed to stimulate and provoke reactions in the audience by sensationally depicting religious, social, and moral transgressions that contribute to everyday instability and uncertainty” (Green-Simms 2012a: 28; Larkin 2008: 186). John Markert’s explanation of reflection theory is a pragmatic tool to analyse how Nollywood’s affective films, which could be viewed as exaggerations of Nigerian life, reflect society. He argues that what “is depicted [...] on the screen is something that reflects a slice of the familiar world” (Markert 2011: xv). The familiar world reflected in many Nollywood films, for which *Bondage* set the bar, is one of African financial instability and the search for a means of survival in the wake of economic

collapse. Films like Andy Amenechi's *The Master* (2004) and Kenneth Gyang's *Confusion Na Wa* (2013) exemplify the highly resonate methods many Africans feel they must employ for basic economic survival. Messages about money, culture and tradition, religion, and the occult would have been difficult for Nigerians to ignore or dispute at the time *Bondage* was released.

Also, Andy's professional and social plight in *Bondage* would have resonated with those Nigerians chafing under the unsuccessful economic policies that Babangida and the International Monetary Fund implemented in the country from 1986. Adebayo Adediji, the former Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, stated that the structural adjustment programs implemented in the late 1980s did more harm to Nigeria's economy and its citizens than all the decades of colonialism put together (Monga 2006: 228-229). The purpose of the SAPs was to deregulate the economy and pay down foreign debt. However, the program left many Nigerians believing the SAPs had sapped them dry. The idea that many Nigerians (and other Africans), including people like Andy and his friends (one humorously named Obi Million), would resort to occult practices to gain power and wealth was highly plausible. *Bondage* contains evocative moments meant to induce fear, disgust, sympathy, anger, sadness, joy, love, and/or understanding. Markert argues, "movies, serve as a window on the world; the content of the cultural form is viewed through a mirror into the group's values. The reflective metaphor allows the cultural object, in this case, movies, to be 'read' as a sign of what people in society are thinking at any given time" (Markert 2011: xvi). Sara Ahmed contends that to "experience an object as being affective or sensational is to be directed not only toward an object but to what is around that object, which includes what is behind the object, the conditions of its arrival" (Ahmed 2010: 25). Markert's and Ahmed's arguments are relevant to conversations about Nollywood films' ability to transmit affect; audiences watching *Bondage*, a filmic object, looked through the window of their individual and collective worlds. Their economic conditions were essentially wrapped up in a dramatic ending depicting Andy's release from demonic powers and Merit's ghost gaining peace and finally transitioning to the heavenly afterlife. Jean and John Comaroff consider the practices reflected in the film and common to Africa's people to be the



mechanisms of an “occult economy”; in an occult economy, para-colonial economic forces reveal the lopsided nature of African capitalism and financial abundance magically or mystically appears with no clear link to employment or other labor. The Comaroffs and Green-Simms contend that occult economies create social anxieties and fear of demonic spiritual behaviors in nations where money was (and is still) gained through illegal means like advanced pay scams (also known as “doing 419”) and pyramid schemes with or without links to magic (Green-Simms 2012: 39)⁷. As stated, the film’s themes and ending became typical of Nollywood’s syncretic narrative conventions.

The storytelling or narrative in *Living in Bondage* contributed to the film being labeled the first Nollywood film and the beginning of Nollywood as a film industry with glocalised narratives and aesthetics. Haynes states that melodrama and the “extremes of fortune, emotion, and moral character are classic melodramatic elements; their predominantly domestic settings, multiple interwoven plot lines, and emphasis on dialogue rather than action” are what make Nollywood combinations of the interiority and drama within western soap operas, *telenovelas*, and Bollywood *masala* films imported into Nigeria during and after colonisation, and the orality of the Yoruba theater (Haynes 2000: 22). Since the release of *Bondage*, Nollywood films have contained lurid stories of seedy urban life, family conflicts, poverty and financial ruin, crime and corruption, witchcraft and the occult, Christian salvation and redemption, romantic relationships and aberrant sexuality in African culture in general, the struggles of living abroad, and the fight to maintain African cultural traditions in the face of deterritorialisation, globalisation, and modernity (Arthur 2014: 101-116). Karin Barber stresses, “modern popular arts have the capacity to transcend geographical, ethnic, and even national boundaries” (Barber 1987: 15). Indeed, Nollywood is a boundary transcending affective symbiosis made popular through local production and consumption. From the early 1990s to the present, the industry has gained the attention of journalists, scholars, filmmakers, and viewers around the world allowing Nollywood to eclipse its status as a solely Nigerian cinema and become a truly transnational cinema.



TRANSNATIONAL NOLLYWOOD FILMMAKING: AFRICAN STORIES SET ABROAD

Since the early 2000s, numerous Nollywood films have emerged that combine the narrative aesthetics of the affective Nollywood spectacle with the larger budgets, highly stylised special effects, and production values of Western films to create a new reterritorialised type of globalised and glocalised transnational cinema. Broadly defined, transnational cinema is the collective cinematic representations of a group of unified people who seek or possess a related cultural identity. It is a cinema of a specific collection of nations rooted in the local customs of one. Also, it can be described as a collection of films representing a multination community linked together through phenomenological and cultural proximity. Ultimately, transnational cinemas are glocal. While they exist in a borderless space, they are models of the synergistic and interdependent combinations of the global and the local⁸. What makes Nollywood transnational and glocal? Nollywood as a film form borrows film, television, and theater elements from nations around the world and incorporates them with storytelling methods, production models, and consumption practices that are categorically local. Yet, this glocal syncretism does not capture the depth of Nollywood's transnationality. Nigerian cinema is transnational and glocal for one primary reason: its continuous circulation around the globe.

Claudia Hoffmann states, "Nollywood's uniqueness is not limited to its commercial success, but includes its potential to reach an audience way beyond native Nigeria while at the same time remaining local in terms of themes and aesthetics" (Hoffmann 2012: 122). The "way beyond" Hoffmann speaks of includes European locations such as the United Kingdom, Italy, and Germany; African nations like Ghana (which has an independent industry, but often shares acting, production, and distribution resources with the larger Nigerian industry), the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Tanzania, and South Africa; and, the Americas, including the United States and Caribbean nations like Barbados, Jamaica, and Guyana⁹. Its global/glocal growth is also the result of Nollywood production in places outside Nigeria and the adoption of the pop-pop-pop production model in other African nations.

Though Nollywood films are mainly shot on location in Nigerian cities and rural villages, the industry has a history of production outside Nigerian borders. One of the first Nollywood films to be shot outside of Nigeria was Kingsley Ogoro's 2003 transnational comedy *Osuofia in London*, which tells the story of the titular character's quest to collect a sizable inheritance from a relative who amassed a fortune in the United Kingdom, died, and left it to Osuofia. Subsequent productions in other nations have expanded the reach of Nollywood to the United States, throughout Africa, and Europe. Notably, Izu Ojukwu's 2007 production *Laviva* tells the story of Nigerian peacekeeping soldiers stationed in Liberia during its civil war and Faith Isiakpere's 2011 film *Foreign Demons*, a film about misunderstandings between Africans from different nations, was co-produced with his South African wife Firdoze Bulbulia. Nollywood has ventured into the Ukraine for Andrew Rozhen's *Feathered Dreams* (2012), a story about a Nigerian medical student (played by Omoni Oboli) who falls in love with a Ukrainian man while dreaming of becoming a singer; the film is a meditation on the plight of Africans adjusting to unfamiliar cultures and languages. These films are only a few transnational Nollywood productions that have garnered audience and media attention.

While these transnational films largely did not retain the pop-pop style of most of their Nollywood cousins, other African filmmakers have adopted the distinctly Nollywood rapid-fire production and narrative model. As mentioned, Ghana's film industry's (sometimes called Ghallywood or Ghollywood) methods are almost identical to Nigeria's; quite often, Ghanaian and Nigerian film personnel, especially actors, move across borders for productions that are labeled Nollywood films. Ghanaian actors like Jackie Appiah, Yvonne Nelson, Majid Michel, and Van Vicker are well established in Nollywood and enjoy star power in both their home nation and Nigeria. Films like Frank Rajah Arese's romantic comedy *The Groom's Bride* (2012) and traditional historical film Leila Djansi's *I Sing of a Well* (2009) are examples of Ghanaian films that employ Nigerian production and narrative aesthetics¹⁰. The aesthetics are also present in Courage "The Rock" Borbor's 2012 historical epic *Hatred*, Liberia's first feature length film. Tanzanian productions like Mussa Banzi's *Nsyuka* (2003) and *Shumileta* (2005) and Haji Dilunga's *Popobawa* (2009) employ



Nollywood witchcraft and occult themes to tell complex horror stories of vampires and demons. Like the transnational co-productions mentioned above, these transnational films are but a few that use features of Nollywood production to create glocal movies that are syncretic mash-ups of Nigerian aesthetics, local narratives, and affective spectacle. Nollywood, with its affective spectacle, does not seek to mask the complexities of African life around the world; the opposite is true. Nollywood presents phenomenological or experientially proximate narratives that appeal to postcolonial viewers living throughout the African diaspora, especially the United States.

In fact, several Nollywood films released in the last decade critique America and offer portraits of what I call the paradox of progress for African immigrants living in the United States. According to the Office of Immigration Statistics data, 620,924 Africans were naturalised in the United States between 2006 (around the time when more and more Nollywood filmmakers began to focus on immigrant experience in America) and 2015. From 1970 to the present, the number of African born people living in America increased from roughly 80,000 to nearly two million (Gambino, Trevelyan, and Fitzwater 2014: 1). While the move to the United States is an inherently positive step for many African immigrants, life in the nation can make advancement and attainment of the American dream an especially onerous enterprise. Migrating to the United States is considered progress for those leaving behind nations marred in political strife, violence, and economic despondency. However, that progressive step becomes paradoxical when the expected progress from hard work doesn't match or even come close to reality. Many of the films set in the United States reflect the precariousness of this reality. Shot in the United States and employing both African and American actors, their narratives alter the overarching ideology of progress often associated with the United States to speak the truth to viewers from Africa living in America and those on the African continent.

Hoffmann notes that many of these films are shot in American urban spaces like New York, Los Angeles, and Atlanta, all areas with large African immigrant communities. She states:



Through diasporic filmmaking, immigrant communities become cinematic manifestations of transnational movements of money, labor, goods, media, and people, and the actual city space, with its buildings, streets, sidewalks, cars, and other symbols of urbanity, is a place where social actors negotiate the relationship between the local and the global (Hoffmann 2012: 121).

Hoffmann's study of transnational and glocal Nollywood films shot in the United States focuses on the ways members of immigrant communities handle the cultural adjustment to life in urban America. Her argument is sharp; she argues that "although the immigrant seems to be at the center of the plot, they are often just the vehicle of a macrolevel political statement about the oppressive global structures and inhumane immigration practices of individual nation-states" (Hoffmann 2012: 124). Ultimately, the urban American landscape in transnational and glocal Nollywood films are sites where the paradox of progress and the emotional dissonance it can produce are explored.

Affect transmitting and inducing narratives set in the United States potentially represent a form of filmic psychogeography where the geographical environment and its incumbent meanings represented in the films consciously or unconsciously affects the emotions and behaviors of the individuals watching. Ideas and theories about psychogeography mainly speak to the way individuals experience urban spaces while inhabiting those spaces (Debord 1955). Yet, I extend these ideas and theories to consider the ways African viewers may process Nollywood films set in the United States. Viewers are not always physically in the filmic space, but the films transmit them there emotionally and psychologically. Films like the *Missing in America*, *Overseas*, and *Mother of George* probe the experiences of African born women who come to the United States to reunite with spouses, for career advancement, and to marry American based men. Others like *In Her Shoes* and *My Life, My Damage* analyse the efforts that some African women will undertake to secure an American based husband and the potential dangers of life (sex and drugs) for an overly ambitious single young African woman in a fast paced and morally vapid American culture, respectively. As the filmmakers of these transnational and glocal Nollywood films are often immigrants themselves, they operate from "an inside-out, point of view" and

“represent how immigrant characters negotiate the local and the transnational space while (physically and mentally) navigating the diaspora” (Hoffmann 2012: 124-125). These films surreptitiously posit notions of America not as a paradise for African immigrants, but as a pocket of hell on earth to educate would-be migrants about the pitfalls of American life or to steer potential migrants toward traditional life at home.

Many Nollywood films are thematic representations of the multiple rifts between African traditional culture and modernity. Transnational-glocal films follow the same narrative and aesthetic model of the basic Nollywood films; the immigrant experiences featured in these films are meditations upon the tensions that can arise when immigrants attempt to tightly hold onto African traditions while embracing enough of American culture and life to survive day to day. Haynes notes that there are a few basic narrative conventions present in American set Nollywood films including protagonists who leave the African continent because of a desire to make a specific dream come true in the United States, protagonists shown negotiating the harsh realities of immigrant life usually in an alienation sequence where they are shown in the streets of a major city, and major drama involving some form of cultural misunderstanding through contact with natives of the host land (Haynes 2012: 77-80). In most Nollywood films set on the African continent or elsewhere, narrative is privileged over technical elements because of the cinema’s roots in the African oral storytelling tradition. The films have the look and feel of soap operas and *telenovelas*; they are mostly set indoors and focus on dialogue, or the conversations the characters have with each other and the interior conversations they have with themselves. These narrative and technical conventions lead to films that are intimate portrayals of what it means for the African immigrant to be a Janus figure in the United States. As Shohat and Stam point out, the America represented in these diasporic films are “another node or terminus in a broader search for survival or relief from economic scarcity or political oppression” (Shohat and Stam 2014: 397).

The drama *Anchor Baby* and the dramedy *Baby Oku in America* are two examples of American set transnational Nollywood films that employ these basic conventions. Because of their focus on the intimate experiences of African individuals in the United States, narrative analysis is the most appropriate and ideal ap-



proach to explicating the ways the films seek to represent African immigrant life. Narrative analysis offers an apt means for understanding how people create meaning in their lives (Clandinin and Connelly 2000: 98-115). Nollywood films, especially those set within the United States that show African immigrants' relationships with a foreign American culture, are concerned with what life means for the nearly two million Africans living in America. These films reflect the primary reasons many on the African continent leave their homes for American shores, particularly the economic and educational opportunities available in the United States.

What makes *Anchor Baby* and *Baby Oku in America* unique is their plots and the way they represent a real and resonant phenomenon for many who migrate to the United States; the female protagonists are pregnant at the beginning of the films and one gives birth during the film's climax. The films explore the realities of women who travel and settle in the United States so that their children can gain American citizenship. While the films' narratives offer vastly different takes on the phenomenon, the message within each film is similar and clear: giving birth to an American born African child is far preferable to giving birth to an African born child because the American born African child will benefit from the advantages of American education and economic stability. Both films show the hopes the female protagonists have for their own and their children's lives in the United States. However, both women are forced to reckon with erroneous notions of an America that proves culturally perplexing and the unfortunate and unexpected emotional, epistemological, and phenomenological circumstances that lead to disappointment for both women and tragedy for one.

In Lonzo Nzekwe's 2010 morality tale *Anchor Baby*, a young undocumented African woman named Joyce is forced to fend for herself in Chicago after her husband, Paul, is deported. Joyce is about five months pregnant at the beginning of the film; she and Paul entered the United States two years prior to the events of the film and did not leave when their visas expired. Though the film does not explain the type of visa Joyce and Paul possessed or the process they undertook to obtain a visa, one can glean that perhaps they entered the country as tourists. When Joyce and Paul discover she is pregnant, the couple decides to remain in Chicago



until the baby is born so that the child can become an American citizen. Joyce and Paul want the child to have access to the benefits and upward mobility (or what they believe to be the upward mobility) of United States citizenship. Before Paul is deported, he reminds Joyce that they came to the United States to fulfill dreams they could not dream in their home nation. Joyce is left to figure out how she will navigate America as an undocumented pregnant woman without a place to live and without health insurance to receive proper prenatal care.

As the film progresses, an African American woman named Susan befriends Joyce upon seeing the young pregnant woman attempt to receive medical care at a clinic. Joyce is reluctant to reveal information about herself to Susan for fear of being turned in to immigration authorities, but eventually comes to trust the woman. Susan offers to allow Joyce to live with her and her husband Tim until the baby is born. The American woman extends numerous kindnesses to Joyce. She connects the young woman to an immigration attorney and allows Joyce to assume her identity so that she can use her insurance and have regular doctor's visits.

However, the life that Susan has provided for Joyce in the final months of her pregnancy proves to be a sham. Joyce gives birth to a son as "Susan Beckler" and receives a passport for the boy with the name "Beckler" and with Susan listed as the mother. When Joyce realises that she will not be able to travel back to her home country with her son because she is not actually Susan Beckler, she devises a scheme with Susan and the lawyer. It is decided that Susan will travel with the baby to Africa and Joyce will turn herself in to the immigration with the expectation that she will return home on the same domestic flight with Susan and the baby boy. It is only after she is detained and Susan kidnaps the baby that Joyce realises that she has been duped. In the final scenes of the film, Susan drives off with her actual husband, John, the man who had acted as Joyce's immigration attorney. Tim is a man Susan and John paid to act as Susan's husband. Joyce is eventually deported, childless and despondent. The film makes it clear that she grieves for the loss of her baby, for the life she lost because of Susan's deception, and for the difficult life she will face once she returns to Africa as a woman who has facilitated her child's kidnapping.



Joyce's desire to give birth to an American citizen can be decoded as ambition and a desire to usurp African traditional life, if not immediately. Having an American citizen as a child gives Joyce the ability to potentially settle in the United States after her child reaches the age of twenty-one and petitions for green cards for Joyce and Paul. This sort of ambition, to give their son access to a better life and to live the American dream in the later years of her life, is brutally punished in the film. Joyce is a proper wife to Paul and a relatively virtuous young woman. The film includes several scenes of phone conversations between Joyce and Paul after his deportation where Paul advises Joyce on how to manage her life in the United States. Though he is back on the African continent, his hold over his wife's life is unbreakable. Joyce's full submission to her husband in the film does not prevent her punishment. She dares to dream and she is violently chastised for not turning herself in to immigration authorities and for not allowing herself to be deported along with her husband. Because she does not seek deportation to return home with Paul, her desire to remain in the United States is coded as selfish. Thus, her misfortune operates in three ways in the film. First, her zeal for America results in Joyce's punishment because she refuses to return to her African home nation where she is obligated to take care of her husband and household. Second, she develops relationships with and trusts Americans instead of relying upon the support of the African community represented in the film. Third, Joyce's misfortunes act as a filmic alarm that suggest that young African women refrain from traveling to the United States to have anchor babies because their lives and the lives of their families could be destroyed.

Anchor Baby alerts viewers about what life in America can become for those who abandon their cultural morality, especially women who are the primary characters and consumers of these films. Adedayo Ladigbolu Abah argues that Nollywood films:

Issue dire warnings for women who exceed the limits placed on their dreams by construed tradition as well as women who fail to meet the expectations placed on their domestic roles by cultural institutions [...] there is a lot to be said for the power of the medium to perpetuate and propagate disabling messages that is not shared by prior means of communication (Abah 2008: 339).



Nollywood can simultaneously highlight the cultural war between tradition and modernity, and it can also serve to naturalise appropriate behavior in a culture where Africans, especially women who are expected to uphold specific values. Many Nollywood films code the ideal woman as one who is highly religious, married with children (preferably sons), and submissive to her husband. Being overly ambitious and desiring personal achievement over communal values is one means by which African women can turn away from tradition; also, a desire for a life away from family, culture, and nation is another. These are sins Joyce commits in *Anchor Baby* and she is punished for them.

Ambition and personal desires are at the core of Ikechukwu Onyeka's *Baby Oku in America* (2013). The plot centers on a young woman named Baby Oku who becomes pregnant with the child of a successful architect who returns from Atlanta to their village to visit his mother. Baby Oku is an uncouth simpleton who is believed to have manipulated the man into a sexual encounter so that she could get pregnant, force marriage, and live in the United States. In the film's opening scenes, Baby Oku and her mother argue with the man's mother who threatens to kill herself if her son does not marry Baby Oku. Subsequently, Baby Oku arrives in Atlanta and begins life with her new husband, Okechukwu. Life proves difficult for her husband, but not for Baby Oku.

The film contains numerous moments of cultural ignorance that result in Okechukwu's increasing frustration with his wife. First, Baby Oku causes a scene in a restaurant when she does not understand American food and screams at her husband's suggestion that they order hot dogs for supper stating that she will not eat dogs "hot or cold". Later, she is arrested after attempting to buy groceries with Nigerian Naira instead of American dollars. Okechukwu becomes embarrassed during a prenatal doctor's appointment when Baby Oku insists on taking a bush substance that will cause her unborn baby to lose weight so she can easily push it out during delivery. She is arrested a second time for becoming violent with a homeowner when attempting to enter a house she believes is hers. Throughout these incidents, she threatens to call 911 and accuse Okechukwu of domestic violence if he disobeys her. She frequently screams, "I know my rights. I will call 911", using her limited knowledge of American law to force her husband to be submissive to her whims. Fearful of the police,

Okechukwu gives in to Baby Oku's importunities. He begins to lose clients in his architecture firm when Baby Oku's constant demands make him late for or miss important meetings. By the film's climax, Okechukwu has lost many fellow African friends who despise Baby Oku's rash and stubborn nature, especially after she misbehaves at a party and insults the host and hostess's choice of party foods.

When her mother, mother-in-law, and a friend visiting from Nigeria admonish her behavior, Baby Oku does not listen. She refuses to believe that her husband's business is failing and ignorantly states that because they live in America, there is money for him to pick up in the streets. Baby Oku does not understand that he must work hard to support her; her ideas about America and money are naïve and quite ridiculous. Upon growing tired of his wife's constant bullying, embarrassing outbursts, and unwillingness to adopt a more sophisticated and traditional African countenance, Okechukwu abandons Baby Oku close to the time of their child's delivery date and leaves her to fend for herself. The closing shots and credits of the film show Baby Oku, hugely pregnant and alone on the streets at night, lamenting the fact that her actions have led to her husband's disappearance.

Baby Oku's behavior throughout the film could be read through an imagological lens; she epitomises the stereotypical images often associated with African women and Africans in general. As Manfred Bellers argues, "our images of foreign countries, peoples and cultures mainly derives from selective value judgments (which are in turn derived from selective observation) (Bellers and Leerssen 2007: 4). Beverly G. Hawk argues that since "Stanley was sent in search of Livingstone, Africa has been a wild adventure story and it continues to be perceived as such. The images and representations of Africa [...] then, is worse than incomplete, it is inaccurate" (Hawk 1992: 4-5). However, Baby Oku subverts what Abah contends are continuously reinforced ideas about African women as wild animalistic creatures who are ultimately submissive to the men in their lives (Abah 2008: 341). She argues that submissiveness as the ideal characteristic for women and wives has found a place in the oral traditions of many ethnic groups, popular cultural sayings (slang), songs, idioms, and proverbs and they "reflect what appears to be deep-seated beliefs and attitudes about the social and domestic role of women in society" (Abah



2008: 342). Baby Oku is not submissive, she demands her husband's submission to her, and has no respect for the traditional role she is still expected to play even in the American home she shares with her husband. The film makes no attempt to redeem Baby Oku or her behavior; she is a loud, obnoxious, ignorant, and provincial bush woman whose greatest sin is her lack of obsequious femininity. Though Baby Oku is acutely different than the submissive Joyce in *Anchor Baby*, Baby Oku is similarly punished for her ambitions, but primarily for her refusal to be a proper wife. Baby Oku becomes alone in America with no husband and no means of supporting herself. The viewer is left to wonder what will become of the very pregnant woman. Will her husband return? Will the people she alienated help her? Will she give birth in the United States without her husband or any family to aid her transition into motherhood? Despite these questions, the message the film sends is clear: Baby Oku is solely responsible for her misfortune because she refused her role as a traditional African woman and wife.

As scholars like Abah (2008), Jane Bryce (2012: 71-87), Green-Simms (2012a, 2012b), and Larkin (2008) have long contended, the portrayals of women in Nollywood films have not strayed from traditional understandings of acceptable African womanhood. Any deviation from acceptable African womanhood is routinely and harshly disciplined. In these films, control of the domestic household resides solely with the male character, even in situations where the female character is more financially successful than her male counterpart. Abah notes that in these films "a good woman is submissive to her husband and is considered arrogant and unfit as a wife unless she is willing to defer to her husband on all issues" and deference to the husband is not "a result of the integrity of the man or any qualifying capabilities other than the fact that he is a man" (Abah 2008: 343). *Baby Oku in America* acts as a morality tale or as a potentially disciplining force. The film says to its male viewers: be careful of the type of woman with whom you have sexual relations because you may come to regret your choice. However, the sharpest message is reserved for female viewers. The film says: behave like a proper woman or you will be severely chastised.

In both films, a transparent transnational message emerges that speaks to the African continent's paracolonial milieu. African viewers are told they can never fully leave behind their African

customs and values once they arrive and settle in the United States. Joyce and Baby Oku are trapped within the paradox of progress; both films posit the idea that migrating can be a positive step, especially for characters seeking better opportunities for their families. Yet, these Nollywood films show the difficult realities and paradoxes of migration for characters who are overly ambitious and who behave outside African cultural norms. The characters learn that the structures (and strictures) of African tradition can become a habituating and disciplining power even in the United States. Success in America is only given to those who maintain their African values, who place home and community (in Africa and America) before themselves, and who create sustainable links to the African continent through constant contact and relationships with fellow Africans living in America. Before migrating, both Joyce and Baby Oku believed the United States would offer them freedom and a way of life unlike what they lived in their paracolonial African home nations. However, what they believed proves erroneous. Ultimately, what they come to understand about America and what they experience turns their American paradise into a nightmare.

CONCLUSION

The cautionary messages within *Anchor Baby* and *Baby Oku in America* offer a particularly apt lens for analysing the ways in which transnational Nollywood films seek to expose the dilemmas and hardships that may arise for African immigrants, particularly African female immigrants when they sully their culture. Just as the immigrant film characters who left their African homes for the United States are examples of the transnational flows of people, ideas, and culture, Nollywood is also an example of the potentials of both globalisation and glocalisation. As a transnational cinema that has glocalised elements from diverse media cultures like Bollywood and Hollywood, continuously moves, and is made local around the world, Nollywood's affective power is evident in these two films. Not only do they rely upon hyper-dramatic plots to narrate stories of the African immigrant experience in the United States, each film reflects the highly resonant paracolonial African sociocultural, economic, and sociopolitical identity matrices that



exist for individuals, particularly women, from the continent living abroad.

The highly affective world these Nollywood films reflect not only offers African viewers a means to see how their cultural values operate beyond the continent's borders, it can also act as a corrective to the notion of the United States as a place where African immigrants can deny or dismiss tradition in favor of individualism. *Anchor Baby* and *Baby Oku in America* offer portraits of the day-to-day skirmishes between African and American culture that many pre-migrants may believe they can avoid upon arrival in the United States. The films' cultural juxtaposition of African tradition and values and its representations of the paradox of progress enables immigrants to paint a new affective picture of their African home and the America they must renegotiate for emotional, experiential, and intellectual survival.

As Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome state, "Nollywood stirs the imagination, provoking its viewers to compare their own daily lives with what is presented on-screen as they explore the similarities and differences between the pro-filmic and the filmic world" (Krings and Okome 2012: 1).

How does Nollywood stir imaginations across the globe? Its growth into a transnational industry can be attributed in large part to the popularity of the dramatic narrative conventions it has perfected. The clash between Western modernity and African traditional, as evidenced in *Anchor Baby* and *Baby Oku in America*, with a focus on the spectacle of melodrama is a common aesthetic and narrative practice in Nollywood films. A simple message is posited for Nollywood audiences watching these films. True African values of home and tradition always win out over the sins of avarice and a longing for a Western modernity that induces extreme individualism. Though Western modernity is not considered inherently evil in either film and is celebrated as a path toward economic autonomy for African people in America, these films and others suggest that centuries-old African values must mitigate individualism so that romances with new cultural landscapes do not lead to loneliness and tragedy.



NOTES

¹ I borrow the pop-pop-pop phrasing from a conversation I had with a few Nigerians about Nollywood while traveling around the nation in the summer of 2011. I learned then that a Nollywood film can be produced in as little as ten days if the director/producer has the necessary funds to complete the film. Without a steady flow of cash, productions can be delayed until the director/producer can raise the money to continue.

² The rise of IrokoTV as a transnational phenomenon has garnered attention from international news outlets since it began in 2011. For an overview of IrokoTV CEO Jason Njoku's building of his African film streaming empire, see "Making a Fortune by Distributing Nigerian Films Online", *BBC.com*, last modified 7 May 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-17896461>.

³ The U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Office of Immigration Statistics data shows that approximately 1.8 African immigrants currently live in the United States with about 1.5 million coming from nations south of the Sahara. As of 7 June 2017, the most recent OIS data is from 2015; data for 2016 has not been released. See United States Department of Homeland Security, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2015* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, 2015), 6-11, <https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/YearbookImmigrationStatistics2015.pdf>. These numbers do not include race-based data or data on undocumented migrants.

⁴ The name Merit in the film is ironic because it suggests that Andy does not have merit and has done nothing to merit his dutiful and loving wife.

⁵ Malcolm MacDonald to Professor Harlow, 27 February, 1940, The British National Archives, Kew, Colonial Office Records, CO: 859/22/16.

⁶ *Fuji* and *jujú* are popular Yoruba dance music forms. *Fuji* came out of a Yoruba Muslim practice where singers used song to awaken the faithful for morning prayers during Ramadan. *Jujú* is a highly percussive dance music where the lead instrument is the "talking drum". The term *juju* can also refer to witchcraft. For more information, see T. Falola (2001) *Culture and customs of Nigeria* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing Group).

⁷ In an occult economy, postcolonial economic forces reveal the lopsided nature of African capitalism and financial abundance magically or mystically appears with no clear link to employment or other labor. The phrase "doing 419" relates to the number in the Nigerian Criminal Code that deals with advance fee fraud.

⁸ My definition is in conversation with previous scholarship that explores the connection between globalisation and culture and the ways cultural imperialism affects the global media landscape. See J. Tomlinson (1999), *Globalisation and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) and J. D. Straubhaar (2010), *Beyond Media Imperialism: Asymmetrical Interdependence and Cultural Proximity*, in D. Kishan Thussu (ed.), *International Media: A Reader* (New York: Routledge), pp. 261-278.

⁹ Scholars like Jedlowski, Hoffmann, and Giovanna Santanera discuss the transportability of Nigerian cinema and the ease with which transnational audiences relate its narratives in their work.

¹⁰ For a comprehensive overview of Ghana's relationship with filmmaking and Nollywood, see C. Garritano (2013), *African Video Movies and Global Desire: A Ghanaian History* (Ohio University Press).

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