"They are watching my film in France and Brazil": Preliminary Notes on Netflix and the transnationalisation of Nollywood

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While middle-class Nigerians were basking in the experience of watching the latest Nollywood films on Netflix on their release dates – something that previously was exclusive to cinema- or festival-going audiences—for the first-time viewers in France, Brazil and several other places could simultaneously enjoy Nigerian cinematic pleasures. The driving factor behind this synchronized viewing experience was Netflix, which made Nigerian productions just a click away during the first wave of the Covid-19 lockdowns from March 2020. The result is that transnational audiences are enjoying the Nollywood-on-Netflix boom[i], and that new constituencies are reaching out to Nigerian filmmakers for commentary and co-productions. It is no longer news that the Nigerian film industry popularly referred to as Nollywood has gained significant attention from film scholars, cinephiles and investors around the globe. This article argues, following existing work on the transnational routes of Nollywood, that Netflix is the new vehicle by which Nigerian screen worlds are transnationalised, and with important implications for the film industry. A close look at two recent Nollywood films, both Netflix originals, *Citation* (2020) and *Oloture* (2019) reveals a path to formalised transnationalism, the movement of cultural products such as films between and beyond the sovereign jurisdictional boundaries of nations in ways that are documented and traceable. This formal iteration, I argue, is distinct from yet continuing the informalities and corporatization of the Nigerian film industry. Prior to this formal circulation of films, VCDs, DVDs and online channels circulated the films illegally without returning the proceeds to the filmmakers. I interviewed the filmmakers to understand how they experience the release of their films to these global audiences via Netflix, and what different advantages and concerns animate their work as it becomes available for digital streaming. Combining the interviews with a look at Nollywood itself and how it has transformed in the last decade, I here offer some preliminary notes on these Nollywood-Netflix currents and what the future might look like.

Writing about the Nigerian film industry, Moradewun Adejunmobi points out that it may be considered an example of "cultural production that is transnational in scope, that is aware of the trends emanating from the dominant centers in global cultural production, but remains detached from the dominant systems of global cultural production in significant respects."[ii] This detachment, resulting in part from the lack of dependence on funding from the global economy, appears to be gradually fading away as Nollywood has in the last decade participated in an increasing flow of intangible circulation based precisely within the global distribution channels. In his article on the transnational paths of Nollywood, Alessandro Jedlowski carefully outlines the films' itineraries from the sites of production to various places, first through informal networks and then, through emerging formalised approaches to other parts of the world especially the United States and the United Kingdom. Through theatrical distributions in the US and the UK, and with the instrumental roles played by Nigerians in the diaspora, Jedlowski argued that the emergent wave of Nigerian cinema from 2010 had significant aesthetic, narrative and economic transformations which could potentially "revolution[ise] the geography of media consumption on the continent and throughout the diaspora."[iii] The phenomenon described here is evidently demonstrated on the global streaming service, Netflix, which in the last year has tripled its Nollywood offerings thus formalising a previously unstructured circulation pathway.

One of the well-known features of Nollywood as a media industry is its informality. The production and distribution of its straight-to-video films was largely done through informal, undocumented and unaccountable ways. Without an established studio system, no one could accurately account for production numbers or revenues. There were no documentation templates, nor was there a thorough classification system that could account for all productions within the country or those being carted away like personal luggage through international borders. Documentation was based on estimates that failed to factor in the numerous small businesses owned by Nigerians who had relatives in nearly all parts of the world, and who sent videos to them. Similarly, these small business owners re-sold the films to their counterparts outside Nigeria without any evidence of such sales. These videos were then replicated and re-circulated, most times sold in locations where Nigerians and other Africans lived. This process fanned the spread of Nigerian films across Africa, US and the UK in ways reminiscent of the 1970s piracy of foreign films. Nigeria and other West African countries were recipients of bootlegged American and Asian films up until and including early 2000s, and so exporting Nigerian films using the same technology proved easy and convenient. Although this pirate transnationalism persists today, it has notably gone online with countless YouTube channels and other websites hosting Nigerian films illegally and, sometimes, deceptively with the intention of luring unsuspecting audiences to wrongly-titled content.

Unlike the pirate transnationalism that Jedlowski described in his aforementioned work and the economic activities it generated—which notably excluded content creators from the proceeds of their work— the transnationalization of Netflix guarantees economic returns to the content owners. However, this does not mean that threats of illegal circulation have evaporated. New forms of piracy accompany online releases, as seen in the case of Kunle Afolayan's *Citation* (2020), a film about a female student's courage in confronting and bringing to justice the male professor who tried to assault her. In the same month of the release of *Citation*, a viewer tweeted a note of complaint to the director about the lack of subtitling of some parts of the film which was shot in Yoruba, English and French. In response, Afolayan's swearword[iv] informed the 'innocent' viewer and several others that they had watched pirated copies being hosted on unauthorised websites: on Netflix, the film is available with its complete subtitling. In spite of the continuities with the pirate transnationalism within this highly formalised transnational route, filmmakers are optimistic about Netflix since it offers deals and funding that allow the films to reach global audiences without sacrificing local audiences' access to the same cultural product. Even though Netflix is providing an accelerated flow of media consumption in privileged and marginalised communities, it is not insulated from the digital pirate economy, and sometimes, the company does nothing to avert illegal circulation. Afolayan said, "if you put something on Netflix now, it will be copied now…the same thing happens on YouTube but by the time you get them to take it down from YouTube, several people will have copied it."[v] At the same time as viewers from the sixteen countries in which the film ranked top 10 in the first months of its release were watching *Citation*, African students were transferring the film on USB flash drives or watching it on their peers' laptops and on illegal websites. Prior to Afolayan's verbal response, many people in his network had sent him the links to some of the illegal websites.

Citation's reception was overwhelmingly positive on social media, and global audiences readily found intersections with their own contexts. In 2019, BBC Eye released a documentary on sex for grades featuring undercover journalists in two universities in Nigeria and Ghana, who exposed male lecturers well known as sexual predators. Afolayan's *Citation* therefore rekindled discussions in universities across the globe including at the Wisconsin University

among others, where he received a speaking request. For the filmmaker, Netflix's foray into the Nigerian film industry as a transnational vehicle is a win-win situation for practitioners and the streaming service since as he repeated during our interview, "…they [Netflix] want our content because they need to grow their subscriber base in this zone, and they are ready to pay for it…because as you know, finding funds to make films is very tough"
Both Gyang and Afolayan confirmed Netflix's strategy as seeking filmmakers whose work have been consistently well-received to partner with for new productions. This is different from commissioning existing films, which could be made by emerging, less-known filmmakers. As such, Nollywood's Netflix boom does not necessarily open doors for new or inexperienced voices.

However, this does not mean that Netflix' involvement necessarily leads to narratives that bolster the status quo. Within this pool of established filmmakers, Netflix' involvement does afford opportunities to address controversial or vexed subjects that might not otherwise be told. Kenneth Gyang's *Oloture* (2020) is such a film. The film exposes the travails of an undercover journalist in her attempt to reveal the human trafficking ecosystem within Africa, and made the top 10 list in 25 countries including France and Brazil according to data released by Netflix. This film appeared to be more popular on Netflix than the previous one, probably because of the global attention that has been given to the issues explored in it namely, human rights abuses, sexual exploitation, mobility, illegal immigration and the scale of transnational organised crime activities. Gyang tweeted the Netflix data, and received hundreds of comments and likes within the hour. According to him, *Oloture* is the kind of socially conscious film he wants to make, and its premiere on Netflix (thus by-passing the National Film and Video Censors Board – NFVCB) made it possible for the film to be told and seen globally without the interference of government officials' editorial controls. He pointed out that France and Brazil are two countries whose film industries are well-known, with France's interest in African cultural projects dating several decades back, and among other things manifesting in the hosting of an annual Nollywood Week in Paris. Brazilian screen media presence in Nigeria has also been long-standing, opening up avenues of cultural exchange and reception, including a growing body of work exploring the reception of Nigerian films in Brazilian cities. As a point of prestige for Gyang, the fact that his film attracted transnational audiences not only suggests the potential for future collaborations but also ranks him as a sought-after director, thus achieving creative, economic, social and emotional satisfaction. In a case of all publicity is good publicity, the ongoing legal battle over intellectual property violation regarding *Oloture*[vi] attracted even more viewers to the film. This legal controversy, with an investigative journalist suing the producers for heavily borrowing from her reporting, renders it a perfect case study for Nollywood's informality'—in this case, it was not viewers that treaded into the twilight zone between legality and piracy, but industry insiders— and the continued yearning for formalization.

What is clear is that global streaming paves the way for global collaboration. Based on his own monitoring on Flixpatrol of the locations where Nigerian films end up being seen around the world, *The Wedding Party* (2016) director, Niyi Akinmolayan, says that Nollywood has penetrated global markets except for the United States because of the sheer number of films and TV shows originating from there. On its website, Flixpatrol describes its goal as gathering all possible streaming data about movies and TV shows to help producers better understand viewers' taste…" (www.flixpatrol.com/about/about). But Akinmolayan is excited about the attention Nollywood has received in past years, especially in 2020. In an informal conversation with him, he revealed that an Indian filmmaker contacted his production outfit after watching Akay Mason's *Elevator Baby* (2019), first for permission to re-make it[vii], and then for a co-production, all thanks to Netflix. The filmmaker believes that this is not the first within the

industry and is certainly not the last. The collaboration requests are coming much faster than they did prior to 2020 since the streaming platform has enabled on-demand spectatorship to global audiences in an unprecedented way. The other streaming platforms that hold Nigerian content such as Amazon Prime are not very popular in Nigeria, partly due to online payment problems, and iROKOtv has arguably been a late comer to premium content. For Akinmolayan, although "Netflix is the biggest, no hottest thing in the industry right now" in terms of the fame and funding it provides, Nigerian filmmakers are merely receiving handouts from the streaming giant without being able to operate on equal terms. "We are not negotiating with Netflix yet…but we need to sit at the negotiating table with them, and that is going to happen very soon."[viii] Samuel Andrews references a similar concern by raising pertinent questions on Nollywood's readiness for smart negotiations across the table with sophisticated partners like Netflix and several other transnational partners[ix].

In a recent move by Nigerian and Indian filmmakers, the first known Indian-Nigerian co-production, *Namaste Wahala* (2021) trans. *Hello Trouble*, was released on Netflix on the 14th of February, 2021, a year after its initial release date. A love story between an Indian boy and a Nigerian girl, Hamisha Daryani Ahuja's debut film is strategically premiering on Saint Valentine's day with great anticipation and more potential collaborations along the same path. Much like Hollywood, Nollywood has a knack for sticking to successful film formulae. Any semblance or actual success from this film will certainly not go unnoticed if we think about the population size of both countries, their creative energies and how spread out across the globe their citizens are. Nigerians and Indians have expressed overwhelming interest and anticipation for this film coming from two of the largest film industries in the world in terms of annual output; and one can reasonably expect more to follow.

With the existing distribution and exhibition platforms available to Nigerian filmmakers, no one has ever been as excited about reaching global audiences as they are today with the stamp of Netflix. Prior to this time, MultiChoice was the major contender in the formalised transnational flows of Nigerian screen media especially within the African continent. Its parent company, Naspers, remains the dominant media company in the region with a recently-established streaming service, ShowMax, that is seemingly the major competition for Netflix. In the words of Adekunle Nodash Adejuyigbe whose film *Delivery Boy* (2018) is also on Netflix, "It (Netflix) is transnational, and is helping us reach global audiences faster, but it is only a phase that like Africa Magic (MultiChoice's pay-TV channel for Nollywood) will pass."[x] It must be remarked that Netflix's splurge in Nigeria was fuelled by the Covid-19 pandemic, when cinema theatres were closed for several months. With the re-opening of cinemas, audiences are gradually returning to the big screens, which will put Netflix in a third or fourth position in the exhibition window. This was already borne out by *Omo Ghetto* (2020), currently the highest grossing film (N540M approx. $1.5M) of the Nollywood era, a box office return achieved solely through its theatrical run and during the pandemic.

A few more years of competitive service and market share dominance will be needed to make authoritative and nuanced comparative comments about the routes of Nigerian films on Netflix and Showmax, but at the moment Netflix leads in the transnationalisation of Nollywood in what appears to be beneficial to filmmakers. The streaming giant's image among filmmakers in Nigeria is respected, and even celebrated[xi] in contrast to what obtains in other film industries where criticisms about its operations are rife. Adejunmobi previously noted that Nollywood has a "…high degree of responsiveness to geographically circumscribed markets, publics, and constituencies"[xii], but that geographical circumscription is blurring to accommodate diverse audiences in nearly all locations including France and Brazil.

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[i] From 2014, only a sprinkling of Nigerian films like Kunle Afolayan's *October 1* and Kenneth Gyang's *Confusion Na Wa* were on Netflix mainly for transnational audiences. Local audiences had other means of viewing Nollywood and therefore paid little attention to video-on-demand platforms. But by 2020, the number of films grew to well over thirty titles.

[ii] Adejunmobi, Moradewun. 2007. "Nigerian Video Films as Minor Transnational Practice." Postcolonial Text 3, no. 2, 1-16 (p. 2).

[iii] Jedlowski, Alessandro. 2013. "From Nollywood to Nollyworld: Processes of Transnationalization in the Nigerian Video Film Industry." In Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry, edited by Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome, 25-45. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. (p. 41).

[iv] See Kunle Afolayan's tweet at https://twitter.com/kunleafolayan/status/1329518690749063173?s=20

[v] Kunle Afolayan, interview by author, Lagos, November 25, 2020.

[vi] See https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2021/01/16/tussle-for-olotures-copyright/

[vii] See Akay Mason's tweet at https://twitter.com/AkayMason/status/1344241887918632961?s=20

[viii] Niyi Akinmolayan, interview by author, Lagos, December 11, 2020.

[ix] See https://theconversation.com/netflix-naija-creative-freedom-in-nigerias-emerging-digital-space-133252

[x] Adekunle Nodash Adejuyigbe, interview by author, Lagos, January 21, 2021.

[xi] See Chinaza Onuzo's (Inkblot Prodcutions) tweet at https://twitter.com/IamSnazz/status/1340675043232276486?s=20

[xii] Adejunmobi, 14