

## **The reception and impact of Nollywood in France – a preliminary survey**

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### **Abstract**

Following a one-year pilot project on the reception of Nollywood in the London region (2006-2007), an international team headed by the Open University, UK, is now embarking on a new project, which will widen the range of diasporic contexts to incorporate data collection from other European cities where Nigerian video films are distributed and consumed, such as Dublin, Paris and Berlin. This paper reports on our efforts to address the gaps in the present knowledge and evaluation of Nollywood in France, in response to Barrot’s challenge that the French publication of his 2005 book on *Nollywood* (2005:6) was but an “incomplete and subjective” study on a largely unknown phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> It considers the reception of Nollywood films by French nationals, focusing on the Paris region and using Nigerian networks such as NIDO France and the Paris-based France-Nigeria Association, in the context of similar data on the reception of Nollywood films worldwide. Based on questionnaire and interviews’ analysis, it focuses on the reasons attracting viewers to Nollywood and the impact of Nigerian video-films on language learning and cultural practices.

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<sup>1</sup> The new preface to the English translation of Barrot’s book (2008: xii) still insisted on the need to explore Nollywood as “a phenomenon which remains largely unrecognised, particularly outside of Africa.”

## Introduction

Haynes, in the preface to the Nigerian edition of his book on *Nigerian Video Films* (1997: xv), considered this production to be “the major contemporary Nigerian art form.” At the time, Nigerians were already enjoying video-films in the comfort of their homes and in video parlours. Yet it took a few more years for the country’s university sector to get involved in what it had first considered as a sub-standard production and a cinematic sequel to the Onitsha market literature.<sup>2</sup> Nigerian scholars meeting in Cambridge, UK, in 1999 for a conference on the power of the Word derided the appalling technical quality of those films. Four years later, Ogunleye (2003: xi) had to warn critics that this production “must not be disdained as a mere flash in the pan. Serious academic work must be expended on it to elevate it from the current position of a mere craft and change the pariah status it occupies, especially among condescending critics, both from within Africa and from the western world.” The belated academic surge of interest in Nigerian video-films has since led to a number of individual and collective research projects on the production, management and reception of the home video. These have been coming from a number of related fields: Yoruba/Igbo/Hausa Studies, Popular Culture, Theatre Studies with a focus on Ghana and Nigeria, film Studies with a focus on Indian or African films from French-speaking countries, Nigerian Studies focusing on politics and sociology, Islamic/Religious Studies and Diaspora Studies.

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<sup>2</sup> For more details on Onitsha market literature, a cheap popular literature printed and sold in Onitsha, Nigeria, in the 1950s and 1960s, read Obiechina, *Onitsha Market Literature*, London, Heinemann 1972, 182p.

## **Nigerian films as a linguistic challenge**

Considering the field from an ethnolinguistic point of view, one notes that, apart from a few paragraphs in Johnson (2000), Larkin (2000), Ogunleye (2003), Ondego (2008) and Barrot (2008), the language of the video films, its choice, and those of subtitling and dubbing, have so far globally escaped scrutiny, at the very time both Nigerian video films are being exported to other continents and daily screened both online and on satellite channels – Africa Magic (launched in 2003), OBE, Nollywood, NTA, AIT Movistar, BEN and Nigeria Movies. Given the impact that the language issue has already had on the marketing of video films and their study, this relative lack of interest can be regretted. Those studies that chose to consider particular linguistic sectors of the video film industry highlighted four main facts:

- The paucity of information on Hausa video films, reported to sell like hot cakes across the border into Niger, following the Hausa trail<sup>3</sup>, but struggling to make it to southern Nigerian markets.
- A growing awareness of the distinctive features of the Yoruba production, focusing on their Yoruba signature - as revealed more by the language and ethnic origin of producers, directors and actors than by the themes treated and their circulation.
- A total disinterest for the few video films produced in Igbo language, which contrasts with the huge attraction for the hundreds of productions in ‘Engligbo’ - English interspersed with Igbo words.<sup>4</sup>
- A blank on the few video films in other Nigerian languages, in spite of documented evidence of production in Efik, Ijo, Isekiri and Urhobo.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> According to statistics, out of 750 films monitored by the Nigerian Censors Board in 2000, 187 were in Hausa (Oladunjoye 2008:66 note 2); 2006 saw the production of 279 Hausa films (Barrot 2008: 33).

<sup>4</sup> Nwafor (1971:44), quoted in <http://www.kwenu.com/uwandiigbo/framed.htm>, described Engligbo as "a new medium of communication, which is a hybrid of the English and Igbo languages."

As noted by Oyewo (2003:145), “language as an integral part of a people’s culture and communication is not only a unifying factor but also a vital contributive factor to the success and acceptability of the various genres of the video film production.” The central importance of the language issue cannot thus be overemphasised, especially since it has led to what may be perceived as a possible imbalance in the presentation of the various Nigerian cultures. It has equally acted as a barrier to a quality study of film contents, rendered a proper historical account of the development of Nigerian video-films difficult, and occasionally generated an unhealthy competition for recognition among the three main cultures of the federation. So far, productions in Nigerian languages have experienced a rather limited circulation, restricted by language barriers. Hausa films might be considered as having fared relatively better than others in this regard: data show them as having now found their way, first into the whole of Northern Nigeria then across the border into Niger and Chad, reaching out to other Hausa-speaking groups – “what’s the problem when we have the same culture, the same religion and when, quite often, even the stories are drawn from our own repertoire?” says a TV Director (Abdoulaye 2008: 100). In spite of a decline in their circulation, observed in the past five years and linked to the extension of the Sharia law to the twelve northern States of the federation, these films are still spreading, now into the whole Sahel region among Hausa-speaking populations where their cultural impact is strongly felt and commented (Abdoulaye 2008); more and more are now subtitled in English and even sold online. Meanwhile, productions in Yoruba reach out to the Yoruba communities in Benin Republic and Togo, as well as to the important Yoruba Diaspora in the USA, the UK and South America. As for

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<sup>5</sup> Video films in English present these different culture areas - *The Queen of the Rain Forest* (120 min., 2003, 120mn), an epic film in English from Jeta Amata, is about the Efik culture of Nigeria. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Ife International Festival held on January 26-30, 2009 in Nigeria, equally featured a paper by Mabel Evwierhoma, from the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Abuja, Abuja, titled: *Enter the Urhobo Home Video Film, Looking Back Looking Forward*.

Igbo-produced video films, knowing their widespread Diaspora and keen attraction to the English language, it is not surprising that most of them should favour ‘Engligbo’, enriched with all-Igbo music.

The widening circulation of the video films had made it imperative for the issue of subtitling and dubbing to be addressed. Even though one can rightly argue that these productions are primarily targeting local audiences and that “movies in other languages are reaching as their primary audience, at best, only certain regions in the country”, one cannot deny the fact that a good number of Nigerians are keen to access video-films in other Nigerian languages - “you get people in Calabar watching Igbo stories and Yorubas learning about Oron<sup>6</sup> warriors.”<sup>7</sup> According to Olushola Adenugba<sup>8</sup>, in his blog dated May 9, 2007, this has been the case right from the start: the first Igbo video film, *Living in bondage* (1992), “became a major hit among the Igbo audience and was also well accepted by non-Igbo speaking audience.” Subtitling, which “ helps to transcend ethnic and cultural barriers that local languages imposed within the multilingual Nigerian market” (Esan 2008), has been overwhelmingly preferred to dubbing, and applied to both Igbo and Yoruba video films since the early 1990s. An interesting example of subtitling is that of *Love in vendetta* (1996), a video film of Chiko Ejiro which can be considered as a Nigerian version of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliette*, featuring an Igbo-Hausa couple in love, struggling against their parents’ memories of the 1987 Kano riots and massacres.<sup>9</sup> The film is subtitled in French – with its introduction subtitled in both English and French - and thus evidently destined to reach out to

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<sup>6</sup> Oron, a sea port south of Calabar, is the third largest city in Akwa Ibom State, cited in ‘A Congoman in Nollywood, [...] in which language do we shoot?’ October 24, 2006 <http://bongodoesnollywood.blogspot.com>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.naijarules.com/vb/business-nigerian-movies-legal-industry-matters/30921-global-cash-crunch-hits-nollywood-6.html>, November 25, 2008, 4h38)

<sup>8</sup> <http://filminnaija.blogspot.com/2007/05/history-and-development-of-nigerian.html>

<sup>9</sup> The intercultural theme, already present in a number of Nigerian novels such as Ike’s *Sunset at Dawn* (1976), in short stories such as Momodu’s ‘Daughter-in-Law’ (1979), and in other video films like *Thunderbolt* (2001, 90mn), Tunde Kelani’s story of a young Yoruba-Igbo couple, appeals to the growing number of viewers directly or indirectly involved in mixed relationships.

neighbouring countries. Producers like Tunde Kelani are now subtitling and dubbing their films in French for the West African market, and Kelani's recent French-titled production, *Pourquoi moi?* (2007) set in Benin Republic, is multilingual. Nigerian actors learn or practise other Nigerian languages when needed. One blogger reported having seen Patience Ozokwor, one of the well known Igbo actors, "speaking Yoruba fluently" in the Yoruba film *Eyin Oka* (2004)<sup>10</sup>; the producer and actor Zachee Orji, an Igbo born in Gabon, who schooled in both French and English in Cameroon, Benin and Togo, is bilingual.<sup>11</sup>

Ondego (2008: 115) highlights the difficulties met by foreign viewers of Nigerian video films:

Harrison Kamau, a [Kenyan] law student, feels that it doesn't matter which language Nigerians use in their films as 'the dialogue is spoken with a heavy accent, so you don't know whether they are speaking vernacular, Pidgin or English'. Nigerians also punctuate their videos with proverbs and sayings in vernacular, usually without translations or subtitles [...], an indication that the primary audience is not international but mainly Nigerian, able to understand the message in its context.

Yet, on November 15, 2006 already, the BBC website reported a Kenyan video boom, with illegal outlets mushrooming around small markets in urban centres and in slum areas of the country's major towns and offering mostly Nigerian video films. The attraction of Nigerian productions is usually so great that the language medium they use, whether Nigerian languages or Engligbo, does not seem to deter French-speaking audiences, as explained by T  lesphore Mba Bizo, a journalist-translator from the Cameroon Radio Television, Yaound  ,

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.nairaland.com/nigeria/topic-106899.64.html>, May 6, 2008, 03:17 pm

<sup>11</sup> Cf. [http://www.zackorji.net/2005/01/place\\_holder.html](http://www.zackorji.net/2005/01/place_holder.html)

in his paper, *The Reasons for Nollywood Craze in French-Speaking Cameroon*, presented at the January 2009 2<sup>nd</sup> Ife film festival. Those films are reported as having equally invaded Tanzanian, Zambian and Congolese markets, with Igbo language making an in-road in the Congo where video films function as an alternative language school. For Okhai (2008), “Africa Magic, the Trans-African movie channel, is proof enough. There is a cultural neo-colonisation of the African continent by Nollywood films. People now speak Igbo words and Pidgin English in far-off places like South Africa as a result of this. It is now hip to shout Igwe!!!”<sup>12</sup>

### **Nollywood gets French attention**

Nigerian video-films, now accessible and widely publicised on the Internet, crossed over to Francophone websites such as *Grioo.com*, *Africinfo*<sup>13</sup> - “the cultural agenda in Africa” - and the Quebecois blog ‘Parole citoyenne’ which featured a very positive commentary on “Nollywood’ sense of urgency”. They have now reached European shores and, after invading Britain and Ireland, are discreetly making their way into Germany, France, Italy, Spain and other countries, here again across language barriers – a move encouraged by scholars. On December 11-12, 2006, the annual Conference of the Portuguese Association of French Studies on ‘Espaces de la francophonie en débat’ featured a paper on Nollywood by Marc Garcia, presented in French and titled: ‘Cherchez le naturel... il repart au galop! Exotisme et

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<sup>12</sup> Victor Okhai, Director, *International Film and Broadcast Academy*, Lagos, “Emerging Talents: Nollywood and the future of African Cinema”, paper presented at the BOB TV 5th African Film and Television Programmes Expo on March 11, 2008 at the Ladi Kwali Hall, Sheraton Hotel and Towers, Abuja, and published on 22/06/2008 at <http://www.nigeriansinamerica.com/articles/2688/1/Emerging-Talents-Nollywood-and-the-future-of-African-Cinema/Page1.html>. ‘Igwe’, Igbo word for ‘Chief’, used as a salutation and praise word, was equally mentioned by one of the respondents as learnt while viewing Igbo movies.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.africinfo.org/index.asp?navig=personalites&code=NG>

authenticité dans le cinéma africain'.<sup>14</sup> In 2007, the Nigerian Film Corporation (NFC) got the foreign missions of France and Spain involved in its activities, and the French Embassy pledged to continue to assist the motion picture industry in the country. This expansion was further encouraged by recent tours taking some of the Nollywood stars across Europe: in September 2008, the 8<sup>th</sup> European tour organised by Isaac Izoya of Ehizoya Golden Entertainment took five of them through 17 cities in eight EU countries including Berlin, Malaga, Athens, Torino, Padova and Genova. Apart from the support listed above, Nigerian films have been plebiscited by the highly mobile Nigerian community and follow them in their relocations. On December 1-7, 2007, the Paris-based Association for cultural exchanges between Europe and the East (AECEO)<sup>15</sup>, founded on August 30, 2006 and whose members were already familiar with Bollywood, the Indian movie industry, hosted a seven-day long Nollywood festival meant to present the Nigerian cinema to the French public. This event, covered by TV stations, FM radios and a press already alerted to the new Nigerian cinema<sup>16</sup>, involved the screening of fifteen recent Igbo feature films in English; among them:

- *Spiritual Challenge*, by Kalu Anya (2007)
- *War against Women*, by Chinedu Nwoko (n.d.)
- *Blood for Tears*, by Ikechukwu Onyeka (2007)
- *Peoples' Club*, by Mac Collins Chidebe (2006)
- *The Faculty*, by Ugo Ugbo (n.d.)
- *Angel in Hell*, by Ikechukwu Onyeka (2006)
- *Ultimate Warrior*, by Andy Chukwu (n.d.)
- *Occultic Wedding*, by Martin Onyemaobi (2006)

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<sup>14</sup> <http://www.apef.org.pt/actas2006/indice122006.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> Association pour l'échange culturel entre l'Europe et l'Orient, a non-profit organisation, 127 Rue Amelot – 75011 – Paris ; Tel: +33 6 37 16 26 06 ; Fax: + 33 8 21 48 04 83 ; Email: [info@aeceo.fr](mailto:info@aeceo.fr); website: [www.aeceo.fr](http://www.aeceo.fr)

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *L'Expansion*, 01/01/2006 : 'Nollywood, un cinéma africain à la conquête du monde, Pierre Cherruau, à Lagos'

- *Common Game*, by Willie Ajenge (2006)
- *Amazing Grace*, by Jeta Amata (2006)
- *Emotional Risk*, by Ebere Onwu (n.d.).

Nineteen stars from Nigeria, including producers, directors and actors were invited to participate and film projections were followed with question-and-answer sessions between Nigerian guests and the public.<sup>17</sup> The event was widely publicised through 1000 posters<sup>18</sup>, 2000 program booklets and 5000 flyers, and 5000 invitations were dispatched.

2008 was a busy year for the Nigerian production in France: the South African photographer Pieter Hugo won an award in Arles<sup>19</sup> as he started exploring the Nigerian video film industry in August; the photographs he took in Enugu are both posted on the Internet and disseminated by the French press – *Le Monde* and *Libération* in particular, but also free dailies like *20 minutes*.<sup>20</sup> The French television caught the fever: on July 3 (22h35), the German-French channel Arte presented ‘Mission Nollywood’, Dorothee Wenner’s 1h20 documentary. Lea Jamet’s 55mn video documentary, titled: ‘Nollywood, le cinéma africain dans la cour des grands’, was later shown on the satellite channel France Ô and placed on the Internet on

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<sup>17</sup> This event benefited from the cooperation of Via Vita Communications Ltd, Nollywood LTD (Nigeria), Ascari Gugiario (Italy), AraMage Artistic Production & Enile (Egypt), in conjunction with Nollywood Actors’ Guild of Nigeria (AGN), the Association of Movie Producers (AMP) and the Directors’ Guild of Nigeria (DGN)

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.aecce.fr/images/Nollywood%20in%20Paris%20VA.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Hugo, born in Johannesburg in 1976, has created street shows in Nigeria. See <http://yager.blog.lemonde.fr/2008/06/24/pieter-hugo>. He won the Discovery Award 2008 at the Rencontres d’Arles festival in France (8 July - 14 September 2008) and the KLM Paul Huf Award 2008. He mounted a sponsored solo exhibition at the Foam Fotografiemuseum in Amsterdam (5 September - 2 November 2008) and was included on ‘Street & Studio: An urban history of photography’ at Tate Modern, London (22 May - 31 August 2008) (<http://www.nollywoodwatch.com/pieter-hugo-captures-nollywood>) and his film, *The Hyena and other men*, is posted on YouTube.

<sup>20</sup> Pong ARTE/ZDF (2007). See <http://www.arte.tv/fr/Comprendre-le-monde/Freedom/A-l-antenne/2038212.CmC=2052406.html> & <http://www.20minutes.fr/article/240530/Television-Queen-of-Hollywood-Bollywood-et-Nollywood.php>

October 13.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the journalist Julien Hamelin's 52mn film, 'Nollywood, le Nigeria fait son cinéma', produced in June<sup>22</sup>, is now programmed on French TV for the spring of 2009.

### **The present study**

Given the efforts mentioned above to gradually introduce the French public to Nigerian cinema, one could assume that some might have gone further and watched at least one or two films. The present study, built on this premise and based on questionnaires and interviews' analysis, focused on the reasons attracting French viewers to Nollywood and on the impact of Nigerian video films on language learning and cultural practices. The initial hypothesis was that Nigerian films, being all either produced in Nigerian languages or in Nigerian English laced with words in one or more of these languages, in addition to their feature songs<sup>23</sup>, would represent a challenge to viewers, yet might attract them and encourage some to learn a language. A questionnaire was designed, targeting French and Francophone audiences as a potentially rewarding field of study. From initial contacts in France, it was soon found out that whereas most Franco-French were yet to discover Nigerian video films,<sup>24</sup> other categories - French expatriates, nationals born in France of immigrant parentage, and Africans living in France – might well be regular consumers of Nigerian video films; it thus

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.kewego.co.uk/video/iLyROoafYnKy.html> & <http://blackklight.blogspot.com/2008/10/france-nollywood-le-cinema-africain.html>

<sup>22</sup> Réalisation : Julien Hamelin ; image : Franck Rabel ; son : Mohammed Musulumi ; montage : Ranwa Stephan ; production : Sunset Presse, 23, rue Sébastien Mercier, 75015 Paris, France, Tél : +33 (0)1 4575 5179 ; E-mail : sunsetpresse@sunsetpresse.fr; co-Production : Julien Hamelin.  
[http://www.fipa.tm.fr/fr/fipatel/2009/fip\\_19702.htm](http://www.fipa.tm.fr/fr/fipatel/2009/fip_19702.htm)

<sup>23</sup> These are mostly sung in the Nigerian language – Igbo, Yoruba or Hausa - corresponding to the main region or ethnic group featured in the film.

<sup>24</sup> This is not surprising: Nigeria, a former British colony, who retained English as its official language, has remained virtually unknown to the French public, in spite of the strong bilateral relationships built over many years between the two countries. The only time Nigeria was in the French news for a long time was during the Biafran war (1967-1970). The Francophone and Anglophone worlds are still separated by a huge gulf and it may take more than a few TV programmes to awaken the French viewers' interest.

became obvious that restricting the viewers' profile to a single location or nationality might severely limit the scope of the investigation.<sup>25</sup> This led to a shift in the study, now aiming at a much wider audience, this time without any geographical or linguistic limitation. A second version of the first questionnaire was then designed, targeting English-speaking audiences. Both questionnaires aimed to build the viewers' profile (gender, age, nationality, location, level of education, first language and years of exposure to Nigerian video films) and obtain details on their appreciation of the linguistic and cultural aspects of the films. It was hoped that the enlarged sample would provide a valuable element of comparison between the French and other nationals (charted as 'others') on the subject. During this second phase of investigation, the English questionnaire was also put on *SurveyMonkey* to boost dissemination, ensure anonymity and facilitate completion.<sup>26</sup> Several channels were used simultaneously to reach a maximum number of people:

- personal and family friendship networks worldwide (through personal contact, email, *Facebook* and *SurveyMonkey*) – this channel, cascaded through motivated individuals, proved quite successful, reaching a public of all ages and nationalities in France and eight other countries: UK, USA, Nigeria, Benin, Germany, Ghana, Poland and Qatar, with a slightly greater number of younger respondents
- professional networks (through email and *surveymonkey*) – this proved more difficult, as very few fitted the required viewer's profile, but was cascaded by interested individuals using their own friendship networks

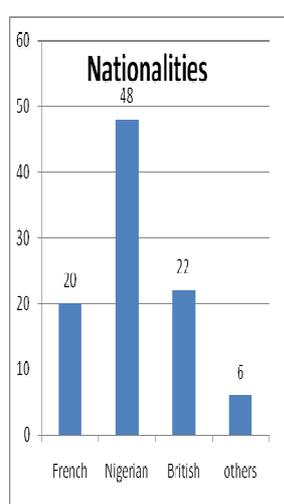
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<sup>25</sup> Some of the French respondents came from Nigeria or other African countries; among the respondents were some of the French nationals living in Nigeria and the UK.

<sup>26</sup> The decision to supplement friendship networks with an online dissemination system followed the experience gained during an earlier (2006-2007) collaborative pilot project on the reception of Nigerian video films in London. During that phase, 1,000 questionnaires were produced and distributed to 800 consumers and 200 shop owners, using friendship networks and Nigerian shops; only 150 questionnaires were returned. It was then felt that an online, totally anonymised facility that would also reach out to an international audience across the globe would ensure better returns. The length of the questionnaire was equally reduced to facilitate completion.

- online newsgroups (*Uwandiigbo*<sup>27</sup> in particular) and official channels (Alliance française, Embassies, cultural centres (email). Newsgroups yielded more results, but official overseas channels provided a few valuable extra contributions.

Questionnaires yielded 96 responses, with a balanced sample of 51 men and 45 women, 30% of them aged 20-30, from a variety of nationalities. These confirmed that wherever they may have settled, Nigerians remain the choice public of their video films: 48 of them responded to



the questionnaire.<sup>28</sup> Other nationals – a good number of them of Nigerian origin or parentage – included French and British respondents in almost equal numbers (see chart opposite) and a few others: Swiss, German, African American, Sierra Leonean, Ugandan and Zambian. Another fact that emerged from the questionnaire was that most respondents were well educated urban dwellers (only 5 had stopped their education after A' Level and many had either a second

degree or professional qualifications).<sup>29</sup> Respondents, several of them close to immigrant circles or immigrants themselves, were equally well travelled: more than 50% lived in a country that was not the one of their birth, and often had a third country's nationality. They usually spoke a minimum of two languages: a number of Nigerians spoke English, pidgin and at least two Nigerian languages (usually Igbo and Yoruba); European languages mentioned included English, French, German, Spanish and Portuguese.

<sup>27</sup> *UwandiIgbo* is an educational newsgroup offering language lessons and forums on Igbo culture.

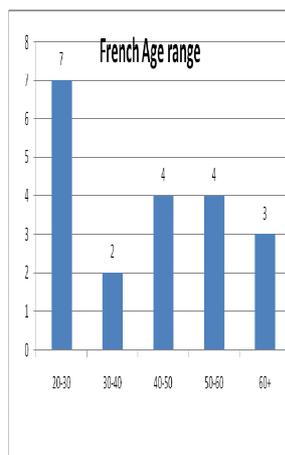
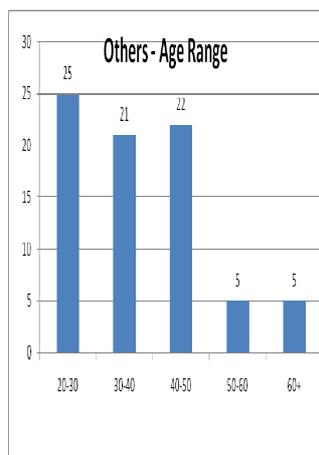
<sup>28</sup> Nationalities given in questionnaires only serve as an indication of cultural ties and influences, as the table above reveals the respondents' high mobility. For further reading on the subject of nationality and identity, see Omoniyi & White (2006).

<sup>29</sup> This was an interesting find, considering considering the criticisms leveled against the Nigerian film production for years by the University sector for its perceived poor quality.

## **The French sample**

A total of 20 French nationals completed the questionnaire, sent to them through friendship and family networks or through cultural associations. In addition, five of them (two men and three women) completed a longer questionnaire designed to replace a face-to-face interview; these were selected as representative of various groups of viewers:

- Emilie (20-30y), born in Nigeria of Nigerian-French parentage, moved to Britain with her family when she was 14. She is trilingual French-Igbo-English and learns German.
- Sylvie (30-40y), born in France of French Guadeloupian parentage, has been living in the UK for more than ten years and does not speak any Nigerian language. Her husband is of mixed parentage (Sierra Leonean-Lebanese). She was introduced to Nigerian video films by Nigerian members of her church and once went with them to Nigeria for ten days.
- Wilfrid (30-40y), born in France of Congolese parentage, has never been to Nigeria but is married to a French of mixed (Nigerian-French) parentage. He does not speak any Nigerian language; his intermediate level of English is just enough for him to understand Nigerian films.
- Martine (40-50y), born in France of French parentage and married to a Nigerian, lives in Britain. She visited Nigeria two times for holidays and is learning Igbo.
- J. (20-30y), born in France of French parentage, discovered Nigeria through the media. He visited Nigeria for his work but has no family connection with that country and does not speak any Nigerian language.



All five interviewees were French native speakers but multilingual, and two of them practiced an African language (Igbo and Lingala respectively) at bilingual level. Two out of five made use of the films to supplement their learning of an additional language – English or Igbo. Two of them

explored viewing Igbo and Yoruba films and acknowledged having learnt some new words that way; J., while visiting Northern Nigeria, was equally exposed to Hausa video films. Watching films in Nigerian languages definitely offers a challenge, especially to speakers of European languages, and can be considered as a threshold beyond which viewers penetrate local cultures unaided – especially since a number of films are neither subtitled nor dubbed. French respondents, while indicating their preference for subtitles they considered as less invasive and more respectful of the authenticity of the film, judged subtitling rather inadequate and too succinct to convey the full meaning of the scenes.<sup>30</sup> Emilie, who was fluent in Igbo, preferred ignoring subtitles, considering them as a distraction. For all respondents with Nigerian family connections, video films were the occasion to discover Nigerian cultures or reconnect with them, and their viewing offered the occasion of endless family discussions on customs; they also watched some films on their own, enjoying the songs and the entertainment. Wilfrid did not consider his lack of Nigerian experience as a hindrance and, relying on his knowledge of life in the Congo, concluded that “Africans feel at home” watching these films “because life is more or less the same whatever the country.” This corroborates Katsuva’s findings: for him (2003:92), what attracts most Congolese to

<sup>30</sup> Subtitling is mostly done in English, and no respondent ever saw more than one example of French subtitling. Personally, I only came across one: that of *Love in vendetta* (1996), directed and subtitled by Zack Orji.

Nigerian films is that “the type of language in these films (although English), easily translates an African culture which is similar to the Congolese culture in general [and that] the themes utilised in these video films are closely related and similar to the Congolese lifestyle.” African respondents from other nationalities highlighted the same cultural similarities.

Although a good number of French respondents were aged 20-30, the above charts reveal that globally, Nigerian video films recruit their viewers among all age groups, and that the French sample, apart from its having more older people than the global sample, is somewhat similar in this regard. The detailed study of the questionnaires proved that age was not a determining factor in shaping responses – it should therefore be only taken as an indication of interest.

Half of the French respondents were born in France and 12 of them live there; 2 are currently in Nigeria and 6 in the UK. All retain strong connections with France, and with Nigeria for those who once lived there. All of them have got Nigerian friends – Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa - and there is a strong parallel between friendship connections and appreciation of Nigerian films. Most respondents were introduced to Nigerian video films by family or friends.<sup>31</sup> These informal gatherings of family or friends around a TV set to watch Nigerian movies can be seen as a pattern which facilitates both the viewers’ initiation to Nigerian ways and the new viewers’ introduction to Nigerian cinema. An interest in Nigeria, triggered by family / friendship / work ties, often reinforces the motivation of those viewers: several discovered Nigerian films while living in Nigeria or visiting the country – one person currently living in the UK acknowledged having lost interest in Nigerian films after living Nigeria.<sup>32</sup> Since their

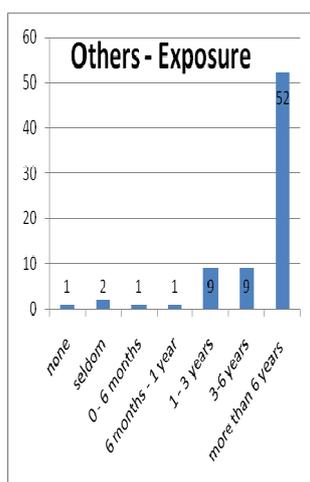
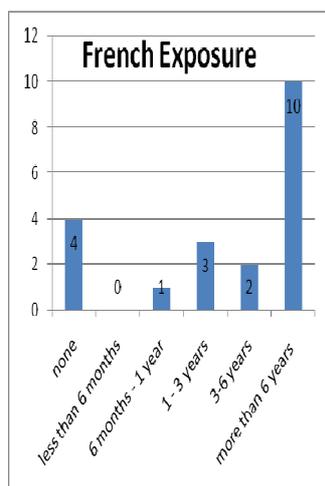
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<sup>31</sup> It must be said that four of the French respondents, although having Nigerian friends and belonging to a bicultural association, did not even know that Nigeria produced any video film. They were included in the paper because they showed enough interest to respond, and can be taken as representative of the wider French public.

<sup>32</sup> One can now watch Nigerian video films while travelling to Nigeria, as both Virgin Atlantic and Virgin Nigeria offer this on board facility to their passengers.

first experience, French respondents have watched 10-30 Nigerian films, sometimes more, the only criterion of selection being the main language (English/English), as most of the films available to them were not subtitled. All expressed their struggle to fully understand the dialogues, blaming:

- the African accent, quite different from the British accent they were introduced to at school
- the habitual use of code switching by Nigerian actors.<sup>33</sup>
- the Nigerian variety of English as described by Igboanusi (2002:1), with its “words



borrowed from the many languages of Nigeria, English words which have acquired new meanings in Nigeria, and words coined for local situations”.

- their difficulty to make sense of some customs and allusions to

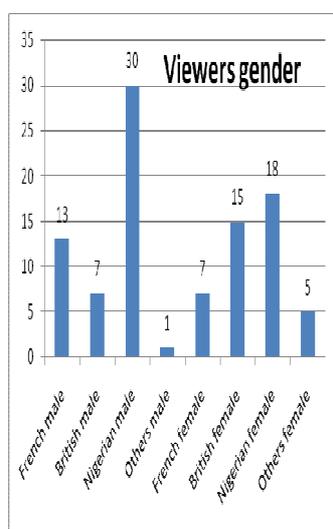
cultural traits, especially those relating to traditional beliefs – this may explain that some prefer watching Nigerian films in the company of spouse or friends and discuss them while watching or immediately afterwards.

As seen in the above two charts, the French length of exposure to Nigerian films is similar to the pattern revealed by other questionnaires. This can be explained by the fact that French respondents with personal or family connections with Nigeria, or living abroad (UK /

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Katsuva (2003:98) on the reception of Nigerian video films in the Congo: “there are two linguistic elements in these movies which sometimes make them difficult for non-Nigerians: pronunciation of some words and some cases of code-mixing in the film.”

Nigeria) accessed these films through their British or Nigerian connections, borrowed from friends and family or watched those films on satellite channels or the Internet (YouTube and Nigerian websites). Other French respondents only discovered Nigerian video films recently (6 months – 3 years ago), the main reason being that France does not yet offer access to the wide choice available in Britain or other English-speaking countries – Paris only counts very few outlets. This difficulty in accessing Nigerian video films, which has so far significantly limited the French approach to the Nigerian film industry, may be overcome through the current development of cultural and migrant associations.

There does not seem to be any correlation between the length of exposure to the films and the learning experience: previous training in language learning, coupled with motivation, triggered by frequency of face-to-face encounters with closely related Nigerians, seem stronger factors in this regard. Seven of the viewers already spoke Igbo, a language they learnt either from their Nigerian parent or while living in Nigeria, and acknowledged having learnt a few additional words of English, Igbo, Yoruba or Hausa while watching films. Some others, while watching films in English, felt encouraged to learn the Nigerian language they



heard more often (generally Igbo) and were often pro-active in their learning. Two regularly noted new words and looked for their meaning and usual context after the film. The range of vocabulary learnt through those films was often limited to greetings, common exclamations and everyday language; but, considering the differences between European and African languages, and the fact that Igbo and Yoruba are both tonal, one can assume that the little that has been learnt is already a huge

step towards the discovery of Nigerian cultures. Films have equally been the opportunity for French viewers to get acquainted with children rhymes, proverbs and Nigerian cuisine.

Comparing the French data with the rest, gender does not seem to be a significant factor in evaluating viewers' interest, as seen in the above chart. The only noticeable fact is the visible presence of male viewers among both the French and the Nigerians.

### **Comparing the French sample with other diasporic communities**

The comparison provided by questionnaires, between the views of French respondents and those of others – mainly the British and the Nigerians – reveals striking similarities between the French sample and the rest.<sup>34</sup> It must first be said that, just like the French, most of the British respondents connected with Nigerian video films were either of Nigerian descent, or having Nigerian friends or partners. As already mentioned above, a number of them shared the Diasporic experience of the majority: several of the British-born respondents were second generation immigrants who occasionally inherited a Nigerian language from their parents<sup>35</sup> (Igbo or Yoruba); some of them still refer to Nigeria, which they might only know as family holiday destination, as 'home' – a word used by both those aged 40-50 and younger ones. Among those born in Nigeria and who now live in the UK, those films are a reminder "of when I used to live there. They also remind me of part of my heritage. I also enjoy watching the films with others as a bonding exercise." These feelings were shared by several respondents, who considered the films to give a fairly accurate account of the state of the

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<sup>34</sup> Out of the six respondents from other nationalities (outside the French, the Brits and the Nigerians), three had been living in the UK for 2 – 20 years, and their responses more or less mirror those of British respondents.

<sup>35</sup> Languages most commonly spoken are Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa; only few respondents spoke other languages: Edo, Ikweri, Urhobo and Ogba. Questionnaires reveal a rapid decline in language skills among second generation immigrants; this is even more visible among Nigerians who were born abroad and subsequently relocated to another country.

country and used them to keep abreast of latest developments, from current affairs to daily life and fashion. This broad life interest can then become a motivator to perfect language skills among those younger men or women born outside Nigeria and who may now wish to learn their ascendants' language<sup>36</sup>; one 20-30 year-old explained that the films “depict life in a cultural context that I am familiar with through my background and in a way they keep me aware of how things are like in Nigeria [...]. If you are not fluent, it's a great tool, as you can relate to what the actors are saying to the English subtitles and over time, you understand more of the language.” Another respondent started watching Nollywood films while in Nigeria with her family and “enjoyed learning about the culture that [she] was living in as [she] was not of Nigerian origin”; she loved the Igbo and Yoruba songs of the films and learnt a few words of greetings and exclamations.

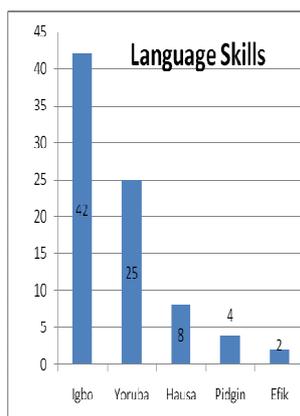
The respondents' attitude to subtitles was rather ambiguous: most of them acknowledged that they found it very difficult to follow a story in a foreign language, and needed the support of subtitles, even though this often meant a less enjoyable viewing. On the other hand, these often failed to convey the full meaning of the scenes; as one man put it, “I will rather have an understanding of the original language because there are some words that cannot be translated directly, hence the meaning is lost and you will not get the full impact of what the author intends.” Many of those films do not offer any subtitles anyway, and this does not seem to have been a problem – as an African-American remarked: “I get the plot from their acting. I don't understand the conversations, which makes me even more curious to learn the language.” This particular respondent tried to learn Igbo from the films, starting with words often repeated. She also used her cultural background to elucidate words from “body

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<sup>36</sup> This is a global trend which swells British Colleges and University classes with “many so-called ‘heritage students’, or students of [foreign] descent who may have learned the language at home or in [...] schools, and wish to pursue an academic study of the language and culture” (<http://www.uk.emb.japan.go.jp/en/study/promotion/0806soas.html>).

movements, expressions and gestures” she found to be very similar to those familiar to her. Another respondent reflected: “although I might not understand what they are saying, the body language speaks volumes”. A third person explained: “if the words are accompanied with motions, then you can figure out what the meaning is, however this is only with single words or short sentences.” This is probably the reason why the majority of respondents perceived their language learning to be limited to short words or sentences, greetings usually – and insults in one case.

### Video films and language learning



As mentioned earlier, respondents were already fluent in a number of Nigerian languages (see opposite chart). Their comments prove that the language spoken in video films cannot be separated from the visual part of the films, as noted by Barber (2000:2) about Yoruba films which “share a love affair with the Yoruba language in its fullest sense – its idioms, archaisms, innovations, slang, dialectal peculiarities, and its sacred and secret registers.” While a number of viewers felt they learnt informally while watching films, some were led to either consciously improve their command of English or learn Nigerian languages by viewing the films. The fact that language skills rated next to cultural interest in their approach to Nigerian video films suggests a possible use of these for language learning. Video-clips have long been used for this purpose; our hypothesis was that one could equally learn through extensive film viewing, even when language learning is not sought. Akpabio (2004), quoted in Isiaka<sup>37</sup> (2007), had already noted

<sup>37</sup> <http://ijedict.dec.uwi.edu/viewarticle.php?id=363&layout=html>

that Nigerian “children and youths are so enthralled with home video films that they are described as video crazy”, and that this could be used in class. Research has recently come to recognise the potential of Nigerian video films for language learning, as shown by one of the papers to be presented during the March 2009 conference on *English for Work and the Workplace (E4WP) in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* to be held in Cardiff. Sotarius, a lecturer at Rivers State University of Science & Technology, Port Harcourt (Nigeria), demonstrates how he has used Nigerian literature in English and Nigerian ‘Nollywood’ home video to teach English for Business/Secretarial Administration and Agricultural Extension field work in retraining programmes organized by the Chamber of Commerce in Southern Nigeria. In a previous paper, Isiaka (2007: 105), from Lagos State University, after studying the effectiveness of video as an instructional medium in teaching rural children agricultural and environmental sciences in schools, argued that children’s “interest in watching home video films can be exploited in the formal school system in teaching Agricultural and Environmental practices in vivid and entertaining manner.” His study, conducted in Badagry Local Government Area of Lagos State and involving 240 pupils aged 10 to 16, concluded that “video is as effective as the traditional teacher in teaching Primary school children Agriculture and Environmental issues. This confirms the assertion of many researchers of the potential of using video as an instructional medium in teaching varying subjects to adults, youths and children in the formal school system.” Closer to our study, the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), makes use of videos on its Hausa programme, which features a number of innovative approaches to language teaching including computerized instructional material and extensive use of videos created especially for Hausa. Beyond the second year of learning, UCLA

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students of Hausa are encouraged to watch movies and television programs on video.<sup>38</sup> Respondents equally insisted on the need to increase the number of films in Nigerian languages to support the “promotion and preservation” of these languages. Eberonwu, a Nigerian poet, dramatist, scriptwriter and producer, proposed yet another use of video films, emphasising “the need to market creative writing the Nollywood way” (Akpuda 2007).

A number of respondents commented on the valuable help of songs in the language learning process. Language learning seemed to be further facilitated by the attraction which these exert on African viewers because of their didactic stance, inherited from folktales. As explained by Ogunleye (2003: 5-6), “the video films also perform an educational function [...] In [Ananse] stories, vice is punished and virtue rewarded. The same folkloristic pattern is what the video film producers have adopted in the technical retelling of their stories. The audience expects to be morally educated through the stories of the video film.” Enemaku (2003:78) tried to argue that those films could not possibly offer moral lessons “since the moral foundations of the video film industry are inextricably interwoven with the moral and ethical foundations of the larger society [and that] the rather ignoble and reprehensible moral lapses inherent in the larger society have become part and parcel of the ethical foundations of the Nigerian video industry.” But respondents to our study strongly disagreed and a number insisted on the educational value of the films; as one put it, “they have a moral tale to tell”. In the end, all viewers agreed that Nigerian video films had a lot to teach – language, culture and morality – and it is hoped that the French public will gradually come to discover this very positive side of Nigeria.

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. [http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/aflang/Hausa%20class%20page/hausa\\_class\\_home.html](http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/aflang/Hausa%20class%20page/hausa_class_home.html)

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