

Nollywood and Netflix's burgeoning relationship

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Anyone with an academic interest in Nigerian film must be familiar with the difficulty in accessing specific titles for teaching or research purposes. Less academic interests are frustrated by the inability to watch recent films without having to go to the cinemas or attend international film festivals. This frustration is hinged on the major question of access and the distribution gaps that lead to piracy. And any thorough-going filmmaker will not make a film accessible without a guarantee of profitability. One of the institutions closing this access gap while also satisfying the profitability clause, at least for latest releases, is Netflix. The streaming giant's growing relationship with Nollywood is definitely changing the production-consumption landscape in ways previously unseen. This is particularly glaring at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has reduced public confidence in cinema-going. While it might be too soon to assess the burgeoning relationship between Nollywood and Netflix, it is worthwhile to start responding to some of the changes and strategies that we are witnessing with Netflix's growing investment in Nigerian screen media.

In the 1990s, local consumption of Nigerian films occurred on television sets in domestic spaces because it was a favourite pastime of women as Brian Larkin pointed out in his book *Signal and Noise*. However, from 2004 when the Silverbird Galleria, a multi-purpose shopping mall and cinema theatre was built in high-brow Victoria Island in Lagos, movie-going and public exhibition of films returned (after seeing a decline from the 1960s/1980s for a variety of reasons). Theatrical releases were the exclusive reserve of new Nollywood films as Jonathan Haynes, Nollywood's leading scholar, pointed out which were made with bigger budgets of N50M and above around 2008. Only a handful of local films from the thousands produced annually made it to the big screens since the cinema facilities were less than thirty at that time in the entire country. It was rare to talk about video-on-demand because those who did not go to the movies watched them at home. But that began to change with Nigeria's exposure to internet facilities.

In 2010, Jason Njoku and Bastian Gotter started a YouTube channel called NollywoodLove, operating from the UK and hosting almost 200 movies by licensing them for as low as \$100. As soon as the pair was able to attract \$3 million in investment from US-based Tiger Capital, they moved away from the ad-based video platform and launched iROKOTv, an online platform that was later described by Jade Miller in her book *Nollywood Central* as the "Netflix of Africa". In a bid to attract more Nigerian viewers instead of only those in the diaspora (who had higher levels of broadband penetration), Njoku set up an office in Lagos and rose to become the leading internet-based distributor of Nollywood films with various pricing models. But the films in iROKOTv's library were not the same ones that went to the cinemas (new Nollywood)

since his company was unable to pay the higher licensing fees demanded by filmmakers who had upped their budgets, were interested in international festival circuits and were releasing their films in the few Nigerian cinemas after touring the world. This made iROKOTv patronise smaller, less known producers and eventually began its own film production through ROK Studios. The result was that the films on iROKOTv are in a different class with arguably lower production values. Most of the highly celebrated films that went to the cinemas after flamboyant premiere events in the most luxurious hotels in Lagos hardly made it to iROKOTv. This created a gap for audiences for years, stoked the fires of piracy, and made some filmmakers look outside the country for favourable distribution deals until Netflix arrived.

The reality of watching the latest Nollywood films on the global streaming platform, Netflix, was greeted with excitement by Nigerian film lovers at home and abroad. In 2018, YouTube and iROKOTv were the main sources of Nollywood on the internet. In 2020, there is evidence from our research to show that Netflix has displaced iROKOTv with YouTube remaining in the lead. A relationship that began in 2015 when Kunle Afolayan's film, *October 1* (2014) was licensed by Netflix has in 2020 reached a peak owing to increased online viewing caused by the COVID-19 lockdowns. The Nollywood-Netflix relationship is not just a thrill for local and global audiences interested in African film; Nigerian filmmakers are equally delighted at the prospect of reaching global audiences, and benefitting from the licensing or acquisition fees paid by Netflix, which turns out to be another source of film funding. Independent filmmakers like Ekene Mekwunye said his three-year deal for *Light in the Dark* (2019), from August 2020, earned him thrice the amount of money realised from theatrical exhibition. He said "my film was a disaster in the cinemas. If not for Netflix, I would have been biting my fingers now. Netflix saved the day for me because in this country, 95% of the films that go to the cinemas do not make their money back."

Netflix's entry strategy into the Nigerian market is varied. It licenses films and geoblocks some to African regions like Ema Deelen Edosio's *Kasala!* (2018). It acquires and brands films for which it had no creative input or control like Genevieve Nnaji's *Lionheart* (2018) and Kunle Afolayan's *Citation* (2020) as originals and it produces its own films through commissioning local filmmakers like Akin Omotoso. Even though the creative input rests with the Nigerian filmmakers, Netflix shares in its contracts strict protocols to be observed and templates which have to be followed to the letter. When the films are handed over to Netflix upon completion, it deploys its own post-production team to ensure uniformity of its products, check subtitling and fill in cultural gaps, arising from language and gestures, for global audiences. Because some films are premiered in Nigeria to great pomp and pageantry, they were submitted to the National Film and Video Censors Board (NFVCB) for classification in line with the regulations of the Board. Kunle Afolayan confirmed that this was done with *Citation*. Film premieres in Nigeria, like elsewhere, are major industry events which all new Nollywood filmmakers look forward to therefore they all go through the NFVCB but primarily for classification. The filmmakers know too well what could be potentially banned from exhibition by the Board and as film scholars have argued, they steer clear of such topics or use a host of strategies to avoid censorship. Kenneth Gyang's *Oloture*, which was not premiered in Nigeria, but rather released directly on Netflix did not go through the NFVCB perhaps due to widely-held notions about the Board stifling creativity. This raises vital questions

on the regulatory environment when internet distribution as opposed to theatrical releases takes the order of the day.

Although Netflix has started approaching filmmakers like Afolayan directly, there are only two distributors that work with Netflix's Amsterdam office which oversees some African countries including Nigeria and South Africa. One of them, Joy Efe Odiete of Blue Pictures Distribution said, "Filmmakers do not go directly to Netflix, Netflix looks for you. And you can pitch your content to them but only through a distributor – and that's where we come in. Even if you go to them directly, they will re-direct you to us."

Netflix's main collaborator in Nigeria is EbonyLife TV and Films, a privately-owned television station and film production company which has several films (*The Wedding Party*, 2016; *Chief Daddy* 2018; *Your Excellency*, 2019) and TV series (*Castle and Castle*, 2018; *The Governor*, 2016, *Fifty* 2015/2017) on the platform. *Oloture* (2019), a Netflix original, is the latest acquisition from EbonyLife launched on the platform in October 2020. Prior to this time, in June 2020, EbonyLife TV CEO, Mo Abudu, announced on Twitter that her company had been commissioned to produce adaptations of Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka's and Lola Shoneyin's works, *Death and the king's horsemen* and *The secret lives of Baba Segi's wives* respectively. The collaboration between EbonyLife and Netflix appears to be so strong and evident on Netflix's platform that popular sentiments suggest that even if Netflix has a physical office in Nigeria (it does not), it must be housed within the premises of EbonyLife TV and Films.

Other Netflix strategies of engagement with Nollywood include sending a team of post-production people, who although not based in Nigeria, visit frequently to hold meetings with specific production studios, and ask questions on the type of equipment used. The streaming giant has maintained a Twitter account, @NetflixNaija, with over 73,000 followers since February 2020 as a promotional platform for feeding its relationship with filmmakers and movie lovers. Sharing film clips, tweeting and retweeting celebrities' tweets which potentially doubles as more views on Netflix, it is definitely the rave of the moment for film lovers. The case of *Ikorodu Bois* is another strategy through which Netflix chose to remain visible to the Nigerian public. A group of four amateur filmmakers, *Ikorodu Bois'* mimicry and YouTube circulation of big budget Hollywood films drew global attention to them. The latest of this effort was a re-make of the Russo brothers' *Extraction* (2020) starring Chris Hemsworth and released on Netflix as an original, which earned the boys an exclusive invitation to the premiere. In response to this, Netflix purchased production equipment for the group and publicised it widely on the internet to the group's greatest pleasure.

In spite of the growth potential of Nigeria's internet-distributed film and TV market, there is no competition between Netflix and local SVODs because of class divisions, content quality and varying audience interests. For example, as Ramon Lobato points out in his book, *Netflix Nations*, the streaming platform's presence in India is targeted at a "small base of English-speaking people, who travel abroad, are wealthy and want to watch the latest [US] shows". The same can be said of Nigeria, which has a small upper-class most of whom are arguably uninterested in Nollywood. Besides, internet penetration, affordability, online payment problems and other easily accessible screen media keep the majority of interested viewers – middle and lower classes – away from

Netflix. It is not the subscription rates (which are the same in European countries and therefore expensive by Nigerian standards) that are unaffordable (at N2,900/month for a basic plan) but the cost of internet data required to stream one film and sustain the practice. An annual subscription to iROKOTv is N3,000 in comparison, and in that sense, Netflix is firmly part of Hollywood, an industry which has never been interested in doing business with poor people and has always focused on the global middle class instead. It has been established that women are more avid consumers of Nollywood, but Nollywood is freely available on satellite television channels especially Africa Magic, hence Netflix is not an option for them. Premium, new Nollywood content is going on Netflix while lower budget films and Asian soaps are hosted on iROKOTv, which does not American content; and millions of Nigerians prefer to binge on freely available media. Like the India case, Netflix's ultimate goal is to use local content to lure Nigerians to the platform to watch its predominantly American content – another definition of cultural imperialism.

Audience interests are also often determined by their social class. As filmmakers have consistently reported, many audiences in the south eastern and northern parts of Nigeria, where production values are different, often lower than new Nollywood, do not care for Netflix, iROKOTv, IbakaTV or the newer SVODs available today. Each platform attracts a different kind of audience thus making any serious competition improbable. If Netflix faces any competition at all on the African continent, it should be from Showmax, an arm of the MultiChoice Group-owned SVOD platform, and that would be because of MultiChoice's dominance in circulating African screen media, not for Hollywood fare. If the future of film consumption is online and on mobile devices, then the role of Netflix as the largest streaming platform in the world is increasingly important to Nigeria's film industry and to its scholarship.

As can be imagined, the excitement triggered by Netflix is not shared by all. Obtaining information from some industry leaders about Netflix is akin to squeezing water out of a stone. Up to five important stakeholders in the Nollywood-Netflix alliance declined commenting on the burgeoning relationship, and those who agreed simply shared generalities that places Netflix in an exalted position. While some referred to Netflix's non-disclosure contracts as reason for not engaging with the potential pitfalls of this relationship, others complained about what they called Netflix's bureaucratic procedures and highly-specific (even intimidating) templates. An anonymous commentator alluded to the lack of a level-playing field as very few filmmakers in comparison to the hundreds of well-trained ones have their films on Netflix. For licensing films, the turnaround times put off distributors and even filmmakers who have to wait for up to six months for Netflix's return. Kenneth Gyang questioned Netflix's location in Amsterdam (a tax haven) while conducting business in Nigeria through its African executives, Ben Amadasun and Dorothy Ghattuba. In response to some Nigerian filmmakers' complaints about unequal license fees between themselves and their counterparts on the continent, Amadasun claimed that Netflix uses industry rates. The question that lingers then is if the relationship between Nollywood and Netflix will continue to be beneficial to stakeholders from cultural, creative and economic perspectives in the long run. Will Nollywood merely be a stepping stone for Netflix's imperialist aspirations? Granted that Netflix wields the economic resources to license and acquire films for any length of time, what legal and copyright issues will Nollywood

have to confront? And how ready is it (or will it) be to take on the streaming colossus in a technological era that makes both legal and illegal digital distribution equally easy?

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