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Nollywood

Popular Culture and Narratives
of Youth Struggles in Nigeria

Paul Ugor



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*For Anyungwu, Behakong, and Unimashi,
the loving family that has endured my long absences from home.*

In the more desperate structural crisis of the coming decade, the young may turn to the camera and the microphone in order to protest against the economic and social limitations impinging on their lives. They may be appealing to each other or their elders, worldwide, through demonstrations and cultural manifestations for an ethical judgment from what one expert calls an 'all-seeing, all knowing eye of global communication' (UNESCO, 1981:41).

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Preface and Acknowledgment

Nollywood, the extremely flourishing video film industry in Nigeria, is perhaps one of the most powerful popular cultural art forms in Africa today. As a burgeoning screen media practice in contemporary West Africa, the Nigerian video film industry has often been seen as a potent cultural instrument for Africa's own self-representation, especially the particular ways in which it expresses the struggles, pain and dreams of ordinary people. First begun in the cities by struggling but resourceful artists, and drawing heavily on the quotidian experiences of people in everyday life, Nollywood has thus been perceived as "the people's art" that addresses the interests of the masses, especially from the perspective of the ordinary man and woman on the street. But careful attention to Nollywood shows that the idea of "the masses" is perhaps an over-generalized concept that glosses over the main social constituency that Nollywood has often addressed. Begun by despondent urban youth seeking cultural avenues of survival and expression, Nollywood has almost always addressed women and youth, especially the marginalised youth that dominate Africa's urban spaces. In this book, I propose to address this ignored aspect of Nollywood studies, demonstrating the particular ways in which the struggles, anxieties and hopes of young people have always been at the heart of Nollywood repertoires. Combining textual analysis, history and ethnographic insights, the book lays bare how Nollywood has been a veritable cultural platform for expressing the vulnerabilities, struggles, and agency of young people all over Africa. By focusing chiefly on the subject matter of the Nigerian youth, the specific socio-economic and political circumstances around them, and the unique ways in which popular video films privilege insights into their everyday struggles to deal with postcolonial challenges, the book offers fresh insights into how Nollywood functions as a rough social map of what it means to be a young person in modern-day Africa. In a sense, the book points to the ways in which critical debates about Nollywood have been indifferent to the youth, the key cultural actors behind the industry's emergence, production, circulation and consumption.

But how might one write on the hinge between Nollywood and Nigerian/African youth, two culturally controversial categories in African studies often charged with the de-politicization of Africa's urgent social and economic issues? And how can you do so when your training is in literary/cultural studies? This has been the main challenge in putting this book together. And I do not suppose that the book's completion is evidence that I've found the right

answers to the questions posed above. But I believe the work inaugurates an important debate on Nollywood that has been ignored for more than two decades and half. While Nollywood remains a formidable cultural force that continues to define Africa for itself and the wider world by addressing the concerns and struggles of the ordinary masses, we must pay serious attention to what this new screen genre tells us about the people that invented it in the first place. Almost every Nollywood book and essay I have read often traces the roots of the industry to the creative ingenuity of unemployed youth in African cities such as Lagos and Accra. In spite of this acknowledgement, however, there has been a serious analytic neglect of what the video genre tells us about the lives and struggles of the people who created and nurtured it, the mass of increasingly despondent but often creative young men and women all across sub-Saharan Africa. It is not only that young people created and still dominate the industry—the stories are often about young people and women and their struggles for survival amidst almost insurmountable odds in both urban and rural spaces. It is these stories of local youth struggles and how they intersect with global political-economic and cultural processes that I address in the book. But the arguments I make here about Nollywood's ability to visually foreground the web of sufferings, pains and struggles experienced by young people in Nigeria, and by extension, the whole of Africa, are only intended to serve as a trigger to a larger field of unexplored themes on Nollywood that still need urgent critical attention. The book's ultimate aim, therefore, is not to be a final statement on the theme of youth in popular African video films, but a prompt that will stimulate and inspire new insights into what Nollywood tells us about the growing population of young people in Nigeria and other parts of Africa.

Although the book project began its life as a doctoral thesis, which I submitted to the department of English and Film Studies at the University of Alberta in 2009, significant parts of the revisions were done while I was a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for West African Studies, University of Birmingham, United Kingdom. I therefore thank the Newton Foundation (UK) and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (Canada) for the very generous funding that made it possible for me to move to England with my family for two years to conduct my research. At CWAS, I had the extraordinary privilege of being hosted by Prof. Karin Barber, a renowned scholar of staggering international repute, but whose humility and modesty calmed my frayed nerves when I arrived the UK in 2011. Karin went beyond the call of duty to make my family and me comfortable while in Birmingham. In the winter of 2012, Prof. Barber was also gracious (albeit careless) enough to allow me co-direct a graduate seminar with her entitled "Media and African Popular Culture." Both Karin and her students will never forget my legendary incompetence, but the seminar provided really fertilizing insights for the introduction to this book and I thank them so much for it. I also owe a huge debt of thanks to Dr Reginald Cline-Cole (the Chair of

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