

Economic Migrants: Resonance of Nollywood and the London Experience

Ambrose Uchenunu Oroboh & Ene Obaje

University of Benin, Nigeria

Abstract

The economic recession witnessed in Nigeria in the early 1980s exacerbated the decline in Nigerian cinema, which was still struggling to establish its place as viable entertainment industry. Barely 15 years of movie production and exhibition, indigenous feature moviemaking on celluloid declined along the nation's picture houses. The vacuum left by the movie industry nurtured Nollywood, which created a movie making phenomenon beyond the shores of Nigeria, with exceptional reception from Nigerian and Afro-Caribbean communities in the UK. This opened up a new vista for Nollywood moviemaking and distribution in London by Nigerian migrants there. This essay is anchored on the reception theory, as it pertains to encoding and decoding as well as postcolonial theory, permeating every aspect of the work. It explores the viability, acceptance and fear of survival of Nollywood movies in the UK. Methodologically, the research is qualitative in nature, employing interviews to ascertain how Nollywood movies have nurtured the eclectic migrant culture in the UK. Findings show that a resident Nollywood movie maker did not just refute being tagged a home video movie maker, but was apprehensive of the decline of Nollywood going the way of celluloid. The crux of the essay thus resides in the reception of Nollywood movies in the UK, and the film maker's rebuttal of being tagged Nollywood moviemaker due to the exclusions of his hybrid Nollywood movies from British cinemas and British audiences.

Keywords : Moviemaking, Economic migrants, Nollywood, Exclusion, British Cinema

Introduction

The history of migration is as old as homo-sapiens. Migration simply means taking all belongings and relocating to another place of abode to return to the old place of abode at some

later time or never to return at all depending on the circumstances. Thus, the propelling force behind migration is therefore hinged on easy means of livelihood, health, security and safety. A handy example of migration could be traced to the Christian Holy Bible where Jacob, due to famine, relocated to Egypt (Genesis 42-46), and then the Exodus of the children of Israel out of Egypt, heeding to God's promise and migrating to "a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3.17). If God directed the children of Israel to leave Egypt to such land of Milk and Honey, it would mean that either Egypt was going down in economy or there existed a place better than Egypt. The next mass human exodus which was witnessed in the 21st century, is that of Syrians fleeing persecution and war, by-passing UAE and Saudi Arabia in all their affluence, to far away Europe, passing through Turkey to far away Germany of 40 hours by road to seek better living condition as opposed to Saudi Arabia of 20 hours down south. (Google map). This clearly places Europe as more lucrative economy and a liberal culture than their fellow Arab nations. Migration then was free movement just like animals do annually without any inhibitions. This free movement was set to change when people started building empires and harnessing environments to themselves particularly with traces of early civilisation of the eastern world. According to Carno, "One of the earliest known references to passport and exit visa is found in the Hebrew Bible. Nehemiah chapter 2, verses 7-9, dating from approximately 450 BC, states that Nehemiah, an official serving King Artaxerxes I of Persia, asked permission to travel to Judea. The king granted leave and gave him a letter "to the governors beyond the river" requesting safe passage for him as he travelled through their lands" (Carno, A. online).

Visa is a Latin word, *charta visa*, meaning "paper which has been seen", with the seal of the king of the host country allowing the visitors the right of passage into the territory of the host king or community. The introduction of photo passport bearing the image of the carrier came into being in the early 20th century following the aftermath of World War I where visa to cross borders became mandatory depending on the civilisation of the individual countries. From this humble beginning, the world came to be caged in the modern servitude of border control, thus altering the very free existence of homo-sapiens, a freedom still being enjoyed by non-human mammals. The reasons for migration cannot be

any other than the search for greener pastures and physical security. Bradley simply wrapped it up in *Fractured Identities: Changing Patterns of Inequalities*, that,

Migration of people around the globe, whether undertaken freely in search of new lands or better prospects or forced on people because of warfare, conquest or economic disaster, has involved the mixing of group of people from different territorially based communities, and is currently manifested in the 'multi-culturalism' or 'social pluralism' of societies such as America and Britain where a multitude of ethnic groups co-exist (Bradley, 2000).

The causal effect of this is hinged firstly on the trans Atlantic slave trade that lasted for well over 300 years and later the 'almighty' colonialism which, in its persistency, has metamorphosed into postcolonialism which has become endless.

In slave trading, migration was by brute force. During colonialism and postcolonialism, migration was by self-will, and now in *post-postcolonialism*, migrants forcefully embark on the tortuous journey even under imminent dangers of death in the Sahara desert or sea. In all, colonialism is seen as a strong force that engendered migration, hence Bradley is quick to point out that, "The relationships of colonialism and its legacy are one important aspect of the great web of racial and ethnic relations which binds the populations of the contemporary world together" (Bradley, 2000). He went further to explain that 'Race' and ethnicity are the offspring of the territorial arrangements responsible for the migration of people from different territorially based groups around the world. Take note of the words "territorial arrangement". Colonialism engendered the movement, and why the movement is taken cognizance of, is because of territorial boundaries. The boundaries spelt out migration boldly, and because it is a movement of a less privileged (migrant) to a more privileged position (host community) problems of acceptance becomes a great issue with the "White" world, more so when race and physical appearance is conspicuous.

This essay, a reception research on the consumption of Nigerian home video movies, documents the developmental stages of the production of home video movies in the UK by resident Nigerians, doing it the "Nigerian way" (Arce and Goldblatt). They have an insight, into the consumption of the images by the

growing population of Afro-Caribbean in the Diaspora and the diverse cultural groups in the UK. Being an interview based, this essay exhaustively discusses the responses to some of the salient questions raised within Sonaiya's style of filmmaking and narratives in *King of my Country* (1997) and *Spin* (2000) with the problem of acceptance. This may have prompted Sonaiya, who try not only to adopt western style storytelling, but also western speech mannerisms which oscillate between British, American and Nigerian accents which we criticised as root-less initially, but on a deeper look, we sensed a hybridity dictated by cross cultural existence. The main objective is that in reading the interviews and attitude of residents in the United Kingdom, this research unveils the viability of Nollywood movies outside the shores of Nigeria, debunking dampened criticisms levelled against it by Nollywood filmmakers in the UK who decried low popularity of the medium as not having a place in world cinema industry. It looks at the racia-cultural differences that exist between Africans and Europeans and the problems of acceptance of the less privileged.

Problems of Acceptance and Social Identity

The cause of racial discrimination particularly between black Africans and white Europeans is a sociological research on its own which is beyond the scope of this essay, however, this research will take a look at the problems of acceptance and identity as an immigrant and a minority in a European community. Independent filmmakers in the US, particularly of Black Identity, suffered this prejudice in the 1960s and 1970s. Critiquing this rejection, Ed Guerrero writes, "For blacks have been subordinated, marginalised, positioned and devalued in every possible manner to glorify and relentlessly hold in place the white-dominate symbolic order and racial hierarchy of American society" (Guerrero, 1993). (The British which is also a white dominated culture is no different). The bold shift from this subordination makes him to laud what he calls "the black film wave of the 1990s" following Spike Lee's "Tell it as it is" epigraph at the opening of *Malcolm X* (1992) (Guerrero, p.1). The reasons for subordination here may not be under the purview of this research, however, reception theory tends to have accommodated this discrimination which may be due to problems inherent in encoding and decoding particularly where there are cultural differences. With a complete different cultural background,

decoding the meanings in the filmic text may be difficult or may be misconceived by the reader and thus the meaning encoded by the author of the script and further by the director that interprets the script may be lost, and may be further lost by the actor that performs the screenplay.

Our quarrel with the reception theory is that while it may be difficult for most Europeans to accept or fully decode the filmic text of other cultures, other (black) cultures, particularly the educated ones do not see a veil hanging between them and the meanings in European movies. This brings us to the issue of timidity on the part of Europeans. There is primal fear on the part of Europeans which degenerates into xenophobia and irrespective of their large population as host communities, it is ironic that they are the ones that are petrified instead of the minority in their midst. Personal experience with doctoral colleagues in the UK is a case in point. On several occasions, one of the researchers walks into his classmates in the corridor discussing in clusters. When he walks into them to join them in collegial interaction, they disperse as if they have exhausted the topic in discuss. With this pattern of behaviour which was also confirmed by a fellow with the same cultural background as one of the researchers, they cleverly avoided their clusters. This problem of acceptance clearly plays out in Wole Soyinka's poem *Telephone Conversation* in which the poet dramatised the challenges Black Africans encountered when looking for apartments to rent from 'civilised' white landlords and landladies in England (Senanu and Vincent, 1976). This racial timidity would have been prevalent in the years preceding the millennium. This discrimination of skin colour sensitivity of a tenant which may qualify or disqualify them of rent has eased and we would confidently say was non-existent in the 2000s.

The short poem encapsulates the fear of a landlady who wanted to rent her apartment to an African of dark skin colour. The poem establishes problems of acceptance by the white European. Quoting Cheikh Anta Diop, in a chapter entitled *Image of Others*, Marimba Ani writes that blacks are not racist and are not afraid of ethnic contact which is pointed out as the weaknesses of the black civilisation from medieval times till the present. Blacks are cosmopolitan as opposed to white counterparts whose racist tendencies stem from fear and traits of

the primitive Aryan (Ani, 2007, p. 304). The Aryans (German) feel superior to every other race hence, after winning four gold medals in Berlin Olympics in 1936, Jesse Owens was speculated to have been denied a handshake by Adolf Hitler, an advocate of the superiority of the Aryan race, feeling humiliated. This feelings of superiority have beleaguered African movies exhibition in the European world where the African movies, according to Eddie Ugbomah, are regarded as ethnographical arts, and thus relegated to be screened for free, for educational purposes or more demeaning, the producers are charged fees for their films to be screened (Ukadike, 2000, p.89). So, when Nigerians in London embarked on the venture of movie production in England, they were neither armed with the history of their host community, the bitter pills suffered by their predecessor African filmmakers, nor researched the lessons from Black independent filmmakers in the United States as documented in *Framing Blackness: African American Images in Film*.

The London production presents a unique setting and narratives, which are distinct from Nigerian cine and home video movies owing to numerous reasons viz: The popularity of the movies caused by nostalgia is uppermost among the reasons. The movies became the easiest alternative by which Black Africans in the Diaspora, resident in London are kept abreast-of the culture that they have left behind. Secondly, Nollywood movies are more detailed in recalling the story of Nigeria than news media and documentaries could ever report. Nollywood Movies relay a greater amount of social information than the producers envisioned. Thirdly, they serve as juxtapositions with western movies and dramas that abound everywhere. Fourthly, as fictional narratives lost their vogue, the Afro-Caribbean audience in the Diaspora began to find non-fictional narratives fulfilling, thus making Nollywood movies an alternative entertainment medium in this regard, according to Segun Akindayini and Philips Dada two Nollywood marketers. Whatever they meant by that may just be that Nollywood narratives deal with mundane issues with less technological sophistication and of course doubling the daily tabloids in the dissemination of current incidences in the socio-political culture of Nigeria.

These reasons led to the unprecedented success of this format of production where video rental/sales soared in shops in London. The success reflects in many Afro-Caribbean food shops

which add Nollywood movies as part of their merchandise. These were some of the major factors that lured artists in London to embark upon the video production format. The London metropolis therefore witnessed its own fully produced Nigerian Nollywood movies which, no doubt, was necessitated by the profit accruing from the sales of Nollywood movies by video shop proprietors metamorphosing into marketers or distributors.

One of the motivating factors that led Nigerian moviemakers resident in the UK to embark on Nollywood Movies production, stems from the knowledge that Nigerians at home cherish foreign products to a fault, and where desirous to make and export those movies from the UK. The success was very doubtful because Nollywood caught on this initiative to start shooting scenes called London scenes. The results are astounding, judging by the increase of people attracted to the industry and by inference from my interview with Ayo Sonaiya, an economic migrant to the UK turned filmmaker. This increase suggests a huge market in the UK and in Nigeria if not in Africa, assuming distribution is properly handled and piracy considerably curtailed.

The African market in the UK is yet untapped owing to the fact that the people are more comfortable with movies on videos than going to the cinemas due to socio-political and cultural reticence, besides busy schedules as immigrants who went to seek greener pasture with obvious hustling spirit. This sudden withdrawal from cinemas was misconstrued in the documentary aired by the *BBC News 24* television when the presenter commented that in Africa, "people can't afford the big screen movies", obviously tied to the appalling economic situation prevalent in the continent (*BBC News 24*). Again, untoward report by western press oozes significantly in that report. Rather than an inability to 'afford', the comfort, safety and ease associated with the small screen movies should be considered as the motive for withdrawal. Also, the continued fall in price of domestic electronics, overtly enhances the popularity of movies on small screen over the cinemas, and this was the moment moviemakers and economic migrants, especially those that have their trails running between London and Nigeria/Africa sought to capture in financial rewards.

Irrespective of the fact that he was born and lived the most part of his life in Nigeria, and have lived in the UK and the US, Sonaiya still have a genuinely strong attachment to Nigeria. This attachment is glaring in his movies, not just through the actors and the characters, but the narratives. His narratives explore the pallid lifestyle that immigrants particularly, Nigerians lead in the UK, which is likely to be a representation of a wider perception outside the shores of Africa. The tendency to fall into the hands of criminals and unavoidably become enmeshed in crime is denoted as near certainty as “socio-economic conditions of life are below their expectations”. (White and Woods, 1980 p. 1-20). His films appear to be crusades against the many social vices within the black community ranging from immigration, joblessness, promiscuity, forgery, fraud and of course the merchandising and consumption of hard drugs.

Taking us on a memory lane, Akindayini narrates that,

The Nigerian video distribution industry started in the UK in 1989, running as mail orders, until the first video rental shop opened in 1991. Statistically, he estimated that 50% of the customers are Nigerians; 20% African Blacks; 15% Caribbean whilst 10% are Whites/light skin of whatever origin and this includes Asians. (S. Akindayini. personal communication, April 10, 2016).

Phillips Dada’s response corroborates with those of Akindayini though, not as comprehensive.

Dada claimed,

That a lot of people including Caribbean now patronise the hvm rentals, compare to three years back, and that there is a stronger market for Yoruba language movies due to the presence of a large Yoruba population in London, and that this escalated reception was in rentals, but not in sales. (P. Dada. personal communication, November 15, 2016).

This however would have included those who understood the language and those who just want to associate with the Nigerian culture. The views of the marketers is a little different from those of Sonaiya, whose views of his movies are different from mainstream Nollywood type, even though they are replete with Nigerian immigrant actors and narratives about Nigeria or Nigerians in the diaspora. He says,

My film is for the World if you look at my logo, my company logo everything I do is for the World. I show Nigerian creativity to the World. Kingsley Ogoro's film is made for the Nigerian market and for the London and any Nigerian around the World that is interested. If you watch my films, my films are not stereotypical Nigerian story line. Although it involves Nigerians, but not stereotypical Nigerian storylines, that only Nigerians all over the world can enjoy it. I make films for...I mean my film has been to LA Pan-African Film Festival, New-York Black Film Festival, and BFM Black Film Festival here in London, Sundance Film Festival, and FESPACO in Burkina Faso in 2001. We send our films to film festivals and we do the whole thing and we got real reviews. (A. Sonaiya. personal communication. November 14, 2016).

The desire to stand out from the endless list of Nollywood moviemakers motivated Sonaiya to dissociate himself from the Nollywood label. This issue is not unconnected with his encounter with a Black couple who refused to see his movie -*Spin* following their late arrival to see *Gladiators* (2000). According to Sonaiya,

...and a Couple, (black) came to watch *Gladiator* and just realised they just missed it and the guy was saying 'well the next film coming up is this Nigerian film'. He was trying to sell them the film so they can just pay, and go and watch it. She just yelled, 'what is a Nigerian film?' And I was standing right next to her. That question struck me. Saying, 'what is a Nigerian film?' and I have been asking myself that question. Is

it a film made by a Nigerian? Is it a film with Nigerians in it or it's a film about Nigeria. What is a Nigerian film? (A. Sonaiya. personal communication, November 14, 2016).

Dissociation and the Apprehension of Rejection in 'What is a Nigerian Film'

There are a number of issues raised by Ayo Sonaiya which require analysis. Like some other Nigerian Nollywood movie makers and critics, he is of the opinion that the Nollywood industry was on the brink of collapse, or to use his words, "is in the mud". He was very sceptical about the viability of the industry and opines that claims made by Nigerians and marketers that more non-Nigerian nationals have become avid consumers of Nollywood movies was unfounded. Irrespective of his exposure to the industry, Sonaiya was not in position to give statistics of the number of other nationals who were receptive to Nollywood movies. Statistics of such a nature could only be ascertained from marketers to the Nollywood movie industry, video shop owners or grocery owners that rent or sell Nollywood movies as part of their merchandise, and through survey research. The two major Nigerian Nollywood movies marketers in London interviewed were candid about the popularity of Nollywood. Segun Akindayini expressively said that the "impact of the industry was quite significant as Africans in the Diaspora, West-Indies and 'White' Europeans have taken interest in Nigerian films" (S. Akindayini. personal communication, April 10, 2016).

Philips Dada's response reiterates that of Akindayini, that "Not only Nigerians, but all other African countries as well as the Caribbeans" have taken interest in Nollywood movies is an attestation to the popularity of the medium in the Diaspora (P. Dada. personal communication, November 15, 2016).

Based on this information and personal observation, the growing popularity of Nigerian Nollywood movies amongst Afro-Caribbeans in the UK is obvious as revealed in the interviews conducted in London in the course of this research. My host in London, Kennedy Imogu (and his household in London), a Nigerian relocated to London over fifteen years ago, who does not watch Nigerian movies was intrigued when one of the researchers played *Osuofia in London* part I (2003) in his house. Unable to play the part II due to time constraint, he emphatically said he

was going to buy the part II, but somehow told a colleague of his, a Jamaican, about the movie. According to Imogu, that same day his Jamaican friend rushed to get the parts I&II of the movie and through him Imogu watched the part II of *Osuofia in London*. (C. Imogu. Personal Communication, November 16, 2016). Needless to say, word of mouth is the best advert, as coming from a witness. This revelation however, unveils three factors that have crippled the huge financial success that the Nigerian Nollywood movies industry would have witnessed in London and back at home.

First, there is the issue of piracy — the means by which Imogu obtained parts I and II of the movie. This source of film distribution inhibits any income to the producer due to communal coexistence radiating within the cultural circle of Nigerians or Blacks and Africans in the Diaspora. Communalism was the same reason Mark Jancovich gave for why though there is a huge reception, Bollywood film industry remained undeveloped in comparison to Hollywood (M. Jancovich, personal Communication November, 2006). The target audience lives in close knit community, and if one person has an interesting movie, it makes the round in the community. Without stressing this any further, it is an indication of one major factor that has reduced the financial strength of the Nigerian film industry at home and in the Diaspora.

Secondly, the scenario shows how people's awareness are generated or rekindled towards the industry. Movies are publicised by word of mouth through friends, families, colleagues or sometimes casual acquaintances such as Imogu and the researcher, Imogu in turn to his colleague, ad infinitum, especially if the images and narratives are worth the time. This is corroborated by Sonaiya who believes that "it is the nice films that Jamaicans are watching" (A. Sonaiya. personal communication, November 14, 2016), which is obvious. No one sees a bad movie and tells his friends to see it except for critical purposes or academics. A further research into the reception of Nollywood movies outside London into the East Midland still revealed a growing popularity of Nollywood movies made easy by Nigerian food shops in Nottingham which still dedicates a section of the food shop to display Nollywood movies in CD^s for sale and rent. In Wilok's International Food Stores UK, owned by (Chibuzor

Okolo) in Nottingham with a branch in a nearby city Derby, Nigerian movies is the 5th item on the list of merchandise, (www.wiloksinternational.co.uk. Accessed Nov. 12 2018). A personal conversation with him in June 2019, revealed that the recent feat Nollywood has attained with the likes of Omotola Jalade Ekeinde topping Time magazine's 2013 100 most influential people, Stephanie Okereke Linus' movie, *-Dry* (2014), and Genevive Nnaji's *Lion Heart* (2018) have upped the game in the reception of Nollywood movies in the United Kingdom amongst Afro-Caribbeans. (C.Okolo, personal communication, June 12, 2019).

Sonaiya's, rejection of being tagged a Nigerian home video moviemaker was the crux of the interview. His experiences especially with the couple who asked with disdain, "what is a Nigerian film?" (A. Sonaiya. personal communication, November 14, 2016), could have led him to reconsider the shape his future narratives would take. The narratives of his two movies, *King of my Country* and *Spin* are typically Nigerian, falling into the genre of crime fiction and exposé of the underground world. Sonaiya's proposition to detach himself from the narratives and images he is already identified with, will pose some difficulties in marketing his movies. His standard of production might not be commensurate with those of Hollywood. This, he admitted when he stated, "I'm an independent filmmaker, I can't afford to shoot celluloid on my own budget" (A. Sonaiya. personal communication, November 14, 2016). Veering from his usual narrative will mean losing an audience already choked with mainstream productions, who seek escapism in narratives that addresses their predicament as minority and underprivileged amidst a 'foreign' culture. For this reason, the power of the audience should not be treated with levity, since it dictates production in the market. This is concisely enumerated in the argument posited by Okome in his study of the audience, referencing Karin Barber that, "The audience is constituted by a *longing* and a *belonging* and both characteristics are defined by some purpose in the end. This purpose may be vague, but it is strong enough to effect a "coming together"" (Okome, 2018).

His action of rejection, calls to mind Chinua Achebe's teaching of the anxious African analysed by Okome. The condition of the anxious African, he writes, "is the source of our problem." We are anxious because "Africa has had such a fate in

the world that the very adjective *African* can still call up hideous fears of rejection". This fear is palpable, but "running away from myself seems to me a very inadequate way of dealing with an anxiety", and that if writers should opt for such escapism, who is to meet the challenges? (Okome, 2018) This reference was necessitated by Achebe's encounter with a Nigerian relocated to New York, and which is similar to my encounter with Sonaiya. His anxiety to break free of the 'Nigerianness' in his future movies, which will be difficult to achieve, is beyond an attempt to cut a niche for himself, but rather is suggestive of 'running away from himself, and if his action is a reaction to the Black Couple who asked, "What is a Nigerian film", then he unknowingly, is equally ploughing the course he questions in the Black couple.

Except for the street shots which are British, his cineaste is replete with 'Nigerianness' due to the narratives and cast. Sonaiya will find it increasingly difficult to sever himself from Nigeria in the production of his movies because of his status as a diasporic filmmaker, calling to mind Ralph Crane and Radhika Mohanram's interest in Sigmund Freud's *The Uncanny*. The clear border between the world and the home, the outside and the inside, the public and the private [they write], dissolves and each becomes a part of the other. Such a sensibility is repeatedly present in diasporic writers, in that there is no clear demarcation between home and the strange, between the public and the private, as the politics of the one informs the other in an 'other' land, in an 'other' country (Crane and Mohanram, 1994, p. x). These diasporic narratives including Sonaiya's are clear embodiment of this eclecticism.

Conclusion

Economic Migrants: Resonance of Nollywood and the London Experience, deals with the issue of resilience in the face of rejection and prejudice particularly when there's racial divide. The challenges African American movie makers encountered in the 1960s, and how they were able to surmount the problems of having White audiences comes handy here. Doggedness should be the watchword as it paid off the African-American filmmakers. They never begged to be accepted, but the dynamics changed due to this and the dichotomy between white produced movies and the African American counterpart is hardly noticed today. The

same goes with the doggedness of Nollywood movie marketers in the diaspora, London to be specific. The recognition that Nollywood movies have accorded Nigeria and Nigerian artistes is enormous. This would not have been possible if the movie makers had crashed out, out of criticism and derision from critics like Ayo Sonaiya, as well as the initial disparaging reception Nollywood movies may have received from the point of view of Sonaiya. Netflix recognition of Nollywood would certainly have been a far cry ending up in mere wishes. We are sure Ayo Sonaiya would have had a rethink by now. Certainly, the cross border migration for economic empowerment has helped the popularity of Nollywood movies in faraway lands, believing in what they do, and the resilience contributed in changing the narrative for Nollywood movies.

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