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Nollywood in diaspora: a Cultural Tool

Françoise Ugochukwu
Open University UK & CNRS-LLACAN, Paris
For Akyeampong (2000: 185), “imagining the homeland is a potent force in diaspora communities.”

This paper, focusing on Europe and based on two sets of questionnaires and interviews dated 2009 and 2011, with the second strongly UK-based (86.3% of 2011 respondents live there), acknowledges the growing importance of the Nigerian Diaspora and the strategic position of the UK in the current building of a European network, as evidenced by the creation of ‘Nigerians in Diaspora Europe’ (NIDOE).

It examines the individual and corporate consumption of Nigerian video films by diasporic communities, considers its social, linguistic and economic impact among both first generation migrants and British youth of Nigerian descent, and reasons behind the success of Nollywood among resettled Nigerians.
It highlights the premium given to the cultural aspect of these films by viewers, its link to individual and collective memory and moral values, and suggests that these films could well have a powerful impact on diasporic communities’ identity and behaviour.

A growing Diaspora

Today, while 54% of Nigerian migrants live in the United States, a significant 10% live in the United Kingdom (Hernandez 2007: 40) and the Nigerian diaspora in Britain is probably the largest in Europe.
Since the Nigerian independence, many Nigerians have left the home country for Britain, to study, seek asylum or find what they believed were greener pastures. In addition, a growing number of Nigerians who previously migrated to Spain, Italy, Germany, Ireland or the Netherlands tend to eventually move to the UK (Heelsum 2007: 11) for a variety of reasons.

Nnodim suggested that the number of Nigerians in the UK might even have reached over a million. The latest estimate from the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office gives the figures of 800,000 to 3,000,000 Nigerians living in the UK.
Some 85% of those coming to Britain eventually settle there, swelling the growth of the Nigerian Diaspora. Within the last fifteen years, some 65,000 of them got the British citizenship. Still, “some migrants maintain residences in both UK and Nigeria. Those who migrated as children tend to live in the UK and visit home occasionally. Some children born and raised in the UK Diaspora have never been to Nigeria and a few Nigerians may never move back if they have lost connection with relatives in Nigeria [...] or if they cannot afford to go home” (Hernandez 2007: 10).

Statistics from the Institute for Public Policy Research reveal a very diverse Nigerian Diaspora. The Nigerian Diaspora in Britain is mostly made up of Igbo and Yoruba highly skilled professionals (Hernandez: 8), representing 36% of the work force (Wills 2010: 449).
Pictures from home

Nigerians in the UK do not only study and work; they meet and support each other within what the Brits have called ‘black churches’; they also contribute collectively to the betterment of their home-country through a variety of associations or/and ‘abroad’ gatherings bringing together people from the same Nigerian town or State. Research carried out between January and March this year shows that meeting others either face-to-face or virtually, online through social networks such as Uwandilgbo, LinkedIn, Facebook or Twitter, helps Nigerians keep in touch; this occupies 79.5% of the 2011 respondents for a significant portion of their free time in the evenings and over the weekend.
Part of this recreational time is equally spent viewing Nigerian films, massively preferred to foreign films and easily obtainable 81.8% of 2011 survey respondents said that they watched 1-5 films/month. All of them were introduced to these films by family or friends: 56.5% of them in Nigeria and 39.1% of them in the UK, and watched their first Nigerian film either at home or in a friend’s home. One remembers: “It was such a big deal, seeing the locally made films and everybody, both young and old, were attracted by the dramas and intrigues.”

To better understand what attracts viewers to these films, one has to remember their diasporic location, and that the random population sample used in 2011 comprised a majority of younger people: 68.7% aged 18-40 (18-25: 27.5% & 25-40: 41.2%), 35.3% of them born in the UK.
The 2011 group were initially thrilled to see films “locally made, using the local language and by the local people”, something “very different to anything [they] had seen previously, and [they] could relate to.” Other factors now keep them hooked: the presenting of Nigeria’s modern cities such as Lagos and Abuja (57.8% responses), of their own culture (48.9%) and of village life/traditional Nigeria (53.3%) – results which confirm Akpabio’s remark (2007: 97) that “the slight edge that Nigerian home video films have over foreign films from the point of view of audience interest cannot be divorced from its reflection of the Nigerian society”. Although some respondents to the 2009 questionnaire regretted the poor quality of the films, this was not mentioned by any of the 2011 respondents – a proof of the huge technical improvement undergone by the films, partly due to the move from VHS to VCD and DVD.
Which culture are we talking about here? Katan (2004: 26) remarks that “people instinctively know what ‘culture’ means to them and to which culture they belong.” He then goes on to define culture as “the artistic and social pursuits, expressions and tastes valued by a society”, this “natural, unconscious learning of language, behaviour, values and belief [being acquired] through informal watching and hearing”. This is done through the watching of films socially, and further reinforced by joining face-to-face and virtual meetings. Research reveals that among Nigerians in Europe, culture is highly valued because it identifies the person, and because this identity is being threatened by the pressure to adjust to a foreign society.
Nigerian films, while continuing to be inspired by everyday issues affecting villagers, couples and families, have gradually ventured into new areas, as shown by the following examples:

*Love in vendetta* (1996) - intercultural marriage and the long-term impact of religious tensions plaguing the country.  
*Domitilla* (1996) and *Up to me* (2006) - lesbianism among city girls  
*The Richest Man* (2003) - adoption  
*Meet you in Hell* (2005) and *Arugba* (Yoruba, 2009) – HIV-AIDS
Legal War (2006) - Penetrating the flaws of the legal sector; proposing to improve the Nigerian situation by using one’s skills and local connections instead of moving abroad (offered Britain or Germany).


Heat of the moment (2009) - rape

Silent scandals (2009) - single motherhood

Twilight sisters & Dangerous Angels (both 2009) - campus problems.
The above examples explain why the latest Nigerian movies resonate with young Nigerian adults, who consider them as giving a fairly accurate account of the state of the country – a view shared by 87% of 2011 respondents. A number of 2011 respondents confirmed their considering the Nollywood production to be mirroring “real Nigeria.” Expanding on their preferences for village/historical films, they explained that those documented customs and traditions reminded them of their childhood and of what they left behind, and “[told] the African story in the African style.” One respondent summarised others’ feelings: “I love seeing the village as it reminds me when I was a child and used to visit. I also love to hear Igbo spoken as it also keeps me close to my roots and childhood. However, I also like to see the city films for a variety.” This confirms Oladitan’s view (2008:36) that Nollywood is “an exposé and a mirror of what goes on in the society.”
Viewing as a collective experience

Most 2011 respondents (95.4%) usually elect to watch films presenting Nigeria but in English, more easily available than those in Nigerian languages and easier to follow for those struggling to understand their parents’ language. 26% of those respondents were Yoruba speakers, 16% Igbo speakers, and a few spoke other languages. 64.6% of my 2011 respondents have been in the UK for more than ten years; 38% of those never visit Nigeria and now often recognise having no real intention of going back ‘home’. In spite of efforts from diasporic communities, a significant drop has been noted in the use of Nigerian languages by British-born Nigerians – for example, the use of Yoruba language is in decline in ‘little Nigeria’ (the London borough of Peckham).
Still, most Nigerians abroad would agree with Oyewo (2003:145) that “language is an integral part of a people’s culture, and [that] 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.”

For 58.7% of the 2011 survey, language plays a role in the pleasure they derive from viewing films. They equally value speaking their first language together: 73.5% of the 2011 respondents speak that language frequently, with 68% considering this as important - only 18.4% rarely practice it, usually because they live in areas away from other Nigerians.
Respondents clearly perceive language as part of their cultural heritage and identity (59%), a legacy to be cherished and protected especially in diasporic situations, a vital tool to communicate with older relatives in Nigeria and keep in touch with one’s roots, especially for the 87.2% who still occasionally visit Nigeria and stay more than a week at a time.

Language is equally valued for its confidence-boosting and identity-reinforcing value, and features prominently in the list of what attracts viewers to Nollywood, second (50%) after the storyline (71.7%), with other factors trailing behind. This marked interest for language reveals the premium placed on communication among diasporic Nigerians.
Some of these 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 in the two surveys. 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.” For those born outside Nigeria, this broad life interest can then become a motivator to meet other people from their culture area and perfect language skills.

Nigerians usually watch these films at home with family (67.4%) and other compatriots (37.2%) who do not need any explanation to enjoy the viewing.
Yet, the multicultural setting prevalent in the UK increasingly brings Nigerians to share their viewing with other Africans (23.3% of respondents) and non-Africans (16.3%), confirming both the vocation of these films to be enjoyed in company and their growing appeal for non-Nigerians, as people who “just suddenly see something they can relate to, beyond the Western world, which is very close to [their own situations]” (Detokunbo-Bello 2010).

Whatever the viewers’ identity, Nigerian films, produced as “a collective expression” (Austen & Şaul 2010:7), are best watched in group and commented in-between scenes.
The importance of culture in attracting Nigerians to Nollywood should not be underestimated, because, by their own admission, it helps them cope with exile. Viewing Nigerian films with family and friends can be a way of building an immigrant community within the host society, and fostering a group identity while gathering strength from the group to resist acculturation. Nigerians equally use other electronic devices to keep in touch, but only films have the ability to transport viewers ‘home’ and allow them to experience living there by proxy and sharing people’s daily life. Viewing Nigerian movies can therefore be seen and experienced as a trip down memory lane, a virtual trip back home, “a ritual experience” (Dipio 2008: 60) and a group therapy.
The viewing of Nigerian films can finally be seen as a virtual classroom experience: a number of respondents insisted on the educational value of the films, as “they have a moral tale to tell” and in the end, all viewers agree that Nigerian video films had a lot to teach – language, culture and morality. The strong emphasis placed on moral values and the didactic component of films – again a distinct Nigerian trait – is indicative of a desire to hand down those values to the next generation and ensure the survival of the culture in diaspora. At home, culture would have been imbibed effortlessly. In the UK, films are now used instead - someone called them ‘baby-sitters’ because parents frequently leave their children watching them while they attend to domestic chores.
Towards home betterment

In the end, “while Nigerian video film continues to be an unknown quantity for mainstream and even more adventurous Western audiences, in Nigeria itself, in many parts of West Africa, and increasingly outside the West African sub-region, Nigerian video films have clearly become a dominant force” (Adejunmobi 2007:9). We have seen that among Nigerians abroad, film-viewing is usually associated with meeting compatriots, speaking Nigerian languages and talking about ‘home’. These findings lead us to confirm that what Nigerians abroad do in their free time is of primary importance, both to their well-being and to that of their home country.
One of the strong attractions of Nollywood among diasporic communities, under constant pressure to accept Western artistic patterns, is the deliberate choice of the Nigerian video film to ignore the diktat of the global – something that boosts the average Nigerian’s morale.

Those films might be accused of keeping Nigerians abroad in limbo, resisting acculturation and rooted in a ‘neither here nor there’ space. Yet they have empowered diasporic Nigerians “to reclaim their culture and history” (Onuzulike 2008: 88), definitely help them cope with their situation, act as a link between ‘abroad members’ and home country, and may incite some to contribute to the Nigerian economy or even go back ‘home’.
Perceived as “a catalyst for national development” (Akpabio 2004), they have the potential to build on acquired habits and communal values, “inducing positive change in the mental and moral disposition of the citizenry” (Ahmad 2008: 181) and trigger individual contributions to diasporic organisations and initiatives as well as cultural exchange projects bridging the gap between ‘abroad members’ and Nigerians at home.

Producers should therefore pay more attention to the viewers’ expressed interests, to the content of their films and to their possible impact on Nigerians’ attitude towards their home country and its wellbeing.