

**Hostile Takeover?
Corporate Interventions in Nollywood**
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PAS Working Papers
Number 24

Series Editors
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Hostile Takeover? Corporate Interventions in Nollywood

My new book on the Nigerian film industry (Haynes 2016b) is a celebration of its character as a popular art—not mass culture, produced by corporations for mass entertainment, but an art that comes from the grassroots, very closely linked to the desires, anxieties, and modes of understanding of a broad audience of ordinary Nigerians (Jeyifo 1984; Barber 1987). Nollywood was created in the early 1990s in the informal sector of the devastated Nigerian economy, based in the structures of African marketing and small-scale industries. The marketers who have controlled the industry have fiercely resisted formalization by the government or big investors. The economic basis on which Nollywood grew may not be, strictly speaking, capitalist (McCall 2012), though it is whole-heartedly commercial.

Corporations have noticed for a long time that there was a lot of money to be made from Nollywood, but formal investors couldn't figure out how to get into film production or distribution, where informality, piracy, and a general, deliberate opacity reign (Miller 2016). Transnational and Nigerian corporations (with breweries and telecommunication companies in the lead) first made inroads by hiring the movie stars Nollywood had created to advertise their products. The biggest stars now make more from such endorsements than from acting.

Transnational corporations also began creating their own celebrities through African franchises of reality television programs. *Big Brother Africa* (from 2003)

demonstrated how big the market for this kind of programming was; *Nigerian Idol* (2010) is a more recent example, among many. Reality television is extremely popular and cheap to make. Nollywood always had an international dimension, rapidly spreading across the African continent, the Caribbean, and among African emigrants, but Nollywood never controlled the foreign distribution of its films—the price of its informal organization. The international market was basically in the hands of pirates at first; at a later stage, some revenues began to make their way back to producers in Nigeria from local entrepreneurs who reproduced video cassettes and then DVDs or VCDs of Nollywood films in places where they were popular. Transnational corporations found their opening in the international distribution of Nollywood films: they now dominate this sector, as the key platforms for distribution have shifted from the market for discs to satellite and cable television broadcasting and Internet streaming.

In 2004, a South African media conglomerate launched Africa Magic, a satellite broadcasting service, of which there are now 8 channels reaching 50 African countries, 24/7. Africa Magic has always depended on Nollywood's enormous output to meet its voracious need for content, but it pays very little for broadcast rights.

Nigeria, like most of Africa, still does not have enough Internet bandwidth to permit streaming of full-length films, but in the African diaspora, the Internet displaced the market in discs. At first the situation was anarchic: fans put up thousands of films on YouTube for free viewing, and producers put up others for small ad revenues. iROKOTv was the first company to monetize Internet streaming effectively on a large scale. It began in 2011 as a channel within YouTube but then turned into a Netflix-model paid subscription service. It makes four or five thousand

films available for \$5 a month to subscribers in about 180 countries. It rapidly dominated the Internet market. But like Africa Magic, it pays film producers very little—not nearly enough to compensate them for the loss of revenues from discs. The whole disc-based economy on which Nollywood was created now returns very little profit, because of the ubiquitous television broadcasting of films and Nollywood’s old problems of overproduction and piracy, now more crippling than ever. The old-school marketers have responded by churning out many very low-budget productions, known as “Asaba films,” aimed at the low end of the market.

Meanwhile, Nigerian companies have been building chains of multiplex cinemas in the upscale malls that have been sprouting up in Lagos and other cities. Tickets cost about \$10, in a country where 70% of the population lives on less than \$2 a day. Mostly these cinemas show American films, but they make space for some Nigerian ones. The multiplexes provides a crucial part of the business model for so-called “New Nollywood” films, which have higher budgets and are of better quality than the Nollywood norm (Adejunmobi 2014; Haynes 2014). Such films also count on making money from diasporic audiences. Some are now on Netflix and on airline entertainments systems, and are shown at film festivals. It’s a director’s cinema: Kunle Afolayan—director of *Irapada* (2007), *The Figurine* (2010), *Phone Swap* (2012), *October 1* (2014), and *The CEO* (2016)—is the most prominent celebrity auteur, and the most successful at attracting formal sector investors, but there are a number of others.

Nollywood was created in the midst of the economic devastation of the structural adjustment program (SAP) (1986–1993) and the subsequent “Afropessimism,” a period when international capitalism largely lost interest in

Africa, apart from extracting its natural resources. Then came the decade (roughly) of rapid growth from about 2006 to which the phrase “Africa rising” was attached. The recent crash in commodity prices has demonstrated Africa’s continuing structural dependency, but we seem to be in a new era, with a reestablished consuming middle class and international investors making large direct investments and encouraging local entrepreneurs. Investments in the tech sector seem to have been less affected by the current downturn than other sectors of the economy; there is a widespread hope that the spectacular growth of cellular telecommunications will be replicated with the Internet. Mark Zuckerberg, on a recent visit to Lagos, repeatedly paid tribute to the “incredible energy” in the air, declared Nigerians would play a crucial part in building the future, and bothered to make a creditable attempt at pronouncing Nigerian names (Zuckerberg 2016).

Neoliberalism has been creating its own new spaces in Nigeria, of which the malls and multiplexes are part. Eko Atlantic is the most spectacular example—a whole business and luxury residential district being built on landfill just off the Lagos coast, intended as a hub of globalization. It is frequently compared to Dubai. Other new residential neighborhoods have been established in Lagos, gated enclaves of wealth and privilege. Nollywood has eagerly colonized this new territory.

Nollywood has always been fascinated by wealth and privilege, gaudy displays, which are one of the essential attractions of its films. Another essential attraction has been Nollywood’s critical perspective on how wealth and privilege were and are acquired and used in Nigerian society. Nollywood was created and found its audience in the midst of a thorough economic, social, and political crisis, when the military regimes of Ibrahim Babangida and then Sani Abacha had lost all legitimacy in the eyes

of the nation. This disenchantment has remained in Nollywood's DNA in an unstable relation to both the ambitious desire for wealth that is widespread in Nigerian society and the visual pleasures of wealth and consumerist greed that are fundamental in most film cultures. The first Nollywood genres were the "get-rich-quick film" with its central, iconic "money ritual," in which a person is sacrificed for magically-generated wealth. *Living in Bondage* (1992, 1993), the inaugural film that both opened the market for Nollywood and established the video film culture, was such a film. The video films distinguished themselves from what had been on television by this willingness to dramatize, luridly, the darkest suspicions of the mass of the population about the utter immorality of those dominating Nigerian society. At the same time, Nollywood picked up the mantle of the Nigerian Television Authority, which had done so much to establish a sense of the Nigerian nation through its television serials that represented a society that was mixed in terms of class, culture, and ethnicity. Even films like Amaka Igwe's *Violated* (1996), which represented lifestyles of extreme luxury and which deliberately cultivated an elite audience, is built around a character haunted by her past as a destitute orphan, who maintains friendships with her former colleagues, Pidgin-speaking shop girls. Some few Nollywood films represented an apparently autonomous society of stable comfort or luxury, hermetically sealed against the realities of a chaotic and impoverished nation, but this was rare. In general, Nollywood presented wealth as something its audience wanted but mostly didn't have and had hard-earned suspicions about; in general, the perspective was that of the nation as a whole (Haynes 2016b).

Class segregation has never been so pronounced in Nigeria as it has recently become. During the extended crime wave of the SAP era, the streets of Lagos were

gated by neighborhood associations. Given the incapacity and corruption of the police, neighborhoods were forced to provide their own security, just as the incapacity and corruption of the government meant households had to make arrangements for their own electricity and water. The neighborhoods thus gated typically contained a whole range of residents, and the neighborhood watch manning the gates might echo village modes of organization. Negotiating one's way through a closed gate typically involved bantering in Pidgin. The gates of the new gated developments are different: products of an economy that is booming for some, the physical barriers embody socioeconomic barriers ensuring a homogeneous neighborhood, and they are staffed by crisply uniformed personnel.

Nollywood's audience is also segmenting. *Violated* was the best-selling film of its period, reaching a very wide audience, but, as was pointed out to me by Kene Mkparu, CEO of a chain of multiplex cinemas, the clear English of a New Nollywood film like *Tango With Me* (2010) would be incomprehensible to an audience in Onitsha or Nnewi. This process of segmentation is not entirely new and it is certainly not complete, but there are now films that express the lives of affluent urbanites and nothing else, an art form by and for them, without traces of a wider, relativizing perspective.

Fifty (2015) is a leading example of this kind of film. It also exemplifies what I believe is the most prevalent single plot form for current Nollywood film and television productions: three or four fashionable career women share the trials and tribulations of their sexual, romantic, and professional lives. The central characters are an eminent gynecologist/obstetrician, a celebrity reality television host, an executive of an architecture firm, and an event planner. *Sex and the City* is clearly the

model. The style is “Afropolitan”—proudly African, but closely linked to the diaspora and to transnational consumption. A similar film, *Lagos Cougars* (2013) is set partly in the Nigerian expatriate community in Houston, Texas, and partly in the Lagos enclave of Lekki, and it is remarkably hard to tell the two apart, so similar are the impeccable suburban neighborhoods, opulent homes, stylish restaurants, and fashion boutiques. The central, obsessively recurring symbol in *Fifty* is the new bridge linking Lekki with the equally upscale neighborhood of Ikoyi. *Fifty* contains a good deal of code switching, with bits of Yoruba and Igbo and more extended patches of Pidgin, but the differentiation in hardly extends beyond the varieties of Mercedes SUV the characters drive.

Such stories about career women sometimes feature twenty-somethings struggling to establish themselves, but (as their titles suggest) *Fifty* and *Lagos Cougars* are about women who are no longer young. The attention to middle-aged women is typical of Nollywood (and decidedly untypical of Hollywood). When Nollywood began and for years afterwards, filmmakers frequently told me their target audience was market women. They were the ones who had the money to buy a film on their way home, so they made the decisions about which film the family would watch. The SAP years made women’s activities in the markets even more important than usual: when the wreck of the formal sector cost men their regular jobs, many families relied on women doing something in the informal sector to see them through (Hansen 2014: 1331).

But filmmaking was mostly done by men (with important exceptions, such as Amaka Igwe), and the early films tend toward standard patriarchal attitudes. *Fifty* and *Lagos Cougars* make a neat contrast with *Glamour Girls 1 & 2* (1994, 1996), the first

English-language Nollywood film, written and produced by the same Kenneth Nnebue who collaborated on *Living in Bondage*. *Glamour Girls* is also about a group of middle-aged women friends, successful in their careers, and looking for their own satisfaction in their vigorous sexual and romantic lives. It also tested the limits of how much raunchiness Nigerian audiences would accept in their film culture. Still *Glamour Girls* is informed by a popular imagination's inflamed interest in "senior girls", independent career women who dared to make their lives outside of accepted patriarchal structures. Such women had long been a prominent topic in the more popular end of newspaper and magazine publishing (a point made to me long ago by LaRay Denzer, who had been researching the topic). While I believe Nnebue's interest in such characters contains a strong element of genuine interest and even sympathy, they are primarily seen under the sign of scandal and transgression (Haynes 2016b: chapter 3). The women have respectable and fashionable careers in business, fashion, and banking, but their real source of income is prostitution—their own gold-digging or the ruthless exportation of other women into sex slavery in Italy.

If *Glamour Girls* is shaped by an overheated male imagination that extends anxieties into wild fantasy, *Fifty* and *Lagos Cougars* illustrate a rapid evolution—or at least, segmentation—of social attitudes. A debate is carried on in both films about what the limits should be of what women do with their sexuality and independence, and the melodramatic bedrock of Nollywood film culture exerts a moderating influence, but generally there is no doubt that the women are the rightful owners of their own lives. And women—this particular kind of woman—also clearly own this art form and are using it for their own purposes, to represent and explore their own social situations. The films come from the two most powerful women producers in Nigeria,

or, to put it better, from two of the most powerful producers in Nigeria, who are women: Emem Isong (*Lagos Cougars*) and Mo Abudu (*Fifty*).

These two films illustrate a new and momentous development: transnational corporations have finally entered into the production of Nollywood original content. Emem Isong is a transitional or straddling figure: a long-time Nollywood producer, her productions range from high-end “New Nollywood” films to low-budget films made in the Efik language for a very local audience. *Lagos Cougars* was one of the first films to be picked up by Netflix for international distribution and is now a television serial (with a different cast, but still with Isong as producer and writer) on iROKOTv. Corporations like serials because they’re cheaper to make per hour of content than films and more dependable. Nollywood emerged out of television, always stayed close to it, and is converging with it again. In 2008, Africa Magic began producing its first soap opera in Lagos, *Tinsel*, set in the entertainment industry and exploiting its glamor.

EbonyLife TV, whose CEO and driving spirit is Mo Abudu, the producer of *Fifty*, was launched in 2015, on the same satellite platform as Africa Magic. It produces 1,000 hours of content per year. Abudu openly aspires to being the African Oprah and reportedly instructs her staff to take *Real Housewives of Atlanta* as their model (Tsika 2015). EbonyLife sponsors some high-end productions like *Fifty*, but it also mass-produces films that look a lot like reality television. Made to a rigid formula—beautiful actors speaking clear English and inhabiting immaculately expensive locations—they are made on tiny budgets, even by Nollywood’s standards, pay abysmal wages to those who work on them, and are about as empty as can be imagined from an artistic point of view. Or a social point of view. This is corporately-produced mass culture of the

worst kind the Frankfurt School could imagine. Africa Magic has also been sponsoring large numbers of such productions.

The Internet company iROKOtv has created its own production and financing arm, Rok Studios, which makes both films and serials (Smartmonkeytv 2014). iROKOtv CEO Jason Njoku has announced ambitious plans to produce most or all of iROKO's content in the near future. Much of the venture capital the company recently raised will be devoted to this end. At the same time, the French media giant Vivendi has acquired a 20% stake in iROKO and made clear its desire to buy the whole company (Fick 2016). Currently iROKO's main profit center is another new division, iROKO Global, which packages Nollywood content for resale to television chains, airlines, and various other transnational corporations (Njoku 2015). This sudden and spectacular integration of the company with the highest levels of global capitalism seem to have had the effect of refocusing Njoku's attention on Nollywood and the Nigerian consumer, which is where iROKO can hope to maintain a dominant position in the face of competitors like Netflix, which is also entering the Nigerian market (Njoku 2016). iROKO has switched to an Android-based system in Nigeria, betting that phones will be the primary platform for viewing films. This will surely have deep consequences, as content is adapted to tiny screens and the viewing experience becomes highly individualized and personalized.

Culturally, the products of iROKO's Rok Studios are not single-mindedly dedicated to branded glamour, though its roster of films and serials certainly emphasizes the lives of prosperous urbanites. Its first original serial, *Festac Town* (2014), takes a broad view of society for its intended broad audience, with emphasis on the Pidgin-speaking, impoverished lower levels. It continues some of the best

traditions of Nollywood and of the NTA—and seems aware of the current golden age of American long-form television pioneered by HBO (Haynes 2016a). The head of Rok Studios, the Nollywood actress Mary Remmy Njoku (who is married to CEO Jason Njoku), is the show’s creator and stars in it. There is much to be hoped for in the alliance of Nollywood with deep and stable funding and a powerful distribution system—things ardently desired by the more ambitious Nollywood independent producers from the beginning.

There is also much to fear in a situation where corporate executives—perhaps ultimately French Vivendi or American Netflix executives—are calling the shots and determining the direction of Nigerian film culture. The grand narrative of late capitalism inexorably extending and deepening its hold on cultural production and consumption across the globe seems to be arriving in Nollywood with terrifying swiftness. On the other hand, Nigeria has always had a way of messing up other people’s grand narratives through its remarkable repertoire of resistances and obstructions, and Nollywood has flourished because of its enormous powers of invention and adaptability. As Ramon Lobato and Julian Thomas show, media ecologies tend to involve complex and fluctuating relationships between formal and informal elements (Lobato and Thomas 2015). Some more specific reasons for hope are:

-- Internet streaming and satellite television platforms can show almost unlimited amounts of content to very diverse consumers, so as long as Nollywood’s film culture holds together an audience, there will be a business reason to give them what they want. “New Nollywood” films and the slick new serials attract attention, but old-fashioned village films, epics, Pidgin comedies, Yoruba melodramas, and Hausa romances are maintaining their market share.

-- The government might someday start doing its job of enforcing piracy laws, which would revive the original Nollywood economy based on selling hard copies of films for home viewing.

-- Exhibition of films in cinemas has been steadily growing as more multiplex theaters are being built. There has been much talk of building many small community cinemas oriented towards ordinary people. There is clearly a market for thousands of such cinemas, which would produce an enormous, dependable revenue stream. Such community cinemas could counterbalance the corporate-driven emphasis on affluent consumers and restore Nollywood's essential character as a popular art.

The future is very much up for grabs, then. Nollywood's transformations are taking place in the global context of dizzying instabilities of technologies, platforms, and ownership structures. The corporate dimension of Nollywood is clearly not going to go away. It may help Nollywood move beyond the serious constraints from which it has always suffered; but it may also endanger Nollywood's character as an autonomous industry of small-scale entrepreneurs that has stood by its popular audience through thick and thin, serving as a tribune of people.

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