

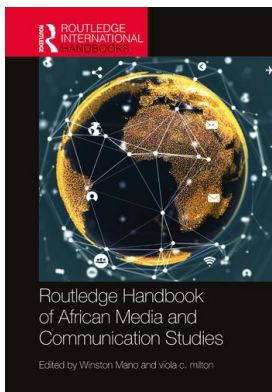
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# Nollywood as decoloniality

*Ikechukwu Obiaya*

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## Introduction

Decolonisation, according to Frantz Fanon, is accompanied by violence and, in fact, requires it. As he put it,

Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is clearly an agenda for total disorder. . . . You do not disorganize a society, however primitive it may be, with such an agenda if you are not determined from the very start to smash every obstacle encountered.

*(Fanon 2004, p. 2)*

One could say that Nollywood exemplifies this notion of Fanon's. However, Nollywood's upturning of the old order did not take the path of physical violence advocated by Fanon, who noted that "decolonization reeks of red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives" (Fanon 2004, p. 3). But Nollywood, nevertheless, found a way of cutting the colonial umbilical cord by disrupting the established system and attaining real independence. This agency and alternative role of Nollywood at the global scale can be understood in terms of what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015, p. 485) terms "decoloniality as an epistemological and political movement" of praxis and "liberatory language" which is crucial for the future for Africa. "Decoloniality speaks to the deepening and widening of decolonization movements in those spaces that experienced the slave trade, imperialism, colonialism, apartheid, neocolonialism, and underdevelopment" (ibid). Nollywood's unrivalled creative power in the global film industry is symbolic of the journey of cinema from colonialism, decolonisation to decoloniality in the Nigerian and African context.

African cinema has to a great extent been a dependent cinema, and the frustrations of colonialism that led to Fanon's incendiary words were truly present in this sector. According to Haynes (2017, p. 3), although Africa was integrated into the international circuits quite early, it "was integrated on the worst possible terms." The continent was placed solely at the receiving end – it could watch but was hindered in the production and distribution of films. "Under the colonial system, the prejudices of the colonisers made it impossible for them to imagine that an African could actually make any sort of film, let alone a feature film" (Armes 2008, p. 3). This

view had a subsequent impact on postcolonial Africa since many of the newly independent countries found themselves ill-equipped for filmmaking. Andrade-Watkins (1996, p. 181) notes that the filmmaking difficulties faced by Africans “have been compounded by colonial and post-colonial traditions and policies regarding cinema.” The strongest influence in African cinema has been colonialism. This is because it was through colonialism that the initial structures for filmmaking were put in place across the continent, and much of the ideological approach towards the cinema has also been a consequence of this reality.

“Filmmaking in Africa and by Africans has been rather turbulent with, above all, problems of limited funds and a poor production and distribution infrastructure” (Obiaya 2011, p. 129). This led Jean Rouch (2003, p. 47) at some point to refer to Africa as “the most backward continent in the area of film production.” Writing in 1994, Ukadike bemoaned this lack of development of African cinema, attributing it to the fact that black Africans were still economically and culturally dependent in spite of having attained political independence. According to him, “This dilemma, created by a colonial past and cemented by a neo-colonial present, has prevented the emergence of a real national cinema capable of speaking for and to Africans” (Ukadike 1994, p. 1).

However, a mere 14 years after these words of Ukadike were written, Barrot (2008, p. xi) points to “9,000 films telling thousands of stories that speak to an audience of millions across the African continent” and which constitute “a social, economic and cultural phenomenon without precedent.” Tomaselli (2014, p. 14) describes a film industry that was developed by “a handful of scriptwriters, film-makers and performing arts graduates who endeavoured to offer new cultural products that shrugged off the vestige of colonial influence.” Nollywood developed from the grassroots on the basis of shoestring budgets (Paulson 2012), and Krings and Okome (203b, p. 1) note that it “has become the most visible form of cultural machine on the African continent.” Its products are consumed both within and outside Africa, and its model of filmmaking has influenced the beginning of film production in other countries.

Nollywood came as the second phase of postcolonial filmmaking in Nigeria. The first phase, which began in the 1970s, was fraught with the same challenges as the rest of African cinema. By the late 1980s, thanks especially to the crash of the Nigerian economy, this phase of filmmaking more or less ground to a halt. The number of films produced in the ten-plus years of this phase did not exceed a hundred. But in the first ten years of its existence, Nollywood produced over 3,000 video films that were enjoyed by a wide audience. This is an indication of the creative freedom that the filmmakers of Nollywood had attained for themselves by overcoming the various filmmaking challenges – or, to use Fanon’s terminology, smashing every obstacle encountered. This chapter seeks to identify and analyse three key areas in which Nollywood has caused a disruption, namely distribution, audience acceptance, and funding. This analysis will be carried out from a media economics perspective with the goal of presenting this approach as a viable one for studying this sector. The chapter concludes by making reference to how Nollywood is negotiating its position and role in the digital age, with the entry into the market of players such as Netflix.

### **The framework for analysis**

Media economics serves to capture the impact of the various factors that have facilitated or hindered the development of African cinema. These factors are largely audience preference, funding, access to channels of distribution, and the behaviour of the market. Albarran (2002, p. 5) describes media economics as “the study of how media industries use scarce resources to produce content that is distributed among consumers in a society to satisfy various wants and

needs.” According to Picard (1989, p. 7), the field of study “deals with the factors influencing production of media goods and services and the allocation of those products for consumption.”

An important consideration of media economics is the fact that the business practices of media industries are not carried out in a vacuum. Rather, these practices are shaped by the political system of their host country while being subject to the determining role played by market supply and demand in terms of content, mode, and targeted consumer of production. Along these lines, Picard (2002, p. 69) notes that “Governments play significant political and legal roles in creating the framework in which enterprises can operate by creating and enforcing property contract, corporate, and other rights necessary for markets to function.” This function of the state has been largely absent in many African countries, and the filmmakers have had to function at the margin of state support.

Owers, Carveth, and Alexander (2004) draw attention to the important link between the media and capital. Substantial capital investment is required for the survival of any media organisation. Without capital, no viable media firm would be able to survive in a challenging economic context. Hence, information in the media sector is tied to economic means, and the media industry cannot afford to ignore economic principles (Owers et al. 2004). Hence McCall (2012) points out that Nollywood’s greatest obstacle for growth is the fact that it remains within the informal economy and is hindered from capitalisation due to the absence of the required institutional mechanisms.

The industrial organisational model, a microeconomic theory, provides a framework for examining these realities. This theory offers the model of market structure–conduct–performance (SCP), which Wirth and Bloch (1995, p. 16) explain by saying that “market (or industry) performance is determined by the conduct of the firms within that market, and that firm conduct is determined by various market structure variables.” Wirth and Bloch (1995, p. 16) go on to list “the number of sellers and buyers in a market” and “the degree of product differentiation present in a market” as being two of the important definers of market structure. Product differentiation is tied to the ability of firms to create a brand preference among the consumers.

It is worthwhile noting that the SCP model treats the variables of the market structure as exogenous and assumes that, in general, they remain constant. Such variables are subject to manipulation or change as a result of policy intervention (Wirth and Bloch 1995). Examples of these can be found in those structures that facilitate performance, such as regulation and training, as well as the access to funding, the lack of which, for instance, constitutes a barrier for those wishing to enter the film industry. On the other hand, the variables of conduct and performance are considered endogenous. Examples of variables for conduct and performance, respectively, include pricing as well as the investment in production facilities, and firm profitability and allocative efficiency (Wirth and Bloch 1995).

## Distribution and reach

Cubitt (2005, p. 193) describes distribution as “the core process in which economic and political moments of human communication take centre stage.” As the meeting ground between production and consumption, it “is the key locus of power and profit” (Garnham 1990, p. 162). Anyone that controls distribution wields a lot of power, and this is especially so in the world of film. Distribution determines what films one sees or does not see, and when and how one sees them (Lobato 2009). This is especially so when distribution is controlled by a limited group. Writing in 1993, Emmanuel Sama noted that distribution was still being controlled by “yesterday’s masters who have been ruling over the same ‘evening classes’ virtually ever since the invention of the cinema” (Sama 1996, p. 148). And according to McCall (2012, p. 16), “Africa’s

auteur films could not reach their African audience commercially or culturally because they were part and parcel of a mode-of-production and mode-of-consumption that was administered from abroad, and to which few Africans had access.”

In Nigeria, the control over the distribution circuits was exercised by AMPEC (the American Motion Picture Export Company [Africa]) and the Lebanese-owned companies, NDO Films and CINE Films. AMPEC was formed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Paramount Pictures, 20th Century-Fox Film Corporation, RKO Pictures Inc., Warner Bros. Inc., Universal Pictures, United Artists and Columbia Pictures. These were the same major American film production companies that made up the Motion Picture Export Association (MPEA) (Segrave 1997). Created in April 1961, AMPEC’s registration under the Webb-Pomerene Export Trade Act enabled the members to form a monopoly in foreign territories, something that was not permitted under the antitrust law in the United States. According to Guback, the power of the cartel enabled it to exploit the supply of films handled by its distributor-members, with the control to determine when the supply should come on or go off (Guback 1985). AMPEC freely exercised this ability, using it to chasten exhibitors that showed films that it did not previously approve. While American and European films were controlled by AMPEC, Indian, Egyptian, and Asian films were under the control of NDO and CINE. None of these distributors carried locally made films due, most likely, to the fact that the films were not considered sufficiently profitable.

Like various other African states at the time, the Nigerian government sought to break the distribution monopoly and establish indigenous control of its cinemas. This push came through the Nigerian Enterprises Promotion Decree, which the government promulgated in 1972. The general aim was to place in the hands of Nigerians the ownership and control of companies operating in Nigeria (Inanga 1978). One of the stipulations of the decree was that the exclusive control over the distribution and exhibition of feature films should lie with Nigerians. But this effort to seize control was unsuccessful due mainly to a lack of enforcement on the part of the government. In addition, as Ukadike (1994) notes, some Nigerians colluded with foreign nationals to undermine the law by agreeing to front for the businesses while the previous ownership remained. Eventually, the government established the National Film Distribution Company (NFDC) in 1981, but this did not improve the fortunes of the filmmakers. This was because NFDC was also not much interested in taking on the distribution of locally produced films, thereby bringing the company’s reason for existence into question (Balogun 1987).

With the introduction of a direct-to-DVD video filmmaking, the filmmakers established different channels for distributing their videos. According to Larkin (2004, p. 290), the industry “generated an entirely novel mode of reproduction and distribution that uses the capital, equipment, personnel, and distribution networks of pirate media.” The videos were distributed through the distribution outlets for electronic goods. This was largely because the financiers of the video-films were in the main dealers in those goods. These dealers, and consequently the main hubs for video sales, were located in the key commercial nerve centres of Lagos, Aba, Onitsham and Enugu (Okome 2007). Distribution of the videos thus largely bypassed the cinema and went directly for sale to wherever buyers could be found – street stalls, video stores, video-clubs, bars and restaurants, barber shops, in the middle of traffic, etc. The videos were also easy to carry across borders in the baggage of travellers.

The structures for distribution that the filmmakers began with were largely informal. Both Lobato (2012) and Miller (2012) consider the informal networks as viable alternatives to the established formal distribution circuits. And according to McCall (2012, p. 11), “Informal markets have been the key to Nollywood’s spectacular success, because they make it possible to get video movies to every remote corner of Africa.” Considering the previous inaccessibility of

the distribution channels, this has been a major achievement for the filmmakers. However, this informality is also a problem. While it is true that it facilitates easy movement and spread, the very informality also undermines profitability since it does not provide for adequate accountability. In the words of Lobato (2010, p. 346), the market “cannot guarantee the return of revenues to producers.”

### Audience acceptance

Thanks to their exclusion from the established distribution circuits, films of the first phase of African filmmaking were not accessible to the African audience. The films, in the oft cited words of Sama (1996, p. 148), were “foreigners in their own countries . . . making a bashful entry in exactly the same way as a stranger entering another land.” Also, rather than entertainment, the filmmakers of the early postcolonial period considered that African filmmaking should in the first place “be an instrument of social and political transformation” (Tcheuyap 2010, p. 25). Thus, the films tended to be largely didactic and not well suited to commercial cinema. Balogun (2004, p. 176) notes that the long dependence of African film on foreign financial assistance “led to a cinematography geared to Western art houses that was not necessarily well received by African popular audiences.” The reverse has been the case with the films of Nollywood, which have enjoyed wide audience acceptance. They are heavily consumed not just in Nigeria but all over Africa and beyond (Okome 2010).

An important reason for this popular appeal is the affinity that the consumers have with the films. According to Haynes (2007, p. 31), the industry’s “proximity to popular imagination” is its great strength. The films are seen as presenting a mirror in which those of the audience can see themselves (Ofeimun 2004; Okoye 2007; Green-Simms 2012). The popular appeal stems largely from the fact that consumers of the films see them as portraying the realities of society. Thus, for many consumers, the films have a use-value in that they are a means of learning about the society (Esan 2008). The films acquire greater credence in the eyes of the consumers thanks to their ability to faithfully reflect the various social tensions experienced by the viewers (Obiaya 2017). This self-identification that the consumers are able to have reflects an important characteristic of the films – they stem from grassroots popular culture. For this reason, Dovey (2012) highlights the closeness that exists between the filmmaker as storyteller and the audience. The latter contributes to the telling of the story and determines its nature. Hence, Green-Simms (2012, p. 60) makes reference to the “proximity of Nollywood to everyday stories.”

The proximity of Nollywood to its audience is also closely related to the commercial nature of the industry. The filmmakers place a lot of emphasis on winning over their audience by offering them entertainment. And the filmmakers, according to Evuleocha (2008, p. 408), are aware of tapping into “a lucrative and long-neglected market” by offering their consumers stories that reflect their daily lives peopled with characters that they can identify with. And in the face of criticism about the content of their films, the filmmakers have responded that they only give the people what they want. This stance is supported by Zajc (2009, p. 77) who notes that “filmmaking in Nigeria is purely commercial activity, so it is clear that the audience is another determinant of the content of video films.” This is an important consideration because filmmaking for these cineastes is a business and, in order for it to be viable, the consumer must be satisfied. It is only through patronage on the part of the consumers that the Nollywood filmmakers can recoup their investments. As Haynes (2017, p. xxv) notes, “it is a popular art form whose perspective must stay close to that of its broad audience of ordinary Nigerians or risk commercial disaster.”



It is perhaps here that one must cite the great power of Nollywood as a process of decoloniality. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015, p. 492), “At the core of decoloniality is the agenda of shifting the geography and biography of knowledge, bringing identity into epistemology – who generates knowledge and from where?” Nollywood, by telling the people their story, is bringing to the fore knowledge that previously did not receive any attention in the mainstream. Thus Okoye (2007, p. 28) notes that the films “invent a progressive African aesthetic which undermines the cultural imperialism of the West and underscores the possibility of formulating an African postcolonial identity.”

A major consequence of this proximity to the audience is that the films are enjoyed by the most diverse audiences all over Africa (Krings 2010). The explanation for this is to be found in the similarities that those audiences have found between their cultures and the representations in the films. Speaking about the popularity of the films in Tanzania, for instance, Krings (2010, p. 76) notes that the video films “matched the social and cultural realities of everyday life in Tanzania,” where, at some point, the local television was wholly given over to the Nigerian video films (Mwakalinga 2013). Dipio (2014), who writes about a Ugandan audience, points out that the details of Nigerian culture portrayed in the films is identifiable with what is found in Ugandan society. The story is no different in many other countries – even beyond Africa – as can be seen, for instance, in Cartelli (2007), Kerr (2011), Krings and Okome (2013a), Waliaula (2014).

### Funding and policy

As already indicated, African cinema has largely been a dependent cinema. This has been most obvious in the area of funding as most film productions in sub-Saharan Africa prior to video filmmaking were dependent on foreign capital. This applied especially to the Francophone African countries, which have benefited a lot from French aid. In the Anglophone African countries, filmmakers have had to be more reliant on their own resources. The process of sourcing funds was quite challenging given the expensive nature of shooting in celluloid. Some funding came from the government, which sponsored about three feature films, but there was no clearly defined policy for supporting filmmaking. Thus, many of the filmmakers of this early period practically went bankrupt in the process of making their films. They had to face “the realities of a depressed economy and stringent lending conditions in financial institutions” (Owens-Ibie 1998, p. 5) financing their projects with loans that they were often unable to repay. Hence Balogun (1987) describes the early history of Nigerian filmmaking as “a painful twenty-year long ordeal.”

When they came on the scene, the video film directors were also faced with the same challenge of funding as their counterparts in celluloid film production. However, they had a great advantage in that the costs of producing video films were much lower. Raising local funds, therefore, did not turn out as difficult for them. Unlike the sometimes astronomical budgets of celluloid films, the video film production budgets were rather low. When productions in video first started, the budgets ranged from ₦50,000 [about USD 479.24] to ₦100,000 [USD 958.49] (Adesanya 2000). This, of course, was accompanied by very poor quality. The relatively low cost of production has however meant that the producers are generally able to recoup their investments and earn enough to fund the next video-film. Over the years, the budgets of the films have increased, but the costs remain much lower than what is required for celluloid filmmaking.

The video films “draw on the wealth of the business class. They may be backed by big merchants from Onitsha or Aba or elsewhere” (Haynes and Okome 2000, p. 64). For instance, the first big hit of the industry, *Living in Bondage* (1992), was funded by Kenneth Nnebue, a businessman dealing in electronic goods who financed the film from the proceeds of his business.

Such businessmen did not only finance the films; they also distributed them, hence the reference to them as ‘marketers’. According to Haynes and Okome (2000, p. 70), “The marketers are the best organised and most powerful element in the industry. . . . most of the video distributors started as importers of electronics and blank cassettes or pirated foreign videos. Other businessmen, in car parts or more dubious enterprises, may use video deals as a way of laundering money.” As suppliers of the funds, they had a say in the productions and were often accused of being dictatorial over what storyline, actors, ideas, etc., should be used in a particular production.

Although the marketers may be criticised for what some considered their stranglehold on the industry, no one can deny that they played a fundamental role in facilitating the growth of the industry. They made it possible for the filmmakers to source local funds for production. This was essential in the light of the reluctance by the banks to get involved due to the lack of structures. The control that the marketers were accused of exercising over storylines and actors is understandable when seen in the light of their concern to protect their investment. However, in spite of such controls, this source of funding allowed the filmmakers sufficient freedom to tell the local stories unmediated by any external forces. Thus, “the Nigerian video films throw into startling relief how much the African cinema that reaches European or American shores is mediated in ways that make it comprehensible to foreign audiences” (Haynes 2000, p. 5).

But much has changed since the initial years. The marketers no longer wield such powers, and this is due to a number of reasons. In the first place, the return of the cinema and the growth in the number of outlets has led filmmakers to turn to cinema exhibitions as a preferable way for releasing their films. The weekly release of data by the Cinema Exhibitors Association of Nigeria (CEAN) on its site ([www.ceanigeria.com/box-office](http://www.ceanigeria.com/box-office)) shows the increased spending by Nigerians at the cinema. The filmmakers’ preference, thus, is tied to security given that the increased rate of piracy has often denied them of the returns from DVD sales. Also, turning to the cinema has meant a consequent need for higher-budget films to meet cinematic standards. This has in turn led to a diversification of the sources of funds since, with the greater certainty of fund recovery implied in the cinemas, other institutions and individuals have become more willing to invest in the films. Also, the returns being realised in the cinemas are a further proof that local funding can support the industry.

Additionally, the government now shows a greater willingness to support the film industry. The industry developed in Nigeria’s huge informal sector without any input whatsoever from the government. The industry took off and boomed as from the early 1990s, but it was only in 2004 that it was officially acknowledged. In that year, the president’s budget speech made reference to the significant foreign exchange earning capacity of the industry. In that same year, the government’s policy thrust for the industry was laid out in the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) document. The goal was “to facilitate the development of a technologically competitive, private sector – led film industry in Nigeria that will create employment, wealth, and net foreign exchange earnings” (Nigerian National Planning Commission 2004). None of this, however, truly materialised into firm structures for the industry. The government, in various moments, subsequently announced that it was granting some funds to the industry (Xinhua News Agency 2006; Aminu 2006), but no long term impact was achieved.

## Conclusion

Thussu (2007) highlights the reality in today’s world of a contra-flow of media pointing out that the flow of media is no longer “one way from the media-rich North . . . to the media-poor



South.” Rather, new transnational networks are emerging from the periphery. Nollywood, in creating one of such networks, has proven successful in changing the narrative first for Nigeria and then for Africa at large. Going by the SCP model, it is clear that some important ingredients for that success have been various aspects of the market structure. The two important definers of market structure as identified by Wirth and Bloch (1995) are the number of sellers and buyers in the market and the degree of product differentiation. From the number of films being produced, it is clear that Nollywood has a high number of sellers (filmmakers). This is largely due to the democratisation of the filmmaking process permitted by the video technology. With lower costs and easy-to-use equipment, the entry bar for going into filmmaking was lowered, and this led to a greater number of people going into film production.

The danger of such high numbers lies in the possibility of an oversaturation of the market. In this case, however, this danger was mitigated because the high number of sellers was matched by a high number of buyers. Haynes (2017) identifies Nigeria’s “enormous internal market” as one of the essential reasons for the growth of Nollywood. With a population estimated at about 200 million, Nollywood had a very large potential audience to tap into. And, as Evuleocha (2008) has noted, this market had been a long neglected one in the sense that they had not previously been provided with stories and characters that they could relate with. The roaring success of the early video films made the audience preference clear to the filmmakers, and this led to the heavy handedness of the marketers who wanted to maintain the winning formula. This, of course, has had its negative side as it has led to a lot of repetition, especially of themes and storyline.

The success of any brand depends a lot on the ability of the brand owners to make it stand out from the noise of other brands. The importance of product differentiation for Nollywood is obvious. The products were different in terms of style and content, and the audience was won over precisely by the elements of that difference. Granted, that very difference has earned the industry a lot of flak, but it has also earned them droves of committed fans. By recognising the thirst of the audience and being able to satisfy it, the filmmakers have created a brand preference among the consumers of their product.

The gaps or absences in the market structure have moulded the conduct of the filmmakers. The quick fix approach that characterises the industry is a response to the many challenges thrown at them by the gaps in market structure. Filmmaking was trimmed down to its bare bones because there was a lack of big funds; people learnt on the job to make up for the lack of formal training; homes and hotels were converted into sets to make up for the absence of sound stages; pirate measures were permitted as a means of promoting distribution; etc. But what stood out, above all, was the sheer grit of the filmmakers. This has enabled them to find solutions to the challenges they faced. The conduct of the filmmakers has had a tremendous impact on the performance of the market, and this can be measured in terms of their achievement – the establishment of a globally recognised industry built on the basis of shoe string budgets and which tells their stories as they want them told.

Looking to the future, there is the question about how Nollywood will survive in the digital era. There are questions about the extent to and ways in which Nollywood ought to be inserted in the global content streaming services. In addition to the resurgence of the cinema, Nollywood’s avenues for distribution have been enhanced by increased possibilities for streaming its content. The South African-owned cable television, MultiChoice, has long promoted Nollywood content through a series of dedicated channels labelled Africa Magic. (It has in this way contributed positively to extending the reach of Nollywood across Africa.) iROKOTv, an online VOD company founded by Jason Njoku, has also been in operation since 2010. However, with the entry of Netflix and CanalPlus, there appears to be a growing interest from players beyond

the African continent. Netflix tentatively entered the Nigerian market in 2016 (Eboigbe 2020), but it was only as from 2019 that it began purchasing and commissioning Nollywood content. CanalPlus, on the other hand, acquired the production studio of iROKOTv, ROK, in 2019 in what was seen as a move to gain a foothold on the continent (Richford 2019). According to Brown (2019), this “growing interest in Africa reflects a growing market, as more people go online and earn enough disposable income to subscribe.” The entry of these global bodies into the Nigerian market has been welcomed by the filmmakers given the increased possibilities of funding and a wider distribution.

However, doubts have been raised as to whether the entry of these global companies is, in the long run, wholly beneficial to Nollywood. Eboigbe (2020), in talking about the Netflix entry for instance, seems to imply that this could undermine decoloniality. She points to the “temptation of developing stories that they think Americans will like but Africans will find difficult to connect with.” This echoes the accusation of cultural imperialism that was hurled at Netflix with reference to its role in Canada (Joseph 2019). The entry of well-funded players into the Nollywood space will certainly result in increased capital and more audiences, but at what cost? Crucially, is it a new threat or opportunity to Nollywood’s agency and creativity on the global scale? Further research is required to examine whether and how Netflix as well as pay television channels such as iROKOTv and Africa Magic are reshaping Nollywood.

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