

Nollywood-Inspired Migrant Filmmaking in Switzerland

Nollywood-Inspired Migrant Filmmaking in Switzerland:

*Practice, Performance
and Meaning*

By

Sandra Mooser

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Link to Project Film PARADISE IN MY MIND (CH, 2015):
<https://youtu.be/ruCbVGDxKNk>

To Papa.
I miss you.

To the rest of my family.
Your continued love and support
throughout this journey was empowering
(even though most of the time you had no idea what I was doing).

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INTRO

FROM AN IDEA TO RESEARCH

“Of course, if I had the chance, I would make a film.”
(Chris, interview, 30 January 2010)

While undertaking a previous field research on the consumption of Nigerian video films in Switzerland in 2010 (Mooser 2011), I interviewed a handful of African migrants about their film viewing practices. During these interviews, we talked extensively about Nigeria’s popular video film industry—that is widely known under the name Nollywood—and the meaning of its films for the migrants’ everyday lives in the diaspora. We also discussed the accessibility of Nigerian films in Europe, spoke about the ways migrants watched the films in Switzerland and conversed on the emotional connection they felt towards the films (all of which more in chapter 1).

At the end of these meetings, I usually posed the same question out of sheer personal interest. I asked the migrants if watching Nollywood videos also inspired them to make films themselves. Even though I previously considered this a dispensable question for my research, I soon realised that it was, actually, one of the most crucial ones for my interviewees. Their interest reawakened instantly and, as a result, many of them started telling me enthusiastically about their personal film visions. They described in detail the kinds of film they would make, the stories they would narrate, and the messages they would intend to convey if ever they had a chance to make a film. In a mere ten to fifteen minutes, they defined conceivable film characters, outlined catchy plots, and developed captivating narratives—all while referring to their favourite Nollywood films and actors. At the same time, they explained that their films would not only be entertaining but also informing. In their view, it was essential that viewers be given the opportunity to learn from their films and—as I soon realised—from their personal life experiences. For although they envisioned making fictional films, they repeatedly mentioned how they would weave their own experiences as migrants into the plot and make viewers learn from their personal history. In fact, the longer we talked the

clearer it became that they understood that the making and showing of a film would not only be a fun activity to express their creativity but also a chance to share their own experiences with other people. Filmmaking for them was a way to express themselves and to tell their story to a wider audience. It provided them with the opportunity to contribute to the current narrative about them in the Swiss media and gave them a means to talk for themselves. This became especially apparent when several interviewees started to consider potential audiences and speculated about the ways they would have to adapt Nigerian filmmaking methods to make their film appealing for both African and European viewers. Their considerations were extremely far-reaching and clearly showed that filmmaking for them was more than just about entertainment. It was a means to find public recognition.

Indeed, the sheer volume of information they provided with their responses was utterly fascinating and, at the same time, also an eye-opener for me. I realised that my interviewees were part of a first generation of migrants who were digital natives of a particular cultural media practice they brought along with them to Switzerland. Aged between 17 and 46, they had all watched at least a few Western films when growing up in their African homelands. However, as it became obvious, the majority of my interviewees had not been primarily socialised by Western media. They rather referred to the media and storytelling culture of their region of origin. As a result, not the allegedly globally dominating Western media but the more familiar video film industry Nollywood served them as the most relevant reference point when telling me about their filmmaking visions. Even though I had known about the cultural importance of Nollywood for many migrants of African origin, this realisation still astonished me greatly, as I had never considered Nollywood to have such a conspicuous influence on the ways migrants represent themselves in Switzerland. In fact, it seemed as if the Nigerian video film industry and its films were not only a reference point to them but also a source of inspiration, since Nollywood made my interviewees reflect upon their lives and think of ways to make their perspectives public. This was also evident during the interviews, which gave me an entirely unexpected but very enlightening insight into my interviewees' media consumption, their lives as migrants in a (medially) globalised world as well as their deep desire for public recognition.

The Idea

After finishing my project on the consumption of Nigerian video films and the viewing practices of migrants in Switzerland, I kept thinking about these interviews. In fact, the more I thought about the migrants' film visions, the more intriguing they became. As I had never expected the migrants I interviewed to have such a strong interest in creating audio-visual products and presenting themselves in public, I started wondering what a Nollywood-inspired film production by African migrants, who lived in Switzerland, would look like. What kind of film would they actually make if given the opportunity? What would it look like if they put their ideas into practice? At the same time, my training as a social anthropologist also prompted methodical questions. If I had already learnt so much about the interviewees' lives, desires and dreams by simply discussing films and viewing practices, what opportunities would a collaboration in a film project create? What would I be able to learn when experiencing how they transform their visions into a real film?

These kinds of questions captured my curiosity and followed me for months. Spurred on by them—and sensing in some vague way that they might lead me to new perceptions—I eventually began to research Nollywood-inspired filmmaking practices and collaborative research methods. As it is often the case with new ideas, once I research them, I realise that my thoughts were less new than they seemed to be at first. In fact, I soon realised that there was a whole tradition of social anthropologists studying performative forms of representation and collaborative research methods before me. Amongst others, there was Jean Rouch (2003) with his *Shared Anthropology* and *Ethnofiction*, Johannes Fabian (1990) and his theatre project in Shaba, as well as the whole field of *Performance Ethnography* (all of which are discussed further in chapter 2). But even though I found bits and pieces of my methodological considerations in all their works, I still knew that my idea slightly differed from all their studies in content, especially since I was looking for a way to combine a collaborative film project with a study of Nollywood's transnational impact on migrant filmmakers. When it comes to Nollywood, there is actually a growing number of studies about its global dimension (Haynes 2016^a; Krings and Okome 2013; Austen and Şaul 2010; Musa 2019; Ugochukwu 2013). However, most of these contributions concentrate either on the global economics of the industry (Jedlowski 2011 and 2013; Miller 2016^a), the reception of Nollywood outside Nigeria (Abah 2009; Becker 2013; Krings 2009; Santanera 2013; Shivers 2009), or expatriate filmmakers in the diaspora with direct business connections to the video

film industry in Nigeria (Haynes 2003, 2009 and 2016^a; Geerts 2007; Jedlowski 2012; Samyn 2010 and 2013). Studies on Nollywood as a source of inspiration for migrant filmmaking outside of—and without direct professional connections to—the Nigerian video film industry are scarce, though. A rare exception are Claudia Hoffmann’s contributions (2010 and 2013) that highlight the different ways that Nollywood films, produced in the diaspora, reflect the identity of migrant filmmakers. So, despite the methodological similarity of various anthropological studies, the actual field I was exploring was ripe for further study. This circumstance, combined with the migrants’ already existing interest in filmmaking, offered exceptional high research potential I (as a curious anthropologist) could not ignore. Therefore, I took the opportunity to undertake research, which I am presenting here, upon the idea of examining Nollywood-inspired film practices by African migrants living in Switzerland through performance ethnographical research methods (more of which in chapter 2).

The Objective

Due to the questions, I had asked myself beforehand, I noticed early on in my research what a tremendous potential a film production holds for a researcher. To me, the most crucial characteristic of filmmaking lies in its double-function, since I came to comprehend—inspired by the thoughts of the sociologist Norman Denzin (2003) on performance—that film production can be understood as a practice as well as a research method. This means that film provides, on the one hand, a platform for the audio-visual realisation of a performative act. It offers an opportunity to make a film, and eventually allows conveying the film’s message to an audience. On the other hand, it also serves as a method to study the said performative act and the social processes associated with it. It can help reveal how the film team members engage with one another within the context of a film production, which is in turn influenced by particular technological, social and ideological forces. From this perspective, filmmaking serves as a means of understanding how people experience their everyday life and express themselves through audio-visual media. When acknowledging this dual function, a film production opens multiple possibilities for researchers. Amongst others, it provides the platform for a “researching by doing”-approach that allows producing and studying at the very same time. In other words, it makes it possible to be part of a film production while examining it.

The thought of such a hands-on approach that allows to actively co-create and simultaneously study the creative process has strongly influenced my research design. As a result, it became my main objective to collaborate with a group of migrants in a Nollywood-inspired film production, and concurrently examine the filmmaking processes as well as the social context behind their audio-visual self-representation. By co-initiating a film production and becoming an actively involved crew member, it was my goal to observe and experience the way, in which migrants collectively performed their lifeworlds through dramaturgical and narrative means in front of a film camera. At the same time, I intended to find out more about the forces and processes that were affecting their filmmaking, such as Nollywood, the migrants' social realities and imagination, and my presence as a colleague and researching social anthropologist—to name but a few.

However, this dual approach of taking part and researching at the same time also implied, similar to the dual function of filmmaking, that my research had to be designed within two overlapping dimensions—since my study was both an active and collaborative partnership in a film project and an independent academic fieldwork research. In order to balance these two sides of my research, I posed several questions. First, I sought to understand the film production and the chosen forms of representation. In this context, I intended to find out more about how the migrants I worked with represented themselves as a group through audio-visual media, what kind of themes and topics they depicted, what kind of viewers they addressed, and what message the final film product conveyed. When using the film production not only as a platform for performances but also as a method to examine the processes and mechanisms that lie behind the migrants' audio-visual self-expression, I also had to question the social context and forces influencing the film production. Here, I asked myself how the film team members negotiated their visual representation in the group. What is seen as representable, and what is not, and why? What kind of processes of identification and alterity become visible? How does Nollywood influence these processes and the eventual forms of representation? Finally, I also felt the need to question and reflect upon my position as a researcher and my methods. I considered whether an open and equal partnership between researcher and filmmakers is feasible. Is it possible to be a researcher and a film team member at once? How does my presence as a researcher and team member influence the production processes and the final film product? In what way can a performance ethnographical approach help us understand the process of representation in a transnationalised postcolonial context? What can I actually learn from

the migrants' audio-visual representation? Finally, in order to bring all these questions together, I formulated an overarching goal, namely to explore how African migrants represent themselves in a Nollywood-inspired film production that is partnered by a social anthropologist.

The Data

In accordance with my research concept, I became a partner in a Nollywood-inspired film production in Switzerland that resulted in a ninety-six-minute long feature film called PARADISE IN MY MIND. The production of this film lasted about four years—from a first meeting in July 2011 to the screening of the final film product at the premiere in summer 2015. Over the course of this project period, I was able to work together with a shifting group of sixty people that were very interested—but mostly not professionally educated—in filmmaking. The vast majority of the project participants were first-generation migrants of diverse social and professional backgrounds. While a third was of Nigerian descent, the rest originated from a variety of countries, which included, among others, Kenya, Angola, Ghana, Cameroon and Zambia. In addition, there were a few people of Swiss or other European origins. Many of these participants played minor roles and were often only present during one or two shooting days. Yet, amongst these shifting and ever-changing constellations of actors and helpers were also a few people that stuck to the project and formed the so-called *core team*. This team consisted of twelve people—seven Nigerians, two Kenyans and three Swiss (including myself). They were present during most shooting days, formed the heart of the project, and—since they controlled the production processes—shaped the film the most (more of which in chapter 3).

While working together with this heterogeneous and constantly changing production team, I collected abundant research materials. As I was able to be part of the whole production process, my data is based primarily on the experiences and observations I made during my active engagement in the film project. Moreover, I have access to a large collection of offline and online data related to the film project, which has allowed me to reassess and analyse the processes of which I was a part. Amongst others, there are several hundred text messages, dozens of e-mails and Facebook posts, as well as over three thousand photographs documenting the processes. In addition, I conducted semi-structured elicitation interviews with the *core team* members in a private setting outside the film project. While many of these interviews were built upon photographs, I was also able to watch and discuss the final film with

several *core team* members. Because indeed, the film itself is certainly the most crucial data source for the research. Finally, in order to complete the picture of the production process, I discussed the film with viewers during a series of public screenings between 2015 and 2020 and took notes of the verbal and non-verbal reactions of the audience towards the film. This exceptionally rich and diverse data set provides the foundation for this book.

The Chapters

In order to present my findings and give an insight into the processes of our Nollywood-inspired film project as well as the many social mechanisms that lie behind migrants' audio-visual self-representation, I structure this book into four chapters.

Chapter 1 defines the field of my study. It introduces the Nigerian video film industry Nollywood, its emergence, its particularities, and especially its transnational dimension. The chapter leads to a comprehension of Nollywood's inspirational effect on migrants and how the diasporic filmmakers transform and adapt the concept of Nollywood for their purposes. In this context, I compare Nollywood-inspired filmmaking to the ideas of *Migrant Cinema* and show how migrants use audio-visual media representations as a form of social exchange in order to communicate with their social environment.

Chapter 2 gives a general insight into the social complexity in which migrant filmmakers find themselves and in which they produce their films in Switzerland. Concurrently, it also provides a broad overview of the concepts and methods I chose to study this research field. Amongst others, it introduces the idea of *identity enactments*, shared forms of representation, and filmmaking as a *total social phenomenon*. It then outlines my methodological approaches in order to study migrant filmmaking in its social complexity. Throughout the methodological part of this chapter, my focus lays upon the French ethnographer and filmmaker Jean Rouch, whom I consider the most eminent pioneer in artistically inspired collaborative filmmaking. From the academic side, he was, therefore, by far my biggest inspiration, and his idea of *Shared Anthropology* has influenced my research the most. In addition, I introduce the newer field of *Performance Ethnography*, which also combines anthropological theories with the knowledge of performing art. Together with Rouch's ideas, this field provides, as I will show, useful approaches to realise contemporary collaborative film projects in a decolonial context, in which historical and contemporary power relations are questioned.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to our collaborative Nollywood-inspired migrant film project PARADISE IN MY MIND. It discusses the film production, the social context in which it unfolded, as well as the forms of representation it produced. By referring to and developing the concepts introduced in the first two chapters, this section focuses upon the analysis of the production processes and the social mechanisms behind the migrants' collective self-representation. It is meant to outline how the project participants came together, developed their film idea, negotiated their collective images, dealt with conflicts, and eventually chose the forms of their audio-visual self-expression. Beyond that, it also explores the meanings the project participants ascribed to the different film scenes and the kind of messages they intended to convey to their audiences. In doing so, the chapter examines how migrant filmmakers wish to represent themselves in public and what influence Nollywood has had on their filmmaking processes in Switzerland.

Chapter 4 reflects upon my personal position in the exchange relationships that I established during the collaboration with the project participants. It deals with the social interactions and power relations I experienced in our film production and shows how my function in the project influenced the social dynamics and the work process. At the same time, it also reveals the challenges of active collaboration, the dilemma of hierarchies in film productions and ethnographic research, and the contradictory tensions that accompany such research projects in their postcolonial environment. In doing so, it touches issues like discrimination, white privilege and the empowerment of research partners and raises general questions about the legitimacy of social research in a decolonial context.

In the conclusion, I will then bring together all my ideas, reflect on the implications of my book and venture a glimpse into the future.

Note

The official full-length cinema version of the Nollywood-inspired feature film PARADISE IN MY MIND, which was created during our collaborative film project and premiered in 2015, can be watched on <https://youtu.be/ruCbVGDxKNk>.

Although both the film production and the resulting film have been public, I changed the names of some of the project participants in accordance with the agreements they signed. This includes some pseudonyms (chosen either by the project participants themselves or by me) as well as the fact that some people in the text remain deliberately

nameless. In this way, I hope to respect and preserve their privacy and integrity as much as possible, despite the public nature of the project.

CHAPTER ONE

FROM NOLLYWOOD TO MIGRANT FILMMAKING

“Everything we did was Nollywood style but in an updated way.”
(Bash, interview, 2 March 2015)

The first time I became aware of Nollywood was in Nigeria in late summer 2006. Strolling through the narrow lanes of hundreds of stalls in one of the many marketplaces in Lagos, I absorbed the noise of people bartering, the smell of unknown foods and spices, the colours of fashionable fabrics, and the unbearable humidity of the ending rain season. As I wound my way through the labyrinth of alleyways lined with ramshackle stalls and discarded containers transformed into shops, my senses were bombarded by new and overwhelming impressions. While everyone tried to beckon me over to their stall with a friendly “Welcome!”, one booth attracted my attention in particular. It was a stall full of video films. On narrow shelves along the wall, on two long tables at the sides, as well as piled up in countless stacks on the floor—the shop’s whole selling space was full of colourful video compact discs (VCDs) showcasing expressive faces of what seemed to be actors of the films. While some of the faces on the covers smiled at me, others looked dramatically heartbroken, and a few even came over rather scary. However, no matter what expression they reflected, they had something oddly familiar about them and thus caught my interest at first glance. With my curiosity aroused, I stepped into the booth and asked the young market trader—who seemed slightly intimidated by the strange woman in his shop—about his stock. Timidly, but still very proudly, he informed me in broken English that they were so-called Nigerian *home videos* and very popular in the area. He then turned to his many piles, grabbed two VCDs, and handed them to me. Pointing to the covers in my hands, he explained that these were parts one and two of *World Apart* (Chikere 2004)—a film, he assured, I would certainly like. Delighted with this friendly recommendation, I purchased my very first Nollywood film for a mere four hundred Naira for both VCDs, which was just a little over three US dollars at the time.

Happy with this bargain, I went back to my accommodation to find that the residence's VCD player had given up after one to many of Lagos's daily blackouts. As a result, my purchase ended up in my suitcase and travelled with me to Switzerland. Here, I watched in utter fascination the modern-day Cinderella-type love story between a rich prince and a poor housemaid a few weeks later. Just like its two covers, the film itself was oddly familiar. In fact, it was easy to follow, and it reminded me in its structure, plot and realisation a lot of the popular soap operas and Rosamunde Pilcher films I used to watch with my mother and grandmother when growing up. Just like the films of my childhood, it was highly entertaining, easy to identify with, and clearly aimed to please a wide range of viewers. Yet, there were also aspects of the film that were foreign to me. For instance, the pace of the film was much slower than I was used to, as the dialogues—which were mostly in English—were never really on point but resembled more unstructured everyday conversations and speech patterns. Moreover, the film's quality was inconsistent and reminded me a lot of a self-made *home video*. Yet, I got used to this “home-made” style surprisingly quickly and soon realised that it gave the film its unique—and somehow refreshing—aesthetics. A bit more bewildering for my Swiss understanding though, was the obtrusive way the prince's status and wealth was presented by featuring never-ending, show-offish parades of European cars—filmed from all sides and angles, and shown for several minutes each time. But then again, this outlandishness was also what made the film so outstanding and special to me and whetted my interest in finding out more about these so-called *home videos*, their making and their impact on viewers inside and outside of Nigeria—and later also their effect on migrant filmmaking in Switzerland.

Even more so, when a few months later, I discovered that the very same film was for sale in an African grocery and cosmetics store in the Swiss capital Bern. From a small corner between hair products and wigs, the now well-known prince and his beloved maid smiled at me and made me realise that my film copy was not the only one travelling across borders and continents. Indeed, it did not take me long to figure out that the “English-language and Pidgin films” (Haynes 2016^a, xxiv) of the popular Nigerian video film industry had conquered the world long before my discovery. Emerged within a local context, the Nigerian video film business had actually become by volume one of the biggest entertainment industries in the world. Not surprisingly, it is today also known under the telling name *Nollywood*—a term which is said to derive from the 2002 New York Times article *Step Aside, Los Angeles and Bombay, for*

Nollywood by Norimitsu Onishi, in which he compared the Nigerian film sector to its global competitors Hollywood and Bollywood (2016^a, xxiii).

But how did Nollywood emerge and become such a global success without me (and many other Westerners) noticing it before? How does Nollywood work, and how does it reach its viewers outside the African continent? Who is watching Nigerian video films in Switzerland? What meanings does Nollywood hold for migrant viewers, and how does the Nigerian video film industry affect migrant filmmaking in Switzerland? In the following, I will discuss these questions of the emergence, the particularities and the global expansion of Nollywood in order to explain its meaning for and effect on migrant filmmakers more closely. In this way, I will try to provide an insight into the transnational context of Nollywood-inspired filmmaking in Switzerland and help understand the broader structures and mechanisms in which my field research took place.

Nollywood's Emergence

Probably the most important reason for Nollywood's international success lies in the fact that Nigerian filmmakers do not produce celluloid films for cinema screenings but video films for private use (Okome 2007^b, 7; Zajc 2009, 66). These videos can be made relatively easily and cheaply, and viewers are able to consume them independent of time and place—two circumstances that were crucial for the emergence of the Nigerian video film industry. However, these key characteristics were no coincidence. When looking back at the past, we will see that Nollywood was actually an innovative response to the specific historical, social and economic conditions in which it evolved.

To start at the beginning, the first documented film screenings took place in Lagos as early as 1903—thanks to private merchants who brought films and the necessary equipment to the area (Zajc 2009, 69; Ugor 2007, 2; Haynes 2016^a, 3). However, not even a decade later, in 1912, the colonial government issued the so-called *Theatre and Public Performance Regulation Ordinance*. In order to regulate the rising film sector in Nigeria and to prevent, as well as to counteract, the propagation of any anti-colonial ideologies (Ugor 2007, 2), this ordinance granted the exclusive right “to produce, distribute and exhibit films” (Zajc 2009, 69) to the colonial government. As a result, the Nigerian film landscape was dominated by “documentaries on the Queen's visits to Nigeria, English football matches, Westminster Parliamentary debates, and government-sponsored films on health and education” (2009, 69). Even though this rather dull programme was supplemented by feature films from America,

China, India and Japan in the late 1950s (2009, 69), the films were primarily “chosen to appeal to the elite [...], were often racist and were always estranged from African realities” (Haynes 2016^a, 3). The colonial government and its regulations, therefore, not only controlled the production of domestic films but also made the rise of an initial Nigerian cinema culture virtually impossible (Ugor 2007, 3).

In the years after Nigeria’s independence in 1960, the political leaders of the new republic continued to produce mostly documentary and newsreel films (Onuzulike 2007, 25), which were broadcasted by the newly emerged TV stations (Uwah 2009, 35; Haynes 2016^a, 8f.). In addition, there was an increase in the import of foreign films for entertainment (McCall 2002, 80). An autonomous Nigerian film culture—that produced its own popular feature films—did not evolve yet, though. Nigeria first had to overcome a devastating civil war (1967-1970) with hundreds of thousands of victims, and become a major global oil producer in the oil boom of the 1970s, before there was any movement in the film sector (Paleker 2005, 8; Zajc 2009, 69). Thanks to the oil, there was an economic boost, which eventually led to changes in the domestic economy and society. Part of these changes was the so-called *Indigenization Act* of 1972, through which the Nigerian government aimed to regain control over the national economy as well as private foreign investments in order to “increase the participation of Nigerians in the economy” (Paleker 2005, 8). In the aftermath, over two hundred and fifty cinema halls changed hands and came into the possession of Nigerians, and for the first time, domestic film productions benefited from financial support provided by the government (Ayemba 2009,1). However, despite several attempts on celluloid “to retell African stories and re-narrate the imperialists’ construction that had long denigrated Africans” (Azeez 2019, 10-12), the formation of a popular feature film industry still failed to appear for the time being.

Paradoxically, this formation only happened after the worldwide fall of the oil price and the consequent collapse of the Nigerian economy in the 1980s (Paleker 2005, 8). As the film historian Gairoonisa Paleker (2005, 8) writes, this economic breakdown of Nigeria and the resulting devaluation of the national currency Naira had a strong impact on the film sector. The devalued Naira made it very difficult “to purchase equipment such as cameras, raw film stock, hire huge crews or budget for lavish productions” (2005, 8). Nigerian filmmakers became simply unable to afford to film on celluloid—the format that has shaped the Western cinema culture until today (Künzler 2006, 2). As “a natural outlet for creative frustrations” (Paleker 2005, 8), they had to shift to the newer,

much cheaper video format instead. This format, as it turned out, was however not a bad alternative. In fact, it had already become a part of the Nigerian everyday life during the economic boom, when many people had purchased television sets and video players. Or, as the filmmaker Françoise Balogun (2004, 173) writes, “in the late 1970s in Lagos, it was a ‘must’ to have a video cassette player at home”. This prevalence of video technologies continued and further increased in the 1990s, when the prices of video devices started to sink on Nigerian markets after some of the older video technologies had become “increasingly dated in the First World” (Miller 2016^a, 15). Suddenly, also people with smaller incomes were able to buy video players and films. As a result, videos were not only cheaper and easier to operate, but also enabled Nigerian filmmakers to reach the masses in an already established format. Or, in other words, it allowed producing films with small budgets and turning them over in vast numbers for private use (Omoera 2009, 193f.). This way, filmmakers have been able to reach millions of viewers throughout Nigeria to this day. According to Barrot (2008, 15), a 2003 survey even revealed that up to sixty-seven per cent of the Nigerian urban households had VCRs or DVD players—“more than had refrigerators or potable tap water” (Haynes 2016^a, 11). And since “the distribution of VHS tapes had almost ceased by 2006, especially in the South of the country” (Barrot 2008, 34), the majority of these devices have over the years been replaced by cheap players compatible with the video compact disc format (VCD) that now dominates Nollywood’s market.

Besides the lower costs and easier accessibility, the video format has also had the advantage that it could be consumed independently of time and space. This was crucial in times of economic instabilities and the dictatorial rules of different military regimes, which brought a sharp increase in violent crime into Nigeria from the 1980s to 1999 (Haynes 2007^b, 1). In fact, due to the growing number of violent attacks in these times of economic, political and social upheaval, going out at night became increasingly dangerous (2007 b, 1). Not only being outside in the streets after nightfall was a risk but also going to cinema halls—which had become disreputable and typical places “for conducting illicit business” (NeuCollins 2006, 1). In response to these developments, families felt safest at home and shunned cinemas completely (Ayemba 2005, 8; NeuCollins 2006, 1). With less and less people attending screenings, one cinema hall after the other had to close down, and many were converted into churches or warehouses (Paleker 2005, 8). So many actually that in 2007 Africa’s most populous country had only one single cinema complex left (Okome 2007^b, 5). In contrast to this desolate cinema scene, the video

films offered an attractive alternative. They were not very expensive to purchase and even cheaper to rent (Ajibade 2007, 4), they could be watched in a safe home environment and “friends and extended family could be invited to watch [them] as a group” (NeuCollins 2006, 1). For these reasons, the most common way to consume Nollywood films in Nigeria to this day is to watch them on VCD at home. Indeed, the films are now also regularly televised, they can be watched against a small fee in one of the countless informal “video clubs distributed across the 36 states of Nigeria” (Oladunjoye 2008, 63; Okome 2007^b, 5-8), and there is also a growing trend to premiere and short-run some higher-end titles in the few newly-constructed, expensive cinema houses. Nonetheless, despite all these new consumption opportunities, the vast majority of Nollywood’s profits—an estimated ninety-four per cent (Miller 2016^a, 37)—still “come from the physical direct-to-consumer sales” (Miller 2016^b, 150).

To sum up, the video format proved a stroke of good luck for Nigerian filmmakers—not only because of economic but also because of social reasons. On the one hand, it was an adequate reaction to the economic limitations they faced and, on the other hand, the new technology has also allowed producing for the masses that have more and more preferred to watch their films in safe private spaces.

Nollywood’s Boom

In Nigeria, the first into the field of video film productions were the so-called *Yoruba Travelling Theatres* (Okome 2007^a, 2). These travelling artist groups have toured the Yoruba-speaking areas in the southwestern parts of the country since the 1940s and were famous for their spectacular music, dance, acrobatics and theatre performances (Haynes 2016^a, 5). Their popularity grew over the years, and so did the number and size of the troupes—so much indeed that it became increasingly difficult to make money from touring (Miller 2016^a, 12). As a fix, they started recording their performances with 35 mm and, more often, with the smaller and cheaper 16 mm analogue film gauge for later public exhibitions. These film exhibitions usually took place in informal venues like churches or meeting halls that the artists rented for film screenings with their portable projectors (Haynes 2007^b, 1; Miller 2016^a, 12). Such a shift from theatre to film exhibitions proved to be an extremely prolific endeavour. In fact, by the mid-1980s, the films had overtaken the actual live theatre performances as the preferred form of popular entertainment (Miller 2016^a, 12). Instead of travelling around as troupes, individual artists were now sent to organise, promote and oversee film showings all over the

region (Künzler 2006, 2). However, the rising filmmaking costs—due to the economic changes in the country—made it increasingly difficult to produce on celluloid for any serious profit (Miller 2016^a, 12). As a result, some Yoruba travelling groups started experimenting with video-based productions in the late 1980s, and soon also started selling videotapes for private use (Künzler 2006, 2). The travelling exhibitions, however, remained their basic model, and even though the videos were very popular amongst its viewers, they never really found much success beyond the Yoruba region. Nonetheless, as communications scholar Jade Miller (2016, 11) writes, the Yoruba Travelling Theatres were important as they marked “the emergence of a for-profit entertainment business structure in Nigerian-grown arts, a structure which directly paved the way for Nollywood’s self-supporting business structure [...]”

The first to eventually recognize the full market potential of video films for private use in Nigeria was—as a popular anecdote says—not an artist but a businessman called Kenneth Nnebue (McCall 2002, 86). Due to the collapse of the national economy, Nnebue was one of many that became self-employed as part of the growing “formation of a parallel, non-official economy based on private ownership” (Paleker 2005, 8). He tried his luck with “dealing in imported used electronics equipment and blank VHS tapes” (Miller 2016^a, 15). But as his blank videotapes did not sell as expected, the Igbo trader Nnebue looked for new sales strategies. By doing so, he noticed the popularity of the Yoruba videos and considered that his tapes “might sell better with something on [them]” (Künzler 2006, 6). Consequently, he produced a few low-budget films with Yoruba artists (McCall 2004, 99). And indeed, his sales figures increased substantially once his tapes had films on them. Nevertheless, the true impact of his strategy did not show before he emancipated from the Yoruba tradition and moved on to make films in his native language Igbo (Haynes 2007^b, 2). It is said that he invested only a few hundred US dollars in the making of his first Igbo film *Living in Bondage* in 1992 and then sold over half a million copies in the first few weeks of its release (Diawara 2010, 302). The film was an instant hit in the Igbo community and “as Nnebue realised there was a national market for this kind of product” (Haynes 2007^b, 2), he soon invested in an English dubbed version in order to attract even more costumers. Two years later, Nnebue went even a step further and released the first Nigerian video film in English (McCall 2002, 86)—the common lingua franca and official language in multiethnic Nigeria. *Glamour Girls*, as this feature was called, told the scandalous story of professional women living outside of patriarchal control and being involved in prostitution (Haynes 2016^a, 62f.). Playing with urban folklore, social taboos and an

absorbing story full of intrigue, the film was a huge success. At the same time, it also paved the way for the video boom in Nigeria. Since Nnebue's achievements did not go unnoticed by his fellow traders, many other business-oriented Nigerians started imitating Nnebue's ideas and producing entertaining feature films in order to be part of his wave of success. Suddenly, there was "a horde of [...] film producers where none had existed before" (Haynes 2007^b, 2). While many of these emerging filmmakers were untrained in filmmaking, there was also some former television personnel. The latter moved into the video market because there were either deeply dissatisfied with the working and production conditions at the national television station or were being laid off in the context of the governmental structural adjustment programme (Ayemba 2009, 1; Miller 2016^a, 10). Mainly trained in making soap operas, they saw the video industry as an opportunity to grow and were indeed able to establish themselves later as the first generation of "big-name directors" (Miller 2016^a, 18) in Nollywood. Together, these two groups of trained and untrained workers flooded the film sector and encouraged the rapid growth of a flourishing video film industry that now determines the national film market and has caused a drastic decline in the consumption of imported foreign films in the country (Künzler 2006, 12). By the end of 2010, the National Film and Video Censors Board had registered *de facto* "more than fourteen thousand Nigerian feature films made on video" (Haynes 2016^a, xxi). This is, as the Nollywood expert Jonathan Haynes (2016^a, xxii) explains, an enormous number of films. By way of illustration, between 1970 and 1992 Nigeria produced in total only about one hundred celluloid films, and in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa (excluding South Africa) there were less than four hundred celluloid feature films between 1964 and 2006 (2016^a, xxii). This means, Nigerian video filmmakers have been impressively productive since their emergence in the 1990s, and, by doing so, they have created—without a doubt—one of the largest film industries in the world.

Nollywood's Structure

Today, Nollywood is a "big cultural business" (Okome 2007^a, 6). By the 2000s, it had formed "one of the fastest growing sectors of the Nigerian economy" (McCall 2004, 100), and had become a major employer in the country that generates large revenues (Wenner 2009, 185; Haynes 2007^a, 134). But since it developed in the aftermath of a national collapse, it has never really been part of a state-regulated industry. Nollywood video films are rather the product of an informal parallel

economy (2007^a, 134) and “a means for the entrepreneurial enterprises of small and medium businesses and individuals who would otherwise not have had access to ownership of any forms of media” (Paleker 2005, 8). This means that Nollywood has not been created by the hands of a few powerful corporations, but has rather been dominated by “a shifting field of countless independent entrepreneurs” (McCall 2007, 96). Or, as anthropologist John McCall (2007, 96) explains, “virtually everyone who can rent the equipment for a few days can become a Nollywood producer”.

As part of the informal market, Nollywood—just like many other Nigerian business branches—operates predominantly detached from banks as well as governmental loans and non-governmental financial aids. Nigerian filmmakers are rather independent very-small-scale entrepreneurs “who make each new film on the profits from the last, or on advances from marketers” (Haynes 2007^a, 134). Consequently, the industry has almost entirely been built on “tiny capital formations” (Haynes 2008, 204)—a circumstance that has affected Nollywood in various ways. On the one hand, there is the fact that the average budget of a Nigerian video film production is relatively low. Even though it has been increasing steadily—from about twenty thousand US dollars in 2008 (2008, 204) to about sixty-five thousand US dollars in 2016 (Haynes 2016^a, xxv; Miller 2016^a, 38)—productions with big budgets are still the exception rather than the rule (Miller 2016^a, 37). On the other hand, “Nollywood is not a place” (Haynes 2007^a, 134). As the Nigerian video film industry has had no capital with which to build its own visible spaces, there are neither big corporate studios nor any flashy places that bear witness to Nollywood’s existence. Instead, the Nigerian video industry is highly decentralised and “scattered across Lagos and beyond” (Haynes 2007^a, 134). This means film productions often take place in private homes, quiet side roads or remote villages far away from the Nigerian megacity (Barrot 2008, 14). And here, the film teams rely primarily upon the existing infrastructure and invest hardly any money in buying props or building artificial film sets (Uwah 2009, 40). As a result, Nollywood largely functions “behind small unmarked doors” and remains “hard to see and hard to quantify” (Miller 2016^b, 148).

However, as Miller (2016^b, 151) declares, Nollywood’s decentralisation and informality do not mean that the industry is entirely disorganised and chaotic. Even though there is no governance by legal institutions and no centralised formal power of major corporate studios, “control is enforced by a mass of small enterprises whose internal organization helps preserve their collective interests” (Miller 2016^b, 151). This collective of power is predominantly represented by the so-called *marketers*, who are “the best

organized and most powerful elements of the industry” (Haynes and Okome 2000, 68). Just like Nollywood’s founding father Nnebue, these marketers are usually self-trained business people whose experience comes from working in electronics trading from a young age on. They leverage their knowledge of Nigeria’s informal and undocumented marketplaces in order to control Nollywood. As self-financed small-scale entrepreneurs, they usually hold—despite their name—multiple positions in a film production and often function as executive producers, marketers and distributors at once (Miller 2016^b, 150). In these positions, they are less interested in artful productions as in the fast and profitable turnover of their films in order to multiply their investments and gain an edge over their competitors. Thus, they favour producing at a brisk pace instead of “pouring money into a single title and laboring over an extended time frame” (Miller 2016^b, 153). In doing so, they make Nollywood known for its exceptionally high velocity.

In Nigeria, it has not been unusual to shoot an entire feature film within five to twenty days (Chowdhury et al. 2008, 16; Marston et al. 2007, 54; Sacchi 2007). “With one week of pre-production and one week of editing and packaging, a video film can go from inception to sale in four weeks” (Miller 2016^b, 153)—however, in reality, three months is a much more common scenario, and some of the more recent high-quality films take even longer to be completed (2016^b, 153). This fast pace stands in stark contrast to the fact that a detailed prediction of the shooting and editing times for a film production is often impossible to make since the daily life of a film team in Nigeria is more often than not characterised by unexpected complications. Sudden blackouts, torrential downpours, whirring air-conditions and generators, hours-long muezzin calls, or the no-shows of cast and crew are not uncommon and can interrupt and delay production processes unpredictably. However, as various television documentaries on Nollywood show (see Addelman and Mallal 2008; Heeder 2003; Meltzer 2007; Sacchi 2007; Wenner 2008), Nigerian film teams face most of these daily obstacles with an exceptional spontaneity, creative improvisation and surprising inventiveness. Despite the challenging filmmaking conditions, the average film is, therefore, still made surprisingly fast compared to most other leading film industries in the world.

Yet, the marketers are not only interested in fast productions but also in a quick distribution of the films. Once the finished films have been pressed at the disc replication plant, the marketers package them in black plastic cases with colourfully printed cardboard sleeve and release them to the markets on the following Monday (Miller 2016^b, 150). Promoted through gossip-loaden Nollywood magazines, catchy TV trailers, as well

as colourful film posters (Marston et al. 2007, 54; Haynes 2007^a, 137), the films then flow through different distributions nodes. Their first stops are usually Alaba (the Lagos market) and Onitsha (the largest video market in the Igbo-dominated southeast and home of many production companies) (Miller 2016^a, 51). From here, copies are sent to nearby towns for sale at their markets and then fan out to smaller villages and other parts of the country (Miller 2016^b, 150). The distribution of the films “through countless small vendors in thousands of local markets and street stalls” (McCall 2004, 102) very much occurs along the same informal channels as the distribution of electronic goods. This means the videos flow through unofficial networks that “are held together through trust, personal connections, and informal exchange as opposed to legally binding contracts” (Miller 2016^b, 150). In doing so, the videos films are very much commodities of Nigeria’s informal market structure (McCall 2012, 12).

Nollywood’s Challenges

It is alleged that in the early years of Nollywood, around one hundred to one hundred fifty thousand copies of each film flooded onto the market, whereas several hundred thousand could be sold if the film became a bestseller (Jedlowski 2011, 3; Marston et al. 2007, 55). Nowadays, these numbers may be much smaller. This is because, as the cultural anthropologist Alessandro Jedlowski (2011, 1) writes, in the mid-2000s “the market became saturated, generating a negative spiral which brought the industry into a situation of critical impasse”. Too many films were thrown on the market, and the sales figures started to decline due to this overproduction and the excess of competition in the market (Jedlowski 2011, 3). As it turned out, the informal structure of the industry—that was the reason for its success—has also been its major threat.

One of the biggest challenges for the informal Nigerian video industry and a major factor that has exacerbated the internal struggles in the last decade has been the unauthorised reproduction and distribution of films (Miller 2016^b, 150). Known as “the largest market for pirate goods in Africa” (Larkin 2008, 225), Nigeria is prone to illegal replication of any well-selling product—and videos are no exception from this practice. In fact, Nigeria has an infrastructure of pirating media products that has been operating for years, because there was “almost no other way to access” (Jedlowski 2016, 297) foreign films after they were restricted by law from entering Nigeria in the 1980s (Schnell 2017, 13). When Nollywood arose, the pirates thus simply expanded their business to the newly emerging local products. In extreme cases, pirated copies of a film can be found on

the market before its actual release, and in some markets, up to 80 per cent of the sold videos can be pirated products (Balogun 2004, 173). This is possible because “those who [may] be described as pirates [are] at the same time involved in the legitimate duplication and sale of media” (Larkin 2008, 223). This means the video pirates usually use the same equipment, the same blank VCDs, the same distribution channels and the same markets as the actual marketer of a film so that customers are often not able to differentiate between originals and copies since the films also have the same quality (2008, 237). In order to discourage this sort of piracy, and concomitantly maximise publicity for their films, marketers release a large number of original copies at once, and then distribute them carefully and as quickly as possible through their numerous distribution channels in the hope to be faster than the pirates (Haynes and Okome 2000, 68). This way, they ensure to circulate their film effectively and to make the most profit of a film in the first two weeks after its release (2000, 68).

Many marketers have proclaimed that these acts of piracy are “decimating the industry” (Miller 2016^b, 150) and making it increasingly difficult to reap any significant return from their releases. And this, although the marketers themselves “are not fully operating on the legal side of copyright law in all their business dealing” but are rather working in a “gray area” (2016^b, 150). They are known to obtain certain rights of films and then overstep them and hide profits (2016^b, 150). Therefore, all figures on sales and profits from Nollywood filmmakers need to be treated with extreme caution, “as they are frequently inflated for publicity purpose, or deflated in order to defraud partners” (Haynes and Okome 2000, 68). In fact, as the two Nollywood connoisseurs Jonathan Haynes and Onookome Okome (2000, 69) state, “cheating is endemic in all relationships between marketers, producers, directors and actors”. This, as well as their “operating behind closed doors and out of the sight of any potential regulations” (Miller 2016^b, 151), makes Nollywood extremely opaque.

According to Miller (2016^b, 147), its opacity and other informal characteristics are Nollywood’s strength as well as its weakness. On the one hand, it allows Nigerian filmmakers to be innovative, to work independently, and to control the industry’s distributive mechanisms on their own. On the other hand, Nollywood’s self-governed informality is also the reason why it is almost impossible “to codify it with standards based on structured global networks” (2016^b, 155). As a consequence, a large part of the Nigerian video film industry remains disconnected from formal global networks and official international film distribution systems (2016^b, 147). And exactly here also lays the reason why we do not see

Nollywood films in official video shops or on television in Western countries. Many of them are just not part of America's and Europe's formal distribution systems. For our highly formalised Western distribution channels, most Nigerian films are simply non-existent. Of course, there have been internal efforts to integrate Nollywood into the global system in order to expand the industry formally. But, as Miller (2016^b, 152) explains, as long as those in power of the distribution—in the case of Nollywood, the marketers—will not profit from such a formalisation but rather lose their leading position, this kind of integration will be slow in progress. So, even though there have been attempts to produce films by independent producers and directors with higher budgets, financially strong partners and investors, better equipment, more filmmaking expertise and frequent premieres in London, Toronto and elsewhere—a practice widely known under the name *New Nollywood*—the majority of Nollywood's filmmaking and distribution has to this day largely remained informal (2016^b, 152). Most Nigerian filmmakers thus work primarily detached from the formal global market. However, as I will show in the following, this circumstance does not stop Nollywood from reaching its viewers around the globe. It even allows them to use digital video as their standard format, produce films in their own manner, and create very unique film aesthetics.

Nollywood's Global Distribution

But how has Nollywood become a media phenomenon of global dimension, if Nigerian filmmakers widely remain detached from the dominant global film networks? This is possible due to migration and modern technologies. As Moradewun Adejunmobi (2007, 1) writes, Nollywood can be understood as “a minor transnational practice”. This means instead of a distribution through official networks, many Nigerian films rather circulate through global media flows outside the dominant centres of cultural production (2007, 1). Or, in other words, there are only few to no advertising campaigns and public spaces associated with Nigerian video films outside Africa (Haynes 2008, 205). Instead, almost all conversation about them occur in private, and word-of-mouth is the biggest force “in moving particular films and in creating interest in the films in general” (2008, 205). Therefore, most of the films move along informal, undocumented and personal channels, such as hand-to-hand exchanges or—in more recent past—also digitally through the internet.

From this perspective, it is no surprise that the vast majority of physical film copies I have found in Switzerland were brought here