



SPEAKING,
NARRATING,
REMEMBERING

Striking continuity

What makes the Nigerian film so successful

By Pia Barth

Film scholars at Goethe University Frankfurt are convinced: Africa is where the future of cinema lies. Why? Because the film industries that have spontaneously sprung up there are making creative use of digital technologies and distribution channels. And they narrate stories that interest a growing audience around the world.

There are good reasons for telling again here the often-told success story of the Nigerian film industry known as Nollywood: it is a good story, it sheds light on a special feature of Nigerian cinema – and it shows what it is about Nigerian film culture that fascinates film scholars at Goethe University Frankfurt and why the current research projects on Nigerian film will be just the start of further international collaborations. The story begins with a clever sales idea: in 1992, Kenneth Nnebue, an importer of Taiwanese video cassette recorders, started to distribute films he has made himself on a delivery of empty VHS tapes in order to drive VCR sales. In a few days, the thriller *Living in Bondage* was made, produced by Nnebue and shot by Chris Obu Rapi with an amateur camera. The film is about a young man, embittered by poverty, who kills his wife in a ritual sacrificial ceremony to become rich and influential; in the end, he is haunted by his wife's ghost and loses everything. Surprisingly, 750,000 copies were sold and spawned numerous imitations. In the following years, home videos in the style of *Living in Bondage* became a successful model. Made in a few days, they often told stories of the travelling theatre and the African narrative tradition with popular actors known from television. The distribution channels of Hollywood and Bollywood cinema, which were already popular, were used,

and the popularity of home videos was additionally fuelled by the flourishing business with pirate copies. The films, in English and the three main languages, Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba, spread across the whole continent and throughout the African diaspora worldwide. Without the Western public even noticing, the Nigerian film market became one of the largest in the world. With around 1,000 feature films each year, it soon ranked second behind Bollywood.

Taking possession of the country's own film heritage

The unprecedented success of the Nigerian video film was preceded by the collapse of the Nigerian celluloid film culture and the death of domestic cinemas. Film culture in Nigeria at the time was dominated by professional filmmakers often trained in the UK, whose works also attracted the attention of European film culture because they met the selection criteria for European festivals. However, after the naira, Nigeria's currency, dropped in value in the middle of the 1980s as a result of the structural adjustment programme triggered by the IMF, celluloid became prohibitively expensive. And in the politically turbulent 1990s, the journey to the cinema and the darkness of the cinema so magical for cineastes could become life-threatening in crime-ridden big cities.

1 The discovery of old reels of the film classic *Shaihu Umar* by Adamu Halilu in 2016 were the motivation for wanting to document their own, Nigerian film history.

Nigerian film can survive in home videos because entrepreneurial filmmakers stick – with tremendous vigour – to what’s already to hand: the technology and distribution channels they have at their disposal. This cinema in VHS format, soon to be known as Old Nollywood, bridged the gap to what is referred to as New Nollywood, which established itself in the middle to the end of the noughties and, like its predecessors, has long turned away from Hollywood. New Nollywood is digital, focuses on distribution via the internet and has developed new sources of income in the shape of online licenses as well as video, CD and TV rights; it makes use of well-known distribution channels such as Netflix, but also domestic, less expensive networks such as irokoty; with increasing budgets, it strives for higher quality in terms of plot (and at the same time draws inspiration from Old Nollywood films); and it gives female producers, actors and directors a playing field as well. Capturing in a nutshell the market power

of his country’s film industry, Victor Okhai, the veteran among Nigerian filmmakers, said laconically in an interview: “We’re now doing with the rest of Africa what the Americans did with us in the 1970s.”

Creative, digital New Nollywood sparked new impetus: to document and archive the country’s own film history – and thus also gain access to colonial and postcolonial history. A key work in Nigerian film from 1976, so before the video boom, provided the initial spark: Adamu Halilu’s *Shaihu Umar*. By chance, curator, critic and filmmaker Didi Cheeka discovered old film reels in Lagos. In 2017, they were digitised and restored by Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art in Berlin. At that point in time, the Nigerian National Archive had neither digitisation facilities nor trained staff. This was about to change when, through cooperation with Arsenal, the film scholars at Goethe University Frankfurt also came into play.

- 2 After a break due to the pandemic, the first students from Jos arrived in the autumn of 2021 for an exchange semester at Goethe University Frankfurt.
- 3 How videos are digitised: the practice-oriented film culture degree programme in Jos also offers students technical seminars.



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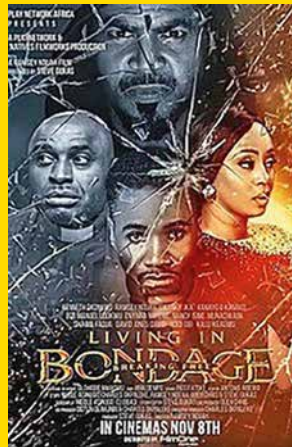
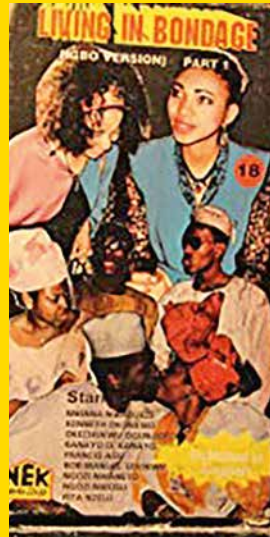
Making a lot out of very little

“It’s the incredible energy, the inventiveness of small entrepreneurs and the creative capacity to make a lot out of very little,” that film scholar Vinzenz Hediger says he finds fascinating about African and especially Nigerian cinema. And which have encouraged him and his colleague Sonia Campanini to develop research projects on African film at the Department of Theatre, Film and Media Studies of Goethe University Frankfurt. Many years of academic collaboration with Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art and the expertise generated by the master’s degree programme launched at Goethe University Frankfurt in 2013 entitled Film Culture: Archiving, Programming, Presentation are the reason why in 2017 Hediger was invited by Nigerian filmmakers to a workshop devoted to questions of national film heritage. Thanks to a funding programme of the German Academic Exchange Service, a partnership unique for both sides has developed out of this initial encounter: the practice-oriented master’s degree programme in film culture offered by Goethe University Frankfurt together with the DFF – Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum e.V. (German Film Institute & Film Museum), which has now also been running in Nigeria since 2019. Project partners are the Nigerian Film Corporation (NFC), the National Film Institute of Nigeria and the National Film, Video and Sound Archive in Jos, as well as the DFF – Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum e.V. (German Film Institute & Film Museum) and Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art. The degree programme is the first and only humanities collaboration in the Transnational Education Programme of the German Academic Exchange Service and the first

master's programme in film archiving in the whole of Africa. The four-year programme is designed to prepare young academics for tasks in the newly established National Archive of Film, Video and Sound in Jos – and, of course, for research and teaching in the new master's programme.

Before the pandemic, four scientists from the Nigerian institutions mentioned above completed initial two-month training at the DFF in Frankfurt, Goethe University and Arsenal in Berlin. In the autumn of 2021, three students from Jos arrived at the university for an exchange semester. During their subsequent internship at Omnimago, a service provider for the film industry, they learnt how to digitise video films. Without this technology, it is impossible to fill the gaps in the Nigerian film archive.

“Training aims to enable students to discover film heritage in general, then to digitise it and make it available in and outside Nigeria,” explains film scholar Sonia Campanini. After all, documenting and archiving Nigerian film history means first of all taking possession of the country's own film heritage in the first place. Nigerian filmmakers rarely own the rights to films from the colonial era, most of which have been collected by the British Film Institute and digitised there; copies of cinema films from the period of independence are mainly deposited in Europe, where they were produced back then; and the ravages of time have long taken their toll on the video films of yesteryear. When the annual conference of Eye, the Dutch national film museum, adopted precisely this as its theme in May 2022, that showed just how urgent the problem is: the varying digital availability of film heritage in the world's regions and how this alarming disparity can be balanced out through international cooperation. Among the film experts from all over the world who participated were also, of course, the film scholars from Frankfurt.



The Nigerian partners set the topics

Exploring Nigerian film heritage and above all tracing the consequences of digitisation for cultural production – this is also the objective of the research project “Cultural Entrepreneurship and Digital Transformation in Africa and Asia (CEDIT-RAA)” launched in Frankfurt in 2021 together with Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, in which Nigerian film scholars are also involved. “As far as Nigeria is concerned,” says Hediger, “our Nigerian partners set the topics.” These have included questions such as: What influence do digital distribution channels have on local producers of cultural products and on the copyrights that they negotiate for Old Nollywood remakes? How are digital processes used in documentaries on African history for a young audience? How do local producers use digital technologies and media for new formats, and how is this reflected in their content?

4 The New Nollywood movement draws inspiration from Old Nollywood films: for example, the 1992 video classic *Living in Bondage* underwent a remake in 2019.

In her doctoral thesis on the semiotics of costume and make-up in Nigerian historical films, which is also part of the Research Training Group “Configurations of Film” in Frankfurt, researcher Fadekemi Olawoye, who was educated in Nigeria, looks at the influence of traditional narrative cultures, the popular tradition of travelling theatre and Ibo culture. French film scholar Benoît Turquety, who is now teaching in Lausanne, studied the history of Nigerian film during his stay as a Mercator Fellow in Frankfurt. His common theme: the format of the film material used in each case. Between television, travelling theatre in the Yoruba tradition, filmed theatre, low-quality analogue video and various digital forms, Turquety attests to a striking continuity in African cinema. In the framework of a Mercator Fellowship, Nigerian film scholar Añulika Agina will visit Goethe University Frankfurt in the autumn of 2022 to teach and conduct research.

ABOUT VINZENZ HEDIGER



Professor Vinzenz Hediger, born in 1969, has been a professor of film studies at Goethe University Frankfurt since 2011. He studied philosophy, film studies and American studies at the University of Zurich, where he earned his doctoral degree with a thesis on the significance of the film trailer. From 2004 to 2011, he held the Alfried Krupp Endowed Chair

in the History and Theory of Documentary Forms at RUB (Ruhr-Universität Bochum). Hediger's research interests lie in the history and theory of film. He explores not only Hollywood cinema but also industrial film and scientific film. He is principal investigator of the "ConTrust" cluster project and spokesperson for the Research Training Group "Configurations of Film". Hediger helped to set up the master's programme in film archiving together with the University of Jos (Nigeria) and the Nigerian Film Corporation. He is co-founder of NECS – European Network for Cinema and Media Studies and founding editor of the *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft*, as well as a member of the Academy of Sciences and Literature in Mainz.

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ABOUT SONIA CAMPANINI



Assistant Professor Sonia Campanini, born in 1982, is principal investigator and postdoctoral researcher in the interdisciplinary project "Cultural Entrepreneurship and Digital Transformation in Africa and Asia (CEDITRAA)". From 2015 to 2022, she was assistant professor for film culture at the Department of Theatre, Film and Media Studies

at Goethe University Frankfurt, headed the master's degree programme "Film Culture: Archiving, Programming and Presentation" and contributed to the corresponding programme at the University of Jos (Nigeria). She studied at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore and the Università di Bologna as well as the University of California (Los Angeles) and earned her doctoral degree at the universities of Udine and Amsterdam. She has been working at Goethe University Frankfurt since 2015, conducting research into film archiving and curating with a focus on the material, technological, aesthetic and memory levels of audiovisual heritage from a transnational perspective.

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"It's the incredible energy, the inventiveness of small entrepreneurs and the creative capacity to make a lot out of very little."

Vinzenz Hediger

What is global film culture anyway?

The interdisciplinary research project CEDITRAA combines film studies with economics, cultural anthropology, linguistics as well as African and Asian studies. As numerous as the research disciplines are, as broad too is the variety of methods practised: they range from field research and participant observation to business studies and digital research. Overall, the research project thrives on such a lively and inquisitive view of the bigger picture: within the Rhine-Main Alliance, Matthias Krings, ethnologist in Mainz and an expert in northern Nigerian video films, is working together with other specialists. A team from the University of Udine in Italy is contributing its expertise in the digitisation of videos. And through collaboration with the University of St Andrews in Scotland, the Frankfurt team has recruited a proven expert on Nigeria's colonial film history: Tom Rice.

What unites them all is their interest in broadening the perspective of the European media and cultural industries. What lessons do the African film industries hold in store, which are spontaneously emerging and not waiting for investors or funders? What is global film culture anyway?

"We're endeavouring to answer these questions together in a dialogue with Nigerian colleagues and the master's students," says Sonia



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Campanini about the collaboration so far in the joint master's degree programme and research project. And anyone taking a look at Fadakemi Olawoye's doctoral project will learn that the history of Nigerian video film is the subject of lively discussion in Nigeria itself too. This has not only but also to do with the fact that there are still considerable gaps in the Nigerian film archives. Each new discovery could introduce new aspects or question previous narratives of film history.

The well-known success story of the Nigerian film industry will therefore be told many more times in future – always in a new and different way. ●

IN A NUTSHELL

- In the mid-1980s, Nigerian celluloid film culture and domestic cinema collapsed. Cinema in VHS format emerges, which makes use of existing technology and distribution channels. Out of this develops one of the largest film markets in the world.
- From the mid-noughties onwards, New Nollywood replaced the Nigerian home video known as Old Nollywood. The new cinema is digital, focused on distribution via the internet, opens up new sources of income – and sparks new impetus: to document and archive the country's own film history.
- Together with the Department of Theatre, Film and Media Studies at Goethe University Frankfurt, the first master's degree programme in film archiving in Africa was set up in Nigeria in 2019.
- The film scholars in Frankfurt are meanwhile collaborating with their Nigerian partners in further international and interdisciplinary research projects. What unites them all is their interest in broadening the perspective of the European media and cultural industries.

5 Some stories told by African cinema are influenced by the travelling theatre of the African Yoruban people's narrative tradition.



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