

Toolkit: Southern Nigerian Cinema

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A significant amount of literature exists on the southern Nigerian cinema, which was inaugurated with the 1992 Igbo-language film, *Living in Bondage*. Little is known and documented about the colonial cinema of Nigeria and the period immediately after colonial rule. Although films were made in the 1970s and 1980s by filmmakers such as Eddie Ugboma, Ola Balogun and Ladi Ladebo, such films and critical analyses about them are not readily accessible.

Hyginus Ekwuazi, Jonathan Haynes and Onookome Okome (see texts below) have written excellent accounts of the history of Nigerian cinema, especially of the Nollywood boom and the socio-cultural contexts that gave rise to them. The film industry in southern Nigeria is today the largest in Africa, producing over a thousand film titles per annum with locally sourced funds and distributed internationally. Foreign investment in Nigerian film is on the rise given the visibility that local productions have created at home and abroad. The government has also taken notice of the commercial viability of the industry and pledged billions of naira through the Bank of Industry to support the film business. The films receive critical acclaim and are commercial hits within Africa and among Africans in the diaspora.

The sections below provide some critical texts and film titles to guide new comers to the nature and scholarship on the Nigerian film industry. The lists are by no means exhaustive; they only serve as a tip of the iceberg in the hope that interested parties can request additional information by emailing aa207@soas.ac.uk or aagina@pau.edu.ng

Some Key Texts

Ekwuazi, H. (1987, 2018). **Film in Nigeria**. Africa World Press – Originally published in 1987 but now reproduced with an introduction by Onookome Okome, this book offers great historical insights into the Nigerian film industry from the

colonial times. It addresses cultural policy, film production and distribution and the audience of cinema in Nigeria.

Haynes, J. (1997, 2000). **Nigerian Video Films**. Ohio University Press – This is the first edited volume, comprising contributions from indigenous and foreign scholars, who attempt definitions of the existing genres, the major themes and trends of Nigerian video films. The authors theorise and analyse some of the important films of the period in stimulating and accessible narratives.

Krings, M. & Okome, O. (Eds.) (2013). **Global Nollywood: The transnational dimensions of an African video film industry**. Indiana University Press– This edited volume documents the transnational contexts

of Nigerian films, the African diaspora who consume the films and what the films mean to them. It documents the popular and problematic engagement of Nollywood with Africans within and especially outside the continent.

Haynes, J. (2017). **Nollywood: The creation of Nigerian film genres**. University of Chicago Press – This monograph is a recent and comprehensive account of the different genres in Nollywood and how their narratives are structured to reveal the elements of each genre. Inevitably, the book adeptly discusses, together with the films, the filmmakers and the cultural milieu in which films are made, circulated and albeit marginally, consumed.

Larkin, B. (2008). **Signal and noise: Media, infrastructure and urban culture in Nigeria**. Duke University Press – this is an ethnographic and anthropological study of media and cinema in northern Nigeria, with an emphasis on the film practices that prevailed in one of Nigeria's largest cities, Kano. Afolayan, A. (Ed.) (2014). **Auteuring Nollywood: Critical perspectives on The Figurine**. University Press Plc – This is the first text devoted to interdisciplinary readings of a particular film, *The Figurine* and its filmmaker, Kunle Afolayan.

Vanisian, Gary (Ed.) (2016). **The Magic of Nigeria – On the Cinema of Ola Balogun**. Filmkollektiv Frankfurt, Frankfurt am Main .Can be accessed at: <https://www.orishaimage.com/blog/ola-balogun>

African film texts that feature Nigerian films

Mahir, S. & Austen, R. A. (2010). **Viewing African Cinema in the twenty-first century: Art films and the Nollywood video revolution** – One of the first edited books that brings together the Francophone filmmaking traditions with the Anglophone film practice in comparative and productive conversations. The editors allow the perspectives on these two traditions to stand side by side, not with the typical superiority imposed on one over the other, but from the lens of filmmaking practices observed in Africa, the nature of the genres, production and distribution circuits as well as audience reception.

Mano, W., Knorpp, B. & Agina, A. (Eds.) (2017). **African film cultures: Contexts of creation and circulation**. Cambridge Scholars Publishing – This text is a product of the African film conferences held at the University of Westminster between 2010 and 2016. The research documented therein reveals the consistent effort of scholars from film and media studies around the African continent to give nuanced readings to the socio-political cultures in which filmmaking and distribution thrived or was censored.

Some Key Films

1. **Living in Bondage** (1992). Dir. Chris Obi Rapu is a drama that focuses on the get-rich-quick theme. It dramatizes, in Igbo language with English subtitles, the travails of a young man, Andy Okeke, whose frustrated attempts to improve his fortunes lead him to sacrifice his wife, Merit, to occult powers in order to get wealthy. Aided by an old school friend who introduced him to the secret cult, Andy indeed

achieves a financial turnaround, but has to live with the guilt of his actions. He sees apparitions of his wife upbraiding him for killing her and all efforts to start a new life fail. Andy is rescued from his bondage by some Christian pastor after he confesses his actions. The film is available on YouTube at https://youtu.be/03CUfzMaq_4 and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1meiN6QFDvQ&feature=emb_rel_err [Legal status unverified]

Living in Bondage is often referred to as the commercial video film that inaugurated Nollywood even though a Nigerian film industry existed in the 1970s, making films on celluloid.

2. **Glamour Girls** (1994). Dir. Chika Onukwufor is a feminist attempt to see four women achieve financial independence in Nigeria's deeply patriarchal society. It uses women's wit and sexuality to shift marital and domestic control from men to women in what might arguably be Nollywood's first English language video film. With numerous consequences for the women's actions and inactions, the film primed the audience for a sequel, which was released a couple of years later. The film quickly gained widespread appeal by featuring popular actresses like Liz Benson and Eucharia Anunobi. Carmela Garitano's chapter in *Nigeria Video Films* provides an illuminative feminist reading of the film. The film is available at https://youtu.be/rPutU_uio4Q [legal status unverified]. See also Paul Ugor's (2013) *Nollywood and postcolonial predicaments: Transnationalism, gender and the commoditization of desire in Glamour Girls in Global Nollywood* (pp. 158–178)

3. **Domitilla** (1996). Dir. Zeb Ejiro attained enormous popularity due to a massive publicity campaign launched by its producers in the 1990s. In 2012, Ejiro admitted that the story of *Domitilla 1 & 2* is the most influential and highest grossing film in his film career. A rags-to-riches story that chronicles the life of a Lagos-based prostitute with the complexities of such a life including being charged for the murder of one of her male clients. Several life-threatening events make her start a rethink of prostitution for a more decent existence until a wealthy businessman takes an interest in and rescues her from the clutches of her past life. The film, acted in English and Pidgin dialects, and its sequel is critically analysed in Onookome Okome's (2007) *Nollywood: Spectatorship, Audience and Sites of Consumption. Postcolonial Text* (3:2). The film is available at <https://youtu.be/yQZSr92n2Hw> [legal status unverified].

4. **Saworoide** (1999). Dir. Tunde Kelani is a political critique – see Haynes' (2006) *Political Critique in Nigerian Video Films. African Affairs* (105:421) – that tells a tale of traditional Yoruba culture and political corruption in a way that satires the Nigerian state and is reminiscent of the country's tumultuous history of greedy politicians. It is a Yoruba language film, like most of Kelani's productions, with English subtitles. Kelani's films are available at tundekelani.tv and *Saworoide* is also available at <https://youtu.be/lqON2t9mBks> [legal status unverified].

5. **Osuofia in London** (2003). Dir. Kingsley Ogoro is a comic presentation of an unschooled character, Osuofia, who travels to London to claim an inheritance bequeath to him by his late brother. Feeling quite displaced in an unknown country, Osuofia must negotiate his way through the vast city, its people and culture to actualise his dream and purpose of his trip to London. He returns to his native land with the white lady he wooed and both live an adventurous wealth-seeking life in a rustic village in Igboland. This film is available on the online video platform, Ibaka TV. See Okome's (2013) *Reversing the filmic*

gaze: Comedy and the critique of the postcolony in Osuofia in London in *Global Nollywood* (pp. 139-157)

6. **The Figurine** (2009). Dir. Kunle Afolayan is a psychological drama woven around a year-long national requirement for all graduating students of Nigerian universities, the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC). A love triangle exists among three friends on the NYSC programme. The two men find a mysterious sculpture while on one of their treks in the countryside, without knowing the myth told about it. It turned out that the sculpture represents Araromire, the goddess who bestows seven years of blessing before unleashing another seven years of terror to those who cross its path. The friends fall prey to this myth, and while trying to comprehend the inexplicable occurrences in their lives, one of them plans an outcome that coincidentally ties in with some mysterious events. The film ends on an open-ended note leaving its audience to multiple interpretations of the figurine and its ascribed powers. The film, which arguably ushered in new Nollywood films – those premiered in Europe and America, feature in international film festivals and are exhibited on the big screens of Nigeria’s modern cineplexes – is available on Netflix.

7. **The Wedding Party** (2016). Dir. Kemi Adetiba is a romantic comedy set in Lagos that made history in Nigeria as the highest grossing film in 2016. Two families from different ethnic groups –Igbo and Yoruba – must forget about their differences and stereotypes in order to allow their children get married. The Igbo groom’s past life and his father’s randiness, coupled with the bride’s uncultured mother are some of the obstacles that have to be overcome for the couple to at least get through the high profile wedding day. The film is available on Netflix.

8. **Lionheart** (2018). Dir. Genevieve Nnaji is a family drama acted in English and Igbo that tells the story of a failing transport business in Southeast Nigeria saved by the daughter of the business owner amidst various difficulties and treachery. The film is popular for the controversy it sparked globally when, after being submitted to the Oscars in the international film category, was disqualified for using over 70% English in its dialogues. The Nigerian Oscars Selection Committee (NOSC) took the plunge to submit *Lionheart* for consideration in the Oscars because of its technical quality and production value. The film’s popularity shot up when Netflix acquired it for online distribution.