

## Nollywood: Spectatorship, Audience and the Sites of Consumption

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### Nollywood on the Rise

Nollywood, the cinematic phenomenon that was inaugurated in Lagos, has known an unprecedented measure of success in its homeland, Nigeria. It is beginning to make its mark outside this home turf. Since the year 2000, it has gone from one international Film Festival to the other, and the gain it has made in these years has been consistent. In 2002, this author was invited to the second edition of the Festival of African and Caribbean Film, which was held in Barbados. Tunde Kelani, the veteran camera man and producer, who is also one of the icons of Nollywood, was also invited to present one of his video films, *Thunderbolt*. Jane Bryce, one of the organizers of this Festival, was clearly excited to formally introduce Nollywood to the audience of the island nation of Barbados for the first time. Bryce's introduction of Nollywood to this audience rephrased what is now "common talk" in the scholarship of the video film to date. It did so from a critical and serious manner, pointing not only to the uniqueness of this medium in the visual culture of Africa but also in the world cinematic expression as a whole. Bryce's take on Nollywood as an art and industry shows how and why Nollywood compels attention from those outside its field of operation and cultural vision, not that the industry cares for any attention from the outside. In fact, one of the characteristics that marks Nollywood as an autonomous local cinematic expression is that it looks inward and not outward, and one can accurately argue that it does so in all aspects of the production and organization of its operation. Bryce also made the point about the difference between Nollywood and the Francophone cinema of French West Africa that was the touch-bearer of what was known as *the African cinema* before the emergence of Nollywood. Indeed, as Bryce notes,<sup>1</sup> Nollywood does not "have the opportunities for training and production financing" of Francophone cinema and does not "go to the biennial Pan-African Film Festival (FESPACO) in Burkina Faso." Yet, it is remarkable in very radical ways. As a result of this success, Nollywood has been able to circumvent the problems that African Francophone filmmakers whine about and has done so successfully in the last twenty years or so. It has moved the discourse of cinematic representation away from the blame game that is obvious and somewhat compellingly

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<sup>1</sup> Please see the program website

<<http://humanities.uwichill.edu.bb/filmfestival/2003/films/kelani&okomi.htm>>

represented in the scholarship of cinema production and culture in postcolonial Africa.

Nollywood is commercially-savvy. It values the entertainment of its clientele. The entertainment bit is primary to the mode of representation in the industry, yet in that pursuit, one cannot forget its sense of mission, which is to produce culture from the bottom of the street, so to speak. Nollywood provides the imaginary for certain marginal sections of the society where it operates. It is the poorer part of its postcolonial base, which is no longer restricted to Nigeria. This marginal clientele is now found among people on the continent and in the black diaspora where such postcolonial conditions prevail. However, this is not to argue that Nollywood clearly demarcates its potential audience along social and economic lines. Even if it tries, this will not be successful in a society where the gulf between the rich and the poor is often a fluid spectrum of negotiations for access to power and money. If the organizer of the Nollywood event at the second edition of the African and Caribbean Film Festival recognized the continental significance of Nollywood and its economic and social importance to the audience that it caters for, this cannot be said for other Film Festivals, especially in Europe and North Africa. The organizers of Barbados Film Festival showed a remarkable, and rare, sensitivity to Nollywood. Outside of Nigeria, and indeed Africa, Nollywood is still largely a curiosity. One typical example was the 2004 edition of the Berlinale Film Festival, which was held in Berlin, Germany. Another was the 34th edition of the Montreal Film Festival. Each of them privileged Nollywood as a “curio.” In moments of doubt for these organizers, Nollywood became a piece of artefact—a piece of *something* from *somewhere* far away but something that is interesting all the same. In this regard, it is noteworthy to point out the 34th Berlinale Film Festival had a curious title for the Nollywood video films: “Hollywood in Nigeria or: How to Get Rich Quick.” For the organizers, the visual practice of Nollywood cannot exist outside of the cultural and institutional framework of Hollywood even when this Festival program announces at the same time the undisputed difference that Nollywood has made to African cinematic life and discourse. That announcement also comes with a tinge of the “exotic.” In the introduction to the screening of Nollywood video films, the Festival highlights the cobbling together of video films “on a shoestring budget.” Of course, the second part of the title links Nollywood to the famous Nigerian scam, the advance fee fraud that is now commonly known as “419.” This ambivalent attitude to Nollywood has obvious draw-backs. Even if it does nothing to dampen the enthusiasm of the local audience or shake the faith of video filmmakers in themselves, it does take the local audience for granted. This essay is about this local audience, and about the ways it consumes Nollywood. It foregrounds the collective gaze of this local audience, and contextualizes the sites of consumption and the regime of meaning which these sites give to the practice of Nollywood as well as the meaning of spectatorship in the industry. Furthermore, this essay seeks to demarcate and read these sites of consumption as popular rendezvous where social meanings meet with the fictional world of the video film, and are then recast into

an unending spiral of other social texts. This essay will also highlight how members of this audience recoup and perform a peculiar postcolonial condition in its encounter with video texts in these popular spaces of consumption.

Nollywood is the latest strand of the Anglophone African cinema. The other prominent category is the Francophone cinema. Its “headquarter” is in the city of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. The most eloquent expression of Francophone African cinema finds outlet in the Biennial Film Festival, which is held in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso. It is the Festival Panafricain Du Cinema et De La Television de Ouagadougou (FESPACO). Before the emergence of Nollywood, it was the African cinema. West African popular video film is different from this Francophone cinema industry. Popular video film, which is the cultural product of Nollywood, is unique in many ways. While there is no doubt that Nollywood exhibits the hybrid character that is obvious in many forms of African popular arts,<sup>2</sup> it is its acute notation of locality that gives it an unprecedented acceptability as *the* local cinematic expression in Nigeria and indeed in Africa. With the emergence of video film, the discourse of African cinema will need to be rephrased in very radical ways. While the wholesale adoption of video technology by practitioners in Nollywood has been an unqualified local success, it is the spirit to defy the economic malaise of the cinema industry in Nigeria that led to the adoption of this “new” technology. What this success signifies is the will to overcome the problems occasioned by economic and political hiccups in the 1980s with the slump in the local currency. Perhaps even more important is the desire expressed by video filmmakers to keep local stories in the narrative program of this local visual culture. By appropriating the terms of video technology the way that Nollywood has done in the last twenty or so years, this local cinema has demonstrated to its audience and to the cinema world at large that it “has not despaired of making some kind of sense out of its own hieroglyphics” (Gottesman 5). In the same vein, it has invested in its playful narratives of the social and cultural life of the Nigerian postcolony a nuanced essence of parody, which, according to Robert Frost, “opposes the dominant discourse” (qtd. in Gottesman 1). Nollywood does this in the most subtle manner.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, the form and content of Nollywood narratives reminds the casual observer of the obvious ties it has to the complicated trade in global media images even when the point has been made of its unique place in world media culture. The social and cultural stimuli that enervated the industry in the late 1970s<sup>4</sup> also demonstrate why the text

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<sup>2</sup> This point is well made in two very influential essays dealing with popular arts in Africa. They include Anthony Kwame Appiah’s “Is the Post-in Postmodernism the Post-in Postcolonialism” and Karin Barber’s essay on the subject, “Popular Arts in Africa.” The polyglot “man on the bicycle” example is the typical expression of popular arts in Africa.

<sup>3</sup> This impression is very deeply etched in the careful reading of the text. It is most obvious in what Bond Emerua, a producer in Nollywood, has to say about this in the newly released-documentary film, *This is Nollywood*.

<sup>4</sup> See the essay, “Preliminary Note on An African Popular Art: The Video Film in Nigeria” *Voices: Wisconsin Review of African Literature*. 2/ 1999:51-69. See also

of popular video film stays close to the sociality of its less than elite majority clientele. My insistence on the importance of the peculiar sociality is a way of demarcating the uniqueness of this cinematic practice as well as expressing the will of those who patronize its cultural product.

The prevailing myth of the origin of Nollywood circulating among scholars is that a certain Igbo trader in the Idumota area of Lagos suddenly chanced upon an ingenious way of disposing a large cache of VHS cassettes, which he imported from Taiwan. Taking advantage of prevailing social, economic and political circumstances in the post-war Lagos of the 1970s, this trader diverted the use of these VHS cassettes into recording and retailing of local theatre performances and productions.<sup>5</sup> Not long after, other traders saw the financial benefits to be derived from the voracious appetite for popular video film shown by an army of subscribers, some of whom came from the emasculated audiences of popular Yoruba travelling theatre tropes in the western parts of Nigeria. Reacting to this need, popular video producers quickly redoubled their efforts, and before long, a string of popular video films were put into the market. Lagos quickly became the mecca of video production, making the sites of the consumption of the cultural product of Nollywood essentially parts of that cultural landscape. But if the origin of popular video film is linked to the Yoruba travelling theatre tropes of the 1970s, this was to change quickly in the coming years as popular video film become more and more cosmopolitan in outlook. The years following the crude representation of theatre productions on vhs soon vanished. Yoruba, the language of the itinerant performers of the Yoruba travelling theatre tropes, was replaced with the English and the Pidgin English, and the main themes that engaged early Yoruba video producers changed from the mythological world of the Yoruba pantheon into the “ghettoized”<sup>6</sup> world of the new urban world that Lagos represented. In this dynamic, a new audience was inaugurated and with it new sites of consumption. It was the cosmopolitan audience of popular video film.

Right from its inception, the debate around the cultural relevance of Nollywood was part of the larger question of this filmmaking tradition. This debate has a direct bearing on the place of the audience, and it is intricately connected to the social sites where video films are consumed. In this regard, I have elected to privilege the contribution of Pierre Barrot because the opinions he expresses represent some of the most salient arguments put forward on the matter. In his own words, Nollywood is “conquering new territories because the domestic market is becoming too small” (2). But he argues that the Nigeria film (meaning popular video film) is still deficient because it is still far

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“The Popular art of African Video-Film.” *New York: New York Foundation for the Arts*, 2001. (See the web site [www.nyfa.org/fyi/fyi\\_summer2001](http://www.nyfa.org/fyi/fyi_summer2001))

<sup>5</sup> See Egun Clark’s study of the father of this theatre tradition, Hubert Ogunde, in her book, *Hubert Ogunde: The making of Nigerian Theatre*. Biodun Jeyifo’s *The Truthful Lie: Essays in Sociology of African Drama* is also a useful reference in this regard.

<sup>6</sup> For a fuller and well informed discussion of the transformation of Lagos in the 1970s into a huge “ghetto” of an army of squatters and the jobless, see Jeyifo.

from creating any “impact on national unity” the way other cinema industries have done elsewhere. He notes that the reason for this is that Nigerian films “are shown neither in the movie theatres nor on TV,” and that most “Nigerians films cannot enjoy a large audience because of the Censors Board that is seen by many as perhaps too restrictive” (6). His prognosis is that “a new development could make the Board change its mind: the re-emergence of the cinema theatres” (6). He gives the example of the newly established Silverbird Cinema Complex located in Ikoyi, an affluent neighbourhood in upscale Lagos. Based on this example, and on the possibility of replicating the Silverbird example, Barrot concludes that “a new market is emerging that is less popular but more prestigious and in this market, [the] Nigerian films no longer enjoy the monopoly they were used to in the home video sector” (6). This comment touches the heart of the operation of Nollywood as an alternative narrative code of a popular art form. I will return to this point shortly. For Barrot, the catch then is that “the re-emergence of cinema theatres in Nigeria though it is starting with foreign films will surely help to revive people’s interest in film and automatically compel directors to shoot better, bigger and, especially, in a more beautiful manner”(6). His position assumes that there is a lack of interest among the audience of popular video film in “foreign films.” This is hardly the case. Field evidence points to the fact that there is a lot of interest in “foreign films” among members of video film audiences. For this audience, it is neither one nor the other. Interest in “foreign films” does not amount to a depreciation of the avid attachment to video film. Members patronize “foreign films” as much as they do local ones. Essentially, what marks the postcoloniality of this audience is the deep intention of being immersed in both visual cultures without being strictly compartmentalized into any one. Its interest in Nollywood is different from the interest it has for Hollywood or any other cinema culture for that matter. Barrot’s suggestion that only the re-invigoration of the moribund “movie theatres” and the screening of Nigerian films in these venues and on television will assure the growth of this art form misses the point. This position surely smacks of a lack of understanding of the history of the audience of popular video film. It shows a lack of understanding of the economics of the venues of spectatorship in popular arts in Africa. More importantly, it writes over the important feature of the alternativeness of spectatorship which has come out of the art of seeing in Nollywood. This essay reads spectatorship from this position by confronting and exploring the alternativeness of this mode of visual consumption. It focuses on two sites where the consumption of video images takes place. It locates the sociality of these spaces and shows how they constitute another form of the production of knowledge in the postcolony.

#### “Public Spaces” and the Audience of Nollywood

The audience of popular video film has a special role in Nollywood. But like most audiences of popular expressions in Africa, few studies have been done to deal with issues around the importance of this audience; there is no denying the fact that this audience is central and

important to the production and consumption of art and literature, especially popular arts on the continent. Indeed, understanding the multiple dimensions of this audience is indispensable to the goal of problematizing ways in which knowledge is constructed, used, or circulated, dispensed and re-invented in Africa.

Karin Barber recognizes this lack in the field and points to the need to bridge critically the lacunae in scholarship if our desire is to “uncover histories of consumers in African popular genres” (“Preliminary” 347). One way to study popular audiences in Africa, she argues, is to understand the concept of the “public” as a new form of “coming together” (“Preliminary” 353). Barber cautions that this act of “coming together” “must be carefully qualified and can only be properly understood “if the specific forms of address, use of space, mode of staging, and expectations and interactions of performers and spectators are empirically established in their surprising and subtle details” (“Preliminary” 353). While it is true that this is not a peculiar characteristic of the Africa visual audience, what truly distinguishes the African popular audience from popular audiences elsewhere is the peculiar history associated with its formations. Barber points to the sources in the history of art criticism as academic discipline and to that overarching historical trauma—colonialism. If the audience of Nollywood is a peculiar category in Africa’s cinematic history, so too are the sites where this audience consumes the visual dreams and despair that Nollywood produces. While it may be argued that these sites display the condition of postcolonial abnegation of desire and want, two of them present a more eloquent writing of this condition than the others. They are the sites located on the “street” and what I refer to as the “video parlour.” “Street sites” of consumption are *ad hoc* spaces of seeing. On the other hand, the site of the video parlour displays another sense of “coming together.” Each site presents the presence of an absence. For instance, it is the absence of capital that makes it possible impossible to engage in the consumption of these images in the more orthodox space of consumption such as the cinema halls. This is one of many absences. Although Nollywood is also consumed in the context of the domestic sphere, which renders the appropriation of the videoed world as a familial engagement of the fiction of Nollywood, it is the uncontrolled sites of consumption in the streets and the video parlours that account for the democratization of the narratives and purpose of Nollywood. It is not only that these sites of consumption render spectatorship in Nollywood as a fluid field of reading culture, it also privileges the presence of an absence as we know it in the production of culture that had been tightly controlled by the ruling and intellectual elite in Nigeria until the emergence of Nollywood.

There are two main kinds of “street audiences”: the “street corner” and the “video parlour” audiences. “Street audience” is the umbrella designation for a special kind of audience that congregates on the streets. These audiences are commonly found in the cities and are essentially defined by the desire to enjoy the re-telling of the social and cultural existence of members in the temporality of these *ad hoc* meeting places. The first category of “street audiences” is the “street

corner” audience. This category of the street audience converts street corners into veritable spaces for the consumption of the visual images from video performances. In this site of spectatorship, members do not have the comfort of a cinema house. Standing all the way through a screening, they literarily “suffer” through the experience of viewing the same way the poor characters of video tales suffer in the rough and tumble of their unpredictable lives in the city. Since the advent of popular video films, “street corner theatres” have become part of the visual topography of the city, through which motorists must navigate to access roadways back home or to other destinations at the close of the working day. The act of this peculiar “coming together” is often effected during the evening, just when workers of the city are heading home for the day. The constitution of this audience is fluid, and this fluidity is in turn constitutive. Members of “street corner” audience are linked together primarily by the goal to see what is making headline news in the city, and elsewhere in the country. By paying attention to what is making the headline news in the city, members assert their collective place in the turbulence of Africa’s tragic economy. This act of involvement implicates popular “street corner” audiences in the social turbulence that is the result of this economy of want and desperation. The symbolic and temporary conversion of “street corners” into social spaces of engagement with the visual world of the video film is only one of the markers of the economic poverty of this group of consumers.

“Street corner” audiences come together in front of video and music stalls. These are the main outlets for the rental of video and music cassettes, VCDs and DVDs in Nigerian cities. The proliferation of video and music stalls is a prominent character of Nigerian cities and towns since the emergence of Nollywood. These stalls have since become part of the visual topography of these cities and towns. In profound ways, these stalls have remapped social spaces in these cities and towns. Although this re-mapping may indeed be temporary, while it lasts the spaces that these “street corner” audiences inhabit are invested with cultural and political value, the kind which only the postcolonial condition can provoke. In these street corners, the flotsam and jetsam of the city and towns act out the performative essence and the social relevance of popular expressions in Nigeria. It is part of the performance of the postcolonial condition of want and desire.

The video parlour is a simple location where members of a community congregate for the sole purpose of consuming video narratives. The material technology of the video parlour is sparse. It can be anything from a small, stuffy room in the neighbourhood to a disused school hall. The essential quality that it must possess is that it has room enough to take in people who are willing to pay a small fee to see video films with other members of the community.<sup>7</sup> This screening room is fitted with a television set and a video recorder. Depending on the spending power of patrons and of the neighbourhood, the television set could be anything from a 14-inch

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<sup>7</sup> Fees are usually very inexpensive by international standards but not by local standards. At the Warri video parlor, I paid N20 for one of the screenings, which translates to about US\$0.16.

screen to 27-inch one. The screening room is often “crampy” and uncomfortable. It is not a cinema hall and does not have the apparatus of a modern cinema hall either. Sidney Little Kasfir once described this space as the video theatre partly because of its link to the social roots of the practice of popular Yoruba theatre in Nigeria and partly due to the contention that “contemporary African art has built through a process of *bricolage* upon existing structures and scenarios on which the older, pre-colonial and colonial genres of African arts were made” (13). There is some truth in this. The suggestion is that this site of screening has obvious links to the performance structure of popular Yoruba theatre practice of the 1970s. “Video theatres,” like the improvisational theatre stages, are patterned along the mode of improvisation employed by this theatre practice. This is also only partly true. Although the transition into video theatre from the informality and the improvisational structure of the itinerant Yoruba travelling troupes was particularly compelling in the late 1970s, the *bricolage* that Kasfir suggests has a broader implication for the audiences of video parlours. Like the local cinema halls, video parlours are still generally gender specific. Women may be admitted but are hardly seen as regular patrons. The social space of the Nigerian video parlour is masculinized. Women who venture to cross this social barrier are often tagged as “free women.” In the years following the emergence of the video film as a distinct popular genre in its own right, this social space of spectatorship has remained completely male-dominated.

### Reading Nollywood and Its Ironic Sociality

Reading the African popular audience is a complex task. The complexities are explainable. Françoise Bayart offers us a way of reading this audience in what he refers to as Africa’s “ironic chorus.” This description collectivizes the ironic location of this army of the abject that live dangerously in the tragic economy begotten by Africa’s kleptomaniac leaders. In *The State in Africa: the Politics of the Belly*, Bayart describes the “public” as an “ironic chorus” (12). The performance of the ironic by this public is a critical one. It is also inevitable because it is a mode of survival as it is act of performing. It is a form of social and economic negotiation, a way of being for the vulnerable and weak. There are a number of reasons for this performance of the ironic but by far the main strategy is subversive in its interpretation of this political terrain and of governance. Its maps of engagement with social and political issues capture innovative ways of providing for the belly in difficult political situations and these “publics” do become the “popular audience” at very short notice as they do this. Deeply marginalized, the narrative options available to members of this public describes the phenomenal life that each member lives in this ironic sphere. As part of the world of the “ironic chorus,” this category of the African audience is always on the lookout for creative ways out of the complex and tedious life that members live and the economic and cultural negotiations they perform traverse definable boundaries. In the realm of performative exchange between the narratives of debilitating lives and the strategies of circumventing

the debilities perpetuated by the uncaring State, members often seek magical ways<sup>8</sup> out of mundane problems and mundane ways out of spiritual things. If political and economic powers are lost to this category of the popular audience, narrative power is not. Powerlessness in the roughly organized political and cultural spheres is converted into a peculiar narrative power in the realm of this existential disorder. What comes out of the various narrative acts of this ironic chorus is what we may refer to as “popular narratives.” Often hiding under the subterfuge of abjectness, members of the popular audience negotiate and restate their desires, aspirations and dreams without the fear of institutional intrusion. This pragmatic method of telling the social and economic concerns of the abject gradually builds up into neighbourhood feelings, which then offers alternative means of survival for members in these popular neighbourhoods whose social and economic interests are often left unattended in the larger political dispensation of the State. These neighbourhood cells then inaugurate different kinds of economic and social belonging. As members re-think their places in the life they are forced to live, affiliation to specific neighbourhood communities become one of the crucial ways they define social belonging. In many African cities, this sense of belonging redraws the meaning of community, nation, nationalism and individuality in ways that inevitably signals the depletion of State as the platform for social and institutional order. Davis Hecht and Maliqalim Simone refer to these cultural and social formations as the “invisible governance, a frame of elliptical efforts that maintain competing agendas and aspirations” (13). It is in this zone of social activities that the public is transformed into the active *audience*. The audience that I refer to is not constituted as an *a priori* category but by the semantics of the peculiar needs of the moment, which are always but loosely inspired by social and economic contingencies. In other words, the newly constituted audience exists, as it were, in a flexible geography of desire. Proximity to scarce national resources is resoundingly absent to members of this audience, yet members always seek to attain that status of duplicitous politics even when they criticize the duplicity of the politics of the State. In many instances, this audience may give up specific class affiliations, education, age or gender differences for the purpose of a temporary “coming together” but it does not give up the aspiration of a social mobility that seek to replace or even come to the same economic status as the political ruling class, which is perceived as the stumbling block to its common welfare. This is one of the ways that members of this audience perform the helplessness of living in the world of “lottery

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<sup>8</sup> Achille Mbembe and Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff have provided telling manifestations of how African localities in the new millennium express the depressing psychosis of the magic of despair. In many African localities of the new millennium, “magic” is the buzz word, and anything and everything is linked to this word on the symbolic and realistic realms, with a result of what Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff describe as “lottery economy.” In these localities, life itself becomes a lottery of some sort and magic, the catalyst of the lottery existence. See Mbembe’s “African Modes of Self-Writing” and Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff’s “Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on A Second Coming.”

existence.”<sup>9</sup> Popular video audience is clearly an example of this category of the African popular audience, which performs the “discontent” of Africa’s postcoloniality. Part of the intention of this paper is to understand how and why Nollywood creates this sense of a community of suffering in the different sites of meeting.

### Street Corner Audiences in Lagos

Nollywood is the medium of the Nigerian city. It is indeed a cultural child of circumstances. Its sense of purpose is determined by the temperament of the city. It is a medium of the city. It is only a city like Lagos that could have engineered and nurtured its birth. Lagos, the birthplace of this phenomenon, is the quintessential postcolonial city. This city is heavy with its burden of the past but light-headed in its dizzy, if not boisterous, drive to look ahead. Its history is no less dramatic. Nesting rowdily on the Lagos Lagoon, and fed by the tidal uncertainties of the Atlantic Ocean, this “ocean-city” was once described as ‘the malarial coast’ by Eileen Thorpe.<sup>10</sup> But it has gone through a lot of changes since it was first made a crown colony of the British Empire in the 1860s. The trauma of colonial occupation and its aftermath; the repatriation of ex-slaves coming from as far way as Brazil and Cuba in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century and the culturally diverse local population of the Lagos area, have all added colour to the social history of this community. Even today, Lagos exhibits the socio-psychological pathology of an ocean community that is always in search of itself. As an ocean community, its body, like its history, remains fractured.

Lagos displays this fractured psychology in the cultural forms that it promotes and consumes. As a city, Lagos is loosely defined and like all postcolonial locations, both the built and dreamed environment display this fractured psychology. Framed on various notions of cultural *bricolage*, Lagos often welcomes the idea of change and mutation with a sense of a *déjà vu*. Always at war with itself, the cultural history of this city has been one of constant negotiations with itself and its parts. However, what marks Lagos as the quintessential postcolonial city is not so much the external history of colonial subjugation, and the resurgence of the cultural worth of the local population; rather, it is precisely its eccentricity, which is defined in its cultural and political renewals. Considered the “centre of excellence” in independent Nigeria, Lagos quickly established its status as the main city. In the realm of culture and the arts, it has always led the way and it has continued to do so because of the freedom it offers to everyone

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<sup>9</sup> See Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming.” I draw the reader’s attention to page 271. Their definition of this social and political existence fits well into the character of the audience of the video film. For instance, “lottery economy” is defined as the social and cultural zone of existence where, “life is assimilated to a game of chance, a lottery, in which the existential and temporal horizon is colonized by the immediate present and prosaic shot term calculation.” This is also part of what defines the “ironicity” of the actions of members of the video audience that I mentioned earlier on in the body of this essay.

<sup>10</sup> See Eileen Thorpe, *A Ladder of Bone: The Birth of Modern Nigeria from 1853 to Independence*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books, 2002.

in it, especially to newcomers. Long before many of the communities in Nigeria truly got on the bandwagon of the so-called “global village,” Lagos had already established itself in the very nexus of that “village” as early as the late 17th century. As soon as its status was recognized as the crown colony, this city quickly attracted the good, the bad and the ugly; pastors and other men of God, sinners and madmen who, in search of the new freedom, were also searching for the will to overcome the malarial temperament of this city. By the late 1950s, Lagos was culturally positioned to lead the newly created nation in matters of culture, especially urban culture. It was here, in this ocean-community, that the experience of the first “magic lantern”<sup>11</sup> became a novelty that would stay on in the minds of Lagosians for a very long time. It was also here, more than half a century later that the energetic burst of cultural activities that led to the creation of Nollywood, one of Africa’s most exuberant cinema cultures, was hatched.

The geography of Lagos is divided in two by the Lagoon; one affluent and the other not. The affluent neighbourhood is called Lagos Island. This is where all the embassies and foreign missions are located. The other part is called Lagos Mainland. It is the high density, low-income area of the city. On the Island, there is a noticeable lack of the proliferation of video parlours. There are hardly any sightings of “street audiences.” Nonetheless, there is an impressive array of video stalls all over the Island. But activities in these video stalls are subdued. A lot more caution is observed in the blaring of music from loudspeakers in these stalls. A number of them have television screens facing the streets but there are hardly people in front of them. Once every while, street hawkers of sundry goods and services come into view and then disappear. Men and women in business suits move briskly about. Most of them are attached to business concerns with multinational companies. In this part of town, the rich can afford to acquire the technology of video projection and so do not need the video parlours. Many of the video stalls located in this part of town mainly do the business of selling and renting video films and their poorly built structures add to the special colour of the city. In this part of town, the re-mapping of the visual and aural landscape of the city is as visible as it is in the other part of town. This visual alteration has also helped to create a sense of a local cultural form of expression that cannot be ignored. The exuberant presence of Nollywood in this part of town points to the fact that it reaches beyond its primary constituency of avid patrons—those from the bottom of the social and economic ladder in Nigeria. Yet, one could also argue that the re-mapping of the landscape in this part of Lagos, which the proliferation of video stalls instigates, shows how this local form disrupts the carefully planned world of this postcolonial city by the departed colonial government. Even if this re-mapping is not a conscious desire, the very act of mapping itself points to the ways that abjectness

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<sup>11</sup> See the account of the first screening of documentary shorts in Alfred Opubor et al, *The Growth and Development of the Film Industry in Nigeria* (2-4). It is reported that the first screening was done in 1904 at the Glover Memorial Hall, which was located in the Lagos Island area of the city. The Alake of Abeokuta was said to have been in attendance.

exercises power in the most opaque manner in this situations. Perhaps even more telling is the fact that the proliferation of these *ad hoc* viewing venues in Lagos is a clear indication of how, to quote Okwui et al, “the changes in the modern paradigm . . . challenge old colonial spatial design” as they “slowly began to lose their decisive functionalist parameters and became subordinated to the mutations wrought by new civic and urban culture” (15).

The experience of watching the character of “street corner” audiences was different in the Lagos Mainland area of Lagos. The common ground upon which these screening venues are recognized as viewing sites of the abject still remains the same in the case of Lagos Mainland. But on the Mainland, the proliferation of “street corner” audiences was much more apparent and obviously more widespread. One area of the Mainland where the proliferation of video stalls and “street corner” audiences was prominent is the notorious junction between Lawanson Road and Ojuelegba Road in the Surulere. Fela Anikulapo Kuti, the Afrobeat maestro, once described this junction as symptomatic of the chaos of Lagos in one of his popular songs. All day long and in all four sides of this junction, video stalls screen different kinds of video films. These screenings are done mostly in the evening when the sun has set and the atmosphere more tolerable for bystanders who casually stop for a while to enjoy the dramatic presentations coming out from television screens in the different stalls. During my visits to Lagos, there were always groups of people standing before these screens. They watched and talked animatedly about the visual world that unfolded before them. Like all “street corner” audiences, these meetings were very temporary. In all the times that I visited this area, there was no let up in the enthusiasm shown for popular video film.

In the Mainland part of the city of Lagos, video stalls do not need to be quiet. The video stalls were overly loud and nobody seemed to care. It was mostly in this part of the city that I observed clearly the character of the “street corner” audiences of Lagos, and the ways that members consume the cultural product of Nollywood. Unlike the report of the video film audience at the Warri video parlour, my report on the “street corner” audience in Lagos is rather indeterminate, a character which follows from the fluid nature of this audience. However, it is important to point out that in both sites of viewing, Nollywood and all that it stands for, clearly proclaims its importance in the life of the people—rich and poor. Perhaps, this is more so with those who live the abject debilities of Lagos and Warri.

Quite understandably, the audience of the video parlour is by far a more stable category of the street audience in Nollywood. While it shares a lot with “street corner” audiences, it is marked by the presence of a *place*. The physical space of the video parlour has a lot in common with the domestic sphere of video film spectatorship. If the extremely fluid nature of the “coming together” of “street corner” audiences makes it rather difficult to truly follow members of this audience through one or more screenings, this is not always the case with the audiences of specific video parlours. Video parlours are generally run for profit. Proprietors aim to keep the business going by providing

some of the basic necessities such as electricity and the convenience of a permanent location. Nollywood's "street-corner" audiences do not have these luxuries. I will now discuss my experience of seeing one video film, specifically, *Domitilla*, in a video parlour located in a village at the outskirts of Warri.

#### In the Warri Video Parlour

*Domitilla* was released in 1997. By the standards of Nollywood, it was a huge box-office success. It was produced by DAAR Communication Ltd., Lagos and the story was written by Zeb Ejiro, a veteran in the video industry. The screenplay was by the late Ken Oghenejabor. The blurb on the jacket of *Domitilla* is as telling as the story of this prostitute girl is dramatic. The real drama of reading this video film should begin here. This dramatic blurb, which has a literary parallel in the blurbs of the Onitsha market pamphlets of the 1950s and 1960s, directs the attention of the reader to the main characters in the story that "had to make a living. And the business turned sour, (sic) just when they beat a retreat, she (sic) wasn't to know the worse is yet to come." *Domitilla* describes the story of Domitilla as "[c]ruel, gruesome, revealing the life of a prostitute." Domitilla's story is indeed a cruel one by all accounts, yet it is not so different from the many stories of the city in Nigeria, especially the city of Lagos, in which women are victimized and sometimes callously murdered in the streets. The story opens in the red-light district of Lagos. It is night. Domitilla is plucked out of the pack of girls waiting to "catch their moogu." She is beautiful. She is one with the street and the city and as she goes into conversation with the "potential client," we hear her speak the poetic Warri-pidgin. She leaves with the client once she determines that the price is right. Not long after, a pimp comes along, asking for Domie. He is told by one of the "good time girls" that Domie has just gone away with her "moogo," which is the pidgin word for a "fool." The pimp laments Domie's absence, saying she has missed out on the prize catch of the night, which the pimp describes as a "whitey," meaning a white client. The picture of Domitilla as a prostitute comes out quite clearly in these opening scenes.

As the narrative progresses, we notice that Domie is not only a "good time girl." She is also a working-class office girl. She does her day-job in a depressing office under a boss who is cruel. After work, Domitilla goes back to her lodging in a decrepit and squalid neighbourhood. She lives desperately. Saddened and carrying the burden of the family back in Warri, Domie constantly negotiates the needs of her family and her own in Lagos by selling her body for money to "men who want to play boys all over again." Domie sees a chance to hit it big. She meets a local politician in one of the parties she is invited to attend as "a good time girl." He is Chief Lawson, the rich and influential politician. At first, this is merely a meeting with one of her "moogu" but she soon falls in love and as she becomes emotionally involved for the first time in her life, she begins to nurse the possibility of "settling down" with the Chief. She is briskly serenaded as "the Greek Goddess" by Chief Lawson who is, according

to one of the “girls,” the “dream of every ashewo”<sup>12</sup> in Lagos. Her hope of settling down is short-lived. Domitilla’s dream turns out to be one of the mirages of the city. In time, Chief Lawson’s wife gets her revenge. Colluding with the steward employed by Chief Lawson to wait on the desires of his mistress, Mrs. Lawson poisons the glass of wine, which Chief Lawson drinks while visiting with Domitilla in her apartment. Chief Lawson dies from poisoning and all hell breaks loose. Domie is utterly confused. She runs into the waiting hands of priest who looks more like a *marabou* than a Christian priest. She is prayed for before she is taken away by the police and charged with murder. She appears in court a little later.

The lawyer who initially takes up the case is a complete imbecile, making way for brief moments of clowning in the court room. A second lawyer is hired by Domitilla’s friends. She is a woman who has more than a professional stake in the case. She goes through every bit of the evidence of the case and when she discovers that Domie is pregnant for the late Chief Lawson, she makes capital of this point in the proceedings. However, the case turns around only when, under intense cross examination, the daughter of Chief Lawson owns up to knowing of the plot by her mother to kill Chief Lawson with the intention of framing Domitilla for the crime. Domitilla is freed of the charge and there is a huge uproar in the court-room from the friends and family of Domitilla. A second video film, *Domitilla 2* was made soon after, a gesture that is common in the industry.

The audience of the Warri video parlour has a lot in common with the “street corner” audiences that I observed at the Ojuelegba outpost in Lagos. One remarkable fact that came out during my experiences with the Warri audience is the empathic connection, which members established with the content of *Domitilla*. Like the members of the “street corner” audiences in Lagos, responses to the world of this video film came with a sense of familiarity with the story. The audience of the Warri video parlour responded to it as a story it already knows. From the discussions that went on in the “parlour,” I noticed that the city was contracted as a place that has an overwhelming presence in the lives of members. There were persistent discussions relating to women and religion in the city. The overwhelming contention on the floor of the screenings was that religion was “a market”<sup>13</sup> and that, as a commercial enterprise, only those who can weather the storm of this highly competitive business are able and likely to profit from it. Weathering the storm also means the ability to engage in inordinate social and economic vices to get desired results, including ritual sacrifices involving human lives. This comment on religion must be seen in the context of the upsurge of dubious religious activities in the country at the time this film was made. Domitilla’s dubious connection to the church and the comments that it elicited from members of this video parlour audience reveals the essence of the “lottery economy” economy in which Domitilla operates as a sex worker. This criticism

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<sup>12</sup> This is the pidgin word for a prostitute. Its origin may have come from the Yoruba language but it has now gained currency as an urban usage.

<sup>13</sup> This is another pidgin expression that refers to the commercialism of the church or that sees the church as business.

of the church as an institution that lacks social and moral credibility was also linked to ideas of wealth accumulation in the society. Comments on the activities of churches (not just the church that is depicted in *Domitilla*) by members focused on the return of profit rather than on the glorious “return of Jesus Christ.” The point of this discussion, which members hammered upon at some length, also stressed the morality of Domitilla and her flippant return to a church. Her dubious return to the church is further highlighted in the background of what members thought of as the “business” of the so-called prosperity gospel churches in Nigeria. However, at the other extreme, this audience was touched by the predicament of Domitilla. The attack on the duplicity of the church is constructed as a narrative of pity for those that these religious institutions prey on due to the inscrutability of the city. Domitilla is a fine example.

The ambivalent location of Domitilla as a “free woman” in the city was another flashpoint in the discussions. Needless to say, this aspect of the discussions went on during the screenings of the two films. It was energetic and boisterous. As the audience engaged the primary visual representation of Domitilla, the prostitute, a number of constructed texts jumped out of the primary visual text during this act of reading. There was no agreement on the moral status of Domitilla in society. She was constructed as a marginal figure and a plaything in the hands of the rich and powerful in the city. Some energy was spent talking about her marginal ethnicity in the larger configuration of the ethnic politics of the Nigerian city. Members drew attention to the very fact the Domie is from the Niger Delta, the rich oil region that constantly suffers social and economic neglect. Others questioned the sociology of the poverty of the Niger Delta that drove Domitilla to Lagos in the first place, and lamented the fate of ethnic minority groups in the power politics of resource control in the Nigerian Federation. What came out quite clearly in the ensuing discussions about the life of Domitilla was an obvious reaction to the marginalization of this section of the country. The feeling of intense anger and despair was obvious. It came from the very fact that members saw themselves as being cheated out of the wealth that is taken from their territory.

This reaction from the audience at the Warri viewing centre privileged an aspect of video spectatorship which I consider unique. The content of *Domitilla* was transformed into a platform of critical inquiry. Comments from this audience went outside the social and ethical references that this video film privileged. *Domitilla* inspired the criticism of the state and its system of governance, and the primary text was then construed as a “real story” in the same way that television soap opera operates as social barometers of the things that matter to its consumers. The reaction to the world of Domitilla became the basis of a social critique of governance and the “big men in Abuja.” By engaging in this kind of interpretation of the video-ed world, members assigned to the filmed world real social equality to the text of the video film. I would argue that while the primary visual text was important in this critical engagement and indeed indispensable to the audience’s performance of its own social reality, the critical note we ought to

make of this is that members read from a marginal social and economic status as representatives of the ironic chorus. What was positive about this engagement though was that it forced members into a critical introspection of those things that matter to them but were not expressed in the so-called enlightened vehicles of public debates that are controlled by the state. The downside of this critical engagement would be that while it offered a sense of freedom for members to say what they want, this freedom was only a pyrrhic victory of some sort. There is little doubt that the phenomenon of the video parlour has opened up the spectrum of social debate to include some members of the abject section of the Nigerian society but the agency which the “freedom” of this venue offers is achieved only in the temporal constitution of that space of spectatorship. Even in the energetic but high digressional discussions that ensued at the Warri venue, popular agency can only be but temporary.

Ideas of the postcolonial city and the place of women in it were also largely articulated during the screening of *Domitilla*. *Domitilla* was the scapegoat, the victim of the nebulous city of Lagos. There was talk about the evil of the city, the evil of rich men who derive wealth and influence from using people’s private body parts. As the energetic discussions around the issues of women and the city went on, a number of constructed texts erupted from the primary video text. Discussions around the evil of rich men in the city often veered far away from the ideas presented in the primary video text itself. Reference to the sales of body parts and how these body parts are transformed—or, if you will, alchemized—into money through magic found its way into the contending narratives emanating from the video primary text. *Domitilla* is connected to this ritual practice because she escapes being a victim of “ritual murder.” Her unfortunate friend and colleague in the prostitution trade does not. She is killed in the attack by what the Nigerian print media has dubbed the “ritualist.” Although there is hardly any aspect of the *Domitilla* story that is connected directly to this ritual practice, it serves as a flashpoint for the discussion of the inscrutable city of Lagos, which is constructed as a frightful place for women and the less privileged. The source of fascination with the urban text of missing body parts comes from the culture of video film itself. Since *Living in Bondage 1&2*, which was released in 1992 and 1993, this urban myth in Nigeria has become the stable of popular video culture itself, so that it is hardly conceivable to see any video film without some remote reference to it. *Living in Bondage* was the first big hit in the industry and not the first video film produced in Nigeria as Bond Emerua contends in the newly released documentary on Nollywood, *This is Nollywood*.<sup>14</sup> It was followed by *Glamour Girls*

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<sup>14</sup> Released in 2007, this documentary film is one in the plethora of documentary films that have recently focused on the Nollywood phenomenon. Bond Emerua, who is a very significant director in Nollywood, gives the impression that *Living in Bondage*, one of the classics to come out of Nollywood, is the first video film produced in the industry. This is not quite the case. There is ample evidence to suggest that Chief Kenneth Nnebue, who is obviously the “father” of Nollywood, had sponsored some Yoruba video filmmakers before he ventured into making *Living in Bondage*. See Emerua, *This is Nollywood*.

*I&2*, and then *Ritual*. All three films were made by Chief Kenneth Nnebue. *Blood Money I&2* reified this urban myth and concretized its place as part of the tentative sub-genre of the city video film. As part of this cultural backdrop, the Warri audience can only explain the sudden accumulation of wealth in the city from the perspective of “ritual murder” and the magical alchemy of body parts into paper money—local and foreign. In this conversation, members refer to the wealth that is generated from these ritual exercises as “blood money.” For this audience then, the city is a place to be feared. But there was also the obvious and palpable acknowledgment of the paradoxical and enigmatic pull which the city exerts.

### Reading the Audience of Popular Video film

Focusing on the two spatial arenas where the audiences of Nollywood consume popular video film, I wish to draw a number of conclusions as a way of pointing to the importance of these sites of seeing and what it means to the study of African cinema and to African visual spectatorship in general. The conclusions that draw from my observations of the “street corner” audiences in Lagos and of the more stable video parlour audience in Warri can only be tentative. In the very act of engaging with these audiences as members divine their individual and collective places in the social and cultural debate in contemporary Nigeria, the most noticeable undercurrent is the pronouncement of their abject status. Members acutely play out the status of their ironic chorus in these viewing venues as well as their ironic ambition of becoming part of the corrupt ruling class, which Nollywood often critiques. As part of this ironic chorus, members are inevitably implicated in both the discourses of postcolonial cities and in the performance of the malcontent of their postcolonial modernity. From the sites of spectatorship to the performance of the reading of video films, the scholar of popular art is confronted with the difficulties of assigning absolute knowledge to both forms of performances in these sites of seeing. Yet, the bold presence of the abject debating abjectness is never lost to the scholar, nor is the valuable presence of the video medium in the lives of the abject. In this dialectics of performance and reading, it is the content of the video films that mattered and not the medium. This is the point that Bond Emerua, one of the directors of Nollywood, made obvious in *This is Nollywood*.

There are bold and obvious similarities between the audiences of the video parlour in Warri and that of the “street corner.” Perhaps, the most obvious is that they are both defined by a strong desire by those left out of public narrative of life in Nigeria to be part of the story of the city and of the nation. A large chunk of the membership of the two audiences is also denied access as part of the hegemonic narrative put forward by the State. Lacking access to State controlled media, they turn to the video film. They give freely of their collective consent to use this medium as the alternative platform to achieve an alternative narrative goal. Clearly then, the history of the emergence of popular video film is connected to the deep-seated desire by this group of Nollywood consumers to have a voice in the social and cultural

debates of the time, which is why they give their unprecedented support to the pioneers and pathfinders of Nollywood. It is this support that has sustained the industry thus far. It is no surprise therefore that the predominant theme of popular video film revolves around the stories of the city, especially stories about the inexplicable *magic* of the city. Membership of the “street corner” audiences in Lagos as well as those of the video parlour in Warri, membership was fluid, very temporary, and indeterminate. Members appeared and disappeared as if by magic. While this special kind of meeting is important to the industry, my reading is that it is the possibilities that popular video films provide as a way of escape and as a platform for critical judgment on social conditions that recommend the massive patronage, which Nollywood enjoys in these sites of seeing. The geography of these meeting places also has a telling presence in the world of the city. The ubiquity of “street audiences” in cities and in rural Nigeria attests to the popularity of the medium. More importantly, it reshapes the aural and visual topography of the city as well as that of the rural areas. In the city, “street corner” sites of spectatorship admit of the flotsam and jetsam of society, and in the rural areas, video parlours admit the poor and young. By bringing this group of socially and economically marginal viewership into this social discursive formation, these sites of screening help the enhancement of the democratization of video stories in contemporary Nigeria. In a country where media ownership was, until recently, tightly under the hold of the State, this shift in the dispensation of and the engagement with public debates is significant, if not crucial. As social centres, “street corners” and video parlours provide alternatives to the orthodox space of cinematic spectatorship. While they announce the material poverty of its audiences, these venues are open and the debates that go on in them are unfettered, unrestrained, and sometime very vociferous. In the very short time that members come together to look at themselves through the mediatory lens of video films, these sites offered a world which is outside what the State configures for public consumption. Outside the influence of the State, they are able to see themselves differently and to rethink their places in the scheme of things. Mobile in space and in time, “street corner” and the video parlour audiences bring their abjectness to these sites where members play out their temporary will to speak about things that matter to them.

The one clear difference between the two posts of spectatorship is in the payment of entry fees. In the case of the “street corner,” members are not charged any fees to see a video film and they do not have any influence over what is screened either. What is projected at any time is entirely left to the proprietor of the video stall. As venues for screening the latest video releases, proprietors know all too well the advantages of positioning television screens to face the streets. This positioning is also an advertisement strategy. It is a way of announcing the availability of new video releases. Conditioned by the exigencies of the street, members may respond to this videoed world in way that can spring cultural and political surprises.

Perhaps the most enduring conclusion that I draw from my observation of these “street audiences” is the way they force us to

rethink the whole idea of spectatorship in Africa and the special uses of popular expressions such as the video film in Africa. Besides the remapping of the aural and physical landscape of the city, audiences of popular video films repeat for us the ways that the economics of spectatorship is defined as a strategic means of coming to terms with an abject status. My experience with audiences in Lagos and Warri point to the unique ways members of these marginal audiences see themselves and the world created about and for them by Nollywood. It also points to ways of understanding why and how members look beyond the images of the video films as they try to make meaning of the miseries in which they live. For the audiences of video films in Nigeria, the medium is more or less a mirror into two distinct but interrelated worlds: the real world in which they live out their ironic reality, and the wish-world that they seek to achieve within the magic of despair inscribed in the stories. The first of the two worlds is a painful one. The second world exists only as a dream but it is a dream world that reinforces the desire of this abject-audience to keep the narrative of social transformation and renewal on the narrative agenda. In the final analysis, both worlds are defined by the eccentricities of the city. It plays a very crucial role in determining how these audiences redraw the map of spectatorship. My experience with these audiences opened my eyes to the uniqueness of the social place that members inhabit as spectators in this cinema tradition and, as I reflect on these experiences, I could not help feeling that I do not agree with Anthony Kwame Appiah who argues that African popular arts “are not concerned with transcending, going beyond, coloniality” (348-352). My reading of these audiences *reading* video images clearly shows *why* and *how* these images function as active agents of the political economy of desire. In the end, it is not the medium or how it manipulates the stories that Nollywood tells that matter to the people who consume Nollywood. The focus is on the stories. The medium may be important but the stories are even more so. There is the need to study many more sites of viewing popular Africa.

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#### Videography

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