Nollywood Afrogeeks:
Nigerian Cinema, Digital Diasporas, and African Immigrants in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Viewing Nigerian film, known as Nollywood, in online platforms provides African immigrants living in the United States with digital spaces to engage with the African continent through films with relatable Pan-African themes. Nollywood on social media sites (YouTube and subscription services IrokoTV, Amazon, and Netflix) marks the Nigerian film industry as a transnational participatory movement that enables immigrants to use the technology at their disposal to watch and comment on films, connect with their cultural values, and become a part of a global digital community of dispersed Africans and African descended populations. Thus, immigrants become a part of a Nollywood focused digital diaspora, a cultural space that illuminated the plurality immigrants negotiate on and off the continent.

KEYWORDS

African Immigrants, IrokoTV, Nigerian Film, Nollywood Focused Digital Diaspora, Online Film Consumption, Social Media Usage

INTRODUCTION

I watch Nollywood because it feels like home. ~ Margie, Immigrant from Sierra Leone

When Margie came to the United States from Sierra Leone with her mother and sister as a teenager in the 1990s, she was eager to start a new life in the nation where her father had settled to improve his family’s well-being. “We weren’t really poor at home, but my dad wanted my sister and I to have more than we could in Sierra Leone,” she said. “America was just this place everyone wanted to go.” Like many other African immigrants from nations below the Sahara Desert, Margie claimed that she and her family worked hard to ‘make it’ in America.2 Margie attended college and graduate school, has worked as a journalist, and currently is a communications specialist in the nation’s capital. Yet, Margie still feels the pull of the African continent, though she visits infrequently. For her, going home involves opening her laptop, connecting to the Internet, and typing in a specific address: http://www.youtube.com. There, Margie is able to watch hundreds of African movies, all from one nation, Nigeria. She exclaimed, “I’m not Nigerian, but the scenes in Nigerian movies…the sets, the way they show the village, the clothes, the people, the stories…they are like my home. Those Nigerian movies on YouTube take me home.”

Connecting with home is at the crux of the practices of African immigrants in the United States who watch Nigerian cinema, known as Nollywood, on the web. Since its inception in 1992, the Nigerian film industry, a transnational cinema with consumers within and outside the African diaspora, has created a highly affective world that offers immigrants from various African nations...
the tools to connect with their cultural values. Nollywood films culturally appose non-nation specific traditions with both the delights and dilemmas of globalization to reveal a recognizable and relatable fictional realm for many Africans dealing with vestiges from European colonial rule. With hyper-dramatic plots that glorify and critique life on the continent, Nollywood becomes a means to an end for African immigrants residing in the unfamiliar culture of the United States. Prior to migrating, many view the United States as a paradise that possesses educational and employment opportunities, consumer goods, and a way of life that may be better than the one they navigate in their home country. However, life in the United States can bring about social, cultural, and financial complexities; for many, misunderstandings about the African continent, inter and intra-racial tensions, discrimination, and a lack of access to employment have created unexpected emotional and intellectual dissonance.

This article explores the phenomenon of online Nollywood consumption amongst African immigrants from nations south of the Sahara Desert. Each day, avid Nollywood fans visit social media spaces like YouTube, subscription based services IrokoTV (dubbed the Nigerian Netflix)\(^3\), Amazon Prime, and Netflix to watch Nigerian films. These individuals actively view and participate in online conversations about Nollywood; they reveal that through consuming Nigerian films on social media and connecting with other viewers who are a part of the larger African digital diaspora, the original homeland on the African continent is remediated as a new paradise. Even if the nation of origin is plagued with economic, social, political, etc., problems, the familiar culture presented in Nollywood films renders these problems moot. Thus, African immigrants view and discuss these films to alleviate the issues of acculturation they may face in the host land; participation in Nollywood digi-culture becomes a matter of mental and psychological survival.

Henry Jenkins would call the processes by which individuals use electronic tools to engage with others participatory culture stating that “not every member must contribute, but all must believe they are free to contribute when ready and that what they contribute will be appropriately valued” (Jenkins et al, 2009, p. 6). Digital media platforms enable reconnection, community building, and provide a means for reimagining the African continent through narratives rendered in online spaces. Madhavi Mallapragada contends in her work on Internet usage amongst Indian immigrants in the United States that the continuous movement of people around the globe is one of the defining features of modern life (2014). This assessment is an apt characterization of African migrants who leave the continent. As economic, political, cultural, and social crises exacerbate the problems for a sizable swath of the African continent’s population, migration to points west, especially the United States, is considered the only viable solution for many seeking to claim some semblance of humanity in an unstable world. Upon arrival in the United States, online media is a catalyst for connectivity and sociality. Individuals use platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to maintain ties with family and friends remaining in the home nation.

Viewing Nollywood on YouTube, the subscription based services IrokoTV and Amazon Prime, and other online platforms like AfriNolly and BuniTV provides the African immigrant with online spaces to connect and socially engage with home as an emotional and epistemological space. Nollywood online or in the cyber-sphere solidifies the industry as a transnational participatory movement that aids the creation of a glocalized African digital diaspora where immigrants in the United States use the technology at their disposal to watch films, digitally connect with their cultural values, and become a part of a global digital community consisting of other immigrants around the world and individuals on the African continent. Inclusion in this community is not necessarily based on active participation through commenting on or liking movies in the digital space; membership can be ontological just as membership in Benedict Anderson’s theoretical imagined communities is rooted in a belief in or desire for belonging (1982). The paradise crafted prior to coming to America is reimagined or reterritorialized with the use of social media platforms and other digital media tools. A new world exists where social media helps alleviate the negative affective impact of the paradox of progress and the original home is remediated as a new paradise for immigrants who become part of a Nollywood focused digital diaspora, a cultural space that illuminates the plurality within the overall African diaspora and the digital diaspora immigrants negotiate when they leave the continent.
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