

# The Nigerian film industry

## A Before you read

1. What do you think are the top three most productive film industries in the world?
2. The Nigerian film industry is called “Nollywood”. Where do you think the name comes from?

## B Read the article and answer the questions after each section.

A lot of people may think that the name Nollywood simply comes from fusing the words Nigeria and Hollywood. They are only partly right as the meaning goes much deeper. In 2002 the Japanese-Canadian *New York Times* journalist Norimitsu Onishi coined the name in an article, describing the adverse circumstances and minimal resources with which Nigerian films were made. According to Onishi, the meaning of the name Nollywood is actually “nothing wood” or making something out of nothing. There is an anecdote that compares Nigerian filmmaking to a surgeon performing open heart surgery with a knife and fork. And the patient survives. This means Nigerian directors and producers make do with whatever materials are available to them, and the result has been a successful industry, the second largest in the world based on output.

1. Create another anecdote to describe “making do” with what you have in any area of life.
2. Create a nickname for the film industry in another city or country and explain why you chose that name and its meaning.

It may be hard to believe, but Nollywood is indeed in 2nd place behind Bollywood and ahead of Hollywood when it comes to the number of films produced per year. In Nigeria, the film industry is the largest employer after the agriculture sector and is responsible for 5% of Nigeria’s GDP. When the Nigerian film industry really came onto the scene in the early 1990s, budgets were extremely low. The budget for an entire Nigerian film was equivalent to the budget for about six minutes of a Hollywood movie – “something from nothing”. The eagerly awaited films – never even intended for the big screen – were sold as VHS video tapes in shops and on the street for \$1-2, which was about what an average worker brought home at the end of the day. The films’ poor technical quality, both audio and visual, didn’t stop an average of 50,000 copies per film from being sold. Nor did it stop rampant piracy. Even today, pirated copies of Nigerian blockbusters can be bought for mere dollars just weeks after their release. If nothing else, the crime speaks for the popularity of the films.



3. Explain what the term “piracy” means in relation to the film industry.
4. What is a “blockbuster”?
5. Why do you think the first Nollywood films were not intended for movie theatres?

## The Nigerian film industry

30 But Nollywood didn't just appear overnight; the something that came from nothing had to come from somewhere. That somewhere was the Yoruba tribe's travelling theatre troupes, which emerged in the 1940s. These theatre groups in turn originated from Christian church groups which put on Christmas and Passion pageants. However, other sources trace the troupes' roots back much further to the late 16th century when a king of the Oyo Empire punished six men who had tried to deceive him. Their punishment was remaining at the king's court and performing for him on command. In any case, at some point the modern-day travelling theatre troupes began videotaping their performances and selling the tapes. It was a fast and easy way to share their plays with a wider audience. They had also come to realize that participating in the emerging TV and film market could be lucrative. Some troupes still travelled while others became sedentary and eventually evolved into film companies.

6. Brainstorm about Hollywood's and Bollywood's origins. Where and how did these industries originate? Research their beginnings and report back to the class with a short presentation.
7. Pretend you are a travelling theatre troupe. Divide the class into two groups – one group wants to continue the traditional way and the other wants to expand into the film business. Debate the pros and cons.

40 What they all had in common, however, were their themes. The travelling troupes drew on religious stories and folklore for their performances, while also using stereotypes such as jealous spouses, penny-pinching parents, and wild sons.

45 As live performances evolved into films, these motifs did not change. Nollywood prides itself on using typically Nigerian and uniquely African storylines. They do not try to cater to Western audiences but instead

50 appeal to the "ordinary African" by portraying cultural traditions and modern concerns of everyday people – their goals, values, and views. The film which is seen as the real beginning of Nollywood is the 1992 movie *Living in Bondage*. It tells the story of a young Nigerian man striving for wealth, the fateful predicaments this quest puts him in, and the high costs of achieving it.

55 Modern Nigerian novels such as *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Americanah*, both by award-winning author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, have also been adapted as films. *Half of a Yellow Sun* takes place during the Nigerian Civil War in the 1960s and *Americanah* is about the stories and struggles of a young Nigerian woman who has emigrated to the United States. Just like the plays of the travelling Yoruba troupes, these relatable plots resonate with Nigerian and many other African viewers.



8. What do you think are Nollywood's advantages of not catering to Western audiences? Are there disadvantages?

9. Compare the *Living in Bondage* 1992 trailer with the trailer for the 2019 remake. What can you say about quality, plot, and appeal to modern-day audiences?

10. Both of Adichie's books mentioned above have received international recognition and awards. Do you think this disqualifies them from being considered Nollywood material? Why or why not?

### A Before you read

1. The three most productive film industries are Bollywood, Nollywood and Hollywood.  
Other guesses might include China, United Kingdom, Japan.
2. I think the name comes from a combination of Nigeria and Hollywood.

### B Comprehension Questions

1. Ideas: a cook who only has salt and pepper as spices, cavemen who found fire, an artist creating art with only berries and branches, a farmer starting with just one seed, making toys from things like cornhusks, old clothes, stick and stones.
2. Individual answers expected.
3. Piracy in the film industry means producing unauthorized copies of a movie and distributing and selling them for profit.
4. A blockbuster is a film that has a high level of popularity and financial success.
5. It was probably cheaper and faster to produce them on individual VHS tapes for distribution and sale. Perhaps Nigeria didn't have the entertainment infrastructure at the time – or only in big cities –and this way people outside of the cities could buy and watch them, too.

6.

**Brainstorming:** I think maybe the weather played a role in establishing Hollywood/Los Angeles as the movie capital in the United States as opposed to New York, for example. There are also different kinds of landscape nearby that could be used for filming.

**After research:** At the beginning of the 1900s, movie production companies moved to California to avoid paying fees as required by the patents for film processing and recording equipment held by Thomas Edison in New Jersey. It was difficult for the patents to be enforced in far-away California.

**Brainstorming:** I think Bollywood definitely came about after Hollywood and the name is a combination of Bombay and Hollywood.

**After research:** Bombay as the center for India's film industry goes all the way back to the 1890s and the Lumiere brothers. The name Bollywood, a combination of Bombay and Hollywood, appeared in the 1970s after the Indian movie industry experienced a renaissance and started producing movies that combined several different genres. This combination was known as masala film and became the trademark of Bollywood.

8. There is less competition if they concentrate on Nigerian and African audiences and they don't have the pressure to make their films a certain way. The disadvantages could be that they can't make as much money if the films have a smaller market. It's also more difficult to get international recognition for the movies and the actors and actresses.

9. The differences in quality are very obvious. You can tell that the original version was made with a small budget by the camera angles and lighting, for example. They are more straightforward with less variety. The backgrounds also look very simple. The trailer for the newer version is much more dramatic and suspenseful and reveals more of the storylines. Of course, the use of modern locations, music and props (cars, boats, etc.) is more appealing to today's audience.

Here are links to the two different trailers:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AyU-TUbG2sQ> - old 

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bQ9pUsXFqoA> - new 

10. This question is connected to the advantages and disadvantages addressed in question 8 and to the decisions made by the travelling theatre troupes: stay traditional or modernize. I think that if a film and cast can compete on the global stage, there's no reason to stop it or to look down on it. And commercial success should not disqualify a film from being considered part of Nollywood. One definition of Nollywood is using Nigerian motifs and how can a film be more Nigerian than being based on a Nigerian novel?