



Lights, Camera, and Real Life: The Influence of ‘Y2K’ Nollywood on Nigerian Women (1990s-Early 2000s)

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Introduction

Nigeria is home to Nollywood, the second-largest film industry in the world by production volume, second only to Bollywood, according to a UNESCO statistics report¹. ‘Y2K’ Nollywood characterizes the decade between the 1990s and early 2000s, which marked the nascent stage of what would later become a mega industry. Although Nigeria had been producing movies for local consumption, mainly on national television platforms, the ‘Y2K’ Nollywood productions, which were often low-budget and of low technical quality, were the defining era that brought about widespread viewership, locally bred storytelling, and global success.

The use of readily available VHS tapes by local businessmen who bypassed mainstream, and often costly, cinemas, choosing to prioritize a straight-to-video approach for home consumption, made the movies produced within this decade largely popular within home and communal settings.² Colloquially, these sorts of productions eventually came to be known as ‘home-video’ movies. Because these movies were consumed primarily in domestic settings and informal sectors, most of their viewers were women who were primarily responsible for domestic responsibilities and the day-to-day running of the household.

Consequently, the constant presence of melodramatic themes, social critique, spiritual conflicts, and bold fashion trends, with female protagonists often at the intersection of such themes,³ depicted everyday life and suggested how it should be navigated, which resonated deeply with the majority of the female audience. In the post-pandemic 21st century, young Nigerians are beginning to recall the past on several social media platforms through memes, pop culture, fashion magazines, and politics, catapulting what was seemingly forgotten into a profound cultural spotlight and appreciation for the era’s originality.

¹ “Nigeria Surpasses Hollywood as World’s Second Largest Film Producer – UN | UN News,” May 5, 2009, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2009/05/299102-nigeria-surpasses-hollywood-worlds-second-largest-film-producer-un>.

² Eno Akpabio, “Attitude of Audience Members to Nollywood Films,” *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007): 90–91.

³ African History and Development Analysis, *Nollywood: From Nigeria to the World: Nigeria’s Film Industry Goes Global :HISTORICAL ANALYSIS*, 2024, at 1:52-2:10, 9:05-9:55, 11:00-11:10, 11:25, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TLreJgMuNMA>.

Scholars and researchers have previously paid frequent attention to the success of ‘home-video’ distribution, the impact of themes depicted on Nigeria’s cultural image abroad, the portrayal of women through the lenses of the female protagonists, and how the ‘Y2K’ Nollywood era was foundational to the later success of Nollywood in the years that would follow. By prioritizing lived experiences through oral history interviews, this research contributes to the existing scholarship by positing that ‘Y2K’ Nollywood influenced the cultural exposure and self-understanding of Nigerian women who both watched and contributed to this cinematic experience.

Ultimately, this research project aims to understand the real-life implications of this era for female self-identity and how these films redefined Nigerian storytelling, thus contributing a historically grounded, personal approach that expands present scholarly discourse.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Nollywood has examined production, spectatorship, and the interpretation of prevalent themes by audiences in Nigeria and on the international stage. By scrutinizing the frequency of negative themes highlighted in Nollywood movies, studies have pointed out that recurrent portrayals of occultism, gendered sexualization, violence, and social conflict are evidence that Nollywood “appeals to the lowest common denominator” and projects a damaging national image.⁴ These studies, after analyzing Nigerians’ disposition toward Nollywood’s emphasis on Nigeria’s negative cultural practices, have concluded that such depictions have had a detrimental effect on the representation of Nigerian society on an international stage, much to the audience’s disapproval. For instance, Akpabio uses surveys and a cluster sampling approach to understand how these ‘home-video’ transmissions (and their common themes) were perceived across Lagos residents.⁵ As his findings indicate, affirmative answers from respondents who agree that Nollywood places too much emphasis on negative content support the author’s hypothesis.

Subsequent studies have therefore taken additional steps to analyze the relationship between Nollywood and Nigeria’s national identity within Nigeria and abroad. Through a comparative study approach, Endong establishes that Nollywood is not solely responsible for Nigeria’s image crisis

⁴ Akpabio, 90–92, 96–98; Asogwa Euphemia et al., “The Representation of Nigerian Indigenous Culture in Nollywood,” *Journal of Scientific Research and Reports* 7, no. 2 (2015): 97–107, <https://doi.org/10.9734/JSRR/2015/15596>.

⁵ Ibid.

abroad.⁶ Rather, he theorizes an interdependent relationship between Nollywood and Nigeria's international image, arguing that Nollywood has both been responsible for, and, at the same time, been a victim of negative perceptions of Nigeria. To the extent to which Nollywood has played a definitive part in Nigeria's national identity domestically, scholarship also focuses on themes prevalent in Nollywood films and their impact on national unity. In a country as diverse as Nigeria, defining national identity has been contentious in recent years. However, conclusions that national identity has been compromised by the moral quality of Nollywood films and their negative stereotypes⁷ ignore the multicultural and political factors also at play that can characterize national identity.

One distinctive feature of initial Nollywood productions in the 1990s and early 2000s was the straight-to-video transmission, which was instrumental in making spectatorship of these movies a connected and integrated practice within community settings. While studying how changing viewing practices, albeit across diasporic audiences, have affected the engagement of themes across viewers,⁸ Dekie's study highlights that the shared community-based viewing practices common during the 'Y2K' Nollywood era, which made use of physical tapes and cassettes, insinuated viewership of these movies as "a social and public practice". Therefore, if watching these movies was a form of socialization, how did that socialization affect the viewers, who were mainly women? This domestic socialization is pivotal to answering the question and to taking a closer look at studies centered around the association between Nollywood and women.

Beyond the method of distributing 'Y2K' Nollywood productions through 'home-video' platforms, what is even more striking as a predominant feature of the movies of this initial decade was the roles women were often depicted in. Common negative characterizations of women include the helpless widow, evil witch, and mobile mistress, among many others, most often portraying women as vile, emotionless beings. Recent studies have begun to critically examine movies produced after 2010,

⁶ Floribert Patrick C. Endong, "Cinema Globalization and Nation Branding: An Exploration of the Impact of Nollywood on the Nigerian Image Crisis," *Journal of Globalization Studies* 9, no. 1 (2018): 77–90, <https://doi.org/10.30884/jogs/2018.01.06>.

⁷ Dr Hassen Zriba, *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies*, 4, no. 2 (2017): 81–85.

⁸ Afra Dekie et al., "Nollywood Online: Between the Individual Consumption and Communal Reception of Nigerian Films among African Diaspora," *Journal of African Media Studies* the, 7, no. 3 (2015): 301–14, https://doi.org/10.1386/jams.7.3.301_1.

which is now defined as “new Nollywood”.⁹ For example, Olayiwola provides a contrast by comparing derogatory themes that presented women in often stereotypical and vulnerable roles, “where women functioned as objects of pleasure”, to recent productions that have seen women in more professional roles where self-agency is being exercised. Her study highlights that “new Nollywood” has begun to shift concentration from the male gaze that often championed such themes to a more feminist framework. Despite this groundbreaking evolution, the question that still lurks is how such stereotypical roles that largely defined this era impacted those most connected to it: the viewers.

Finally, this research similarly builds on a study that examined the impact of Nollywood on women in a suburban local government area in the capital city of one of Nigeria’s states.¹⁰ Employing surveys across a large sample size, Olanrewaju et al. examine how women have interpreted themes from Nollywood. Although centering women’s perspectives, albeit from a region that is not very diverse, there’s still a hypothesis about negative themes in Nollywood being tested, which might blur the real influence of how these movies impacted participants.

By centering oral history and the lived memories of women who navigated the ‘Y2K’ era of Nollywood, and its cinematic weight on their personal lives, within the decade following the 1990s, my research ultimately diverges from the often analytical standpoint used by researchers. This research goes beyond hypothesizing the consequences of Nollywood’s negative portrayals and, instead, closes this gap by including a feminist framework of women who lived through this period.

⁹ Elizabeth Olayiwola, “New Nollywood and the Female Gaze: Changing Female Stereotypes in Nigerian Cinema,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 40, no. 1 (2023): 94–111, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2021.1984822>; Perpetua Ogechi Aondover, “Nollywood and African Women Empowerment: Representation, Narrative and Social Impact,” *Journalism* 16, no. 1 (2026): 33–43; Chinenye Amonyeze and Ogochukwu Agbo, “On New Voices in Nollywood: Female Agency and Value in Selected Nigerian Movies,” *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 9, no. 1 (2022): 2064080, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2022.2064080>.

¹⁰ A. O. P. Olanrewaju et al., “Perceived Influence of Nollywood Movies on Social Life: A Study of Women in Ilorin South Local Government Area, Kwara State,” *Sapientia Journal of Education, Sciences and Gender Studies* 3, no. 4 (2021), https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Olanrewaju-Ajakaiye-2/publication/357689486_PERCEIVED_INFLUENCE_OF_NOLLYWOOD_MOVIES_ON_SOCIAL_LIFE_A_STUDY_OF_WOMEN_IN_ILORIN_SOUTH_LOCAL_GOVERNMENT_AREA_KWARA_STATE/links/61db478dd4500608169d3a24/PERCEIVED-INFLUENCE-OF-NOLLYWOOD-MOVIES-ON-SOCIAL-LIFE-A-STUDY-OF-WOMEN-IN-ILORIN-SOUTH-LOCAL-GOVERNMENT-AREA-KWARA-STATE.pdf.

Methodology

This research documented the lived experiences and personal narratives of 12 Nigerian women who demonstrated that they were avid viewers and contributed to the ‘Y2K’ Nollywood era between the 1990s and early 2000s. A previously prepared set of questionnaires was employed to guide the flow of conversation and reveal background information; while the questionnaires were general in scope, each was tailored to the respective interviewee. This qualitative study was conducted through semi-structured interviews that usually ranged from 45 to 90 minutes each.

By prioritizing an oral history approach, this study was able to center on the interviewees’ firsthand perspectives based on their personal ordeals and how ‘Y2K’ Nollywood productions played a part in them, rather than on any pre-existing hypothesis testing the consequences of one theme or the other. To get an apt representation of society despite a small sample size, interviewees included two actresses who played a significant role during the years of ‘Y2K’ Nollywood, three women who lived in the diaspora across Saudi Arabia and Brunei, the United States and the United Kingdom, respectively, between the 1990s and early 2000s. Interviewees were generally selected to reflect the diversity of Nigeria’s ethnic, religious, and socio-economic landscape. Furthermore, participants were selected to reflect the diverse age ranges of women who were at the onset of puberty to young adult ladies, and women who already had families during the years following ‘Y2K’ Nollywood’s debut.

Relying on personal and academic networks, participants of this study were identified through snowball sampling on a rolling basis until the target number of participants was reached and sufficient data had been collected. During the recruitment process, eligibility was assessed through informal conversations to ensure that selected participants were women who had lived through this era and had engaged with it on a personal level. After potential participants were identified, they were contacted informally and provided with an overview of the study, including its purpose, voluntary nature, and ethical safeguards. Informed consent was obtained before participation. Interviewees were also informed about the option to remain anonymous (or use a pseudonym), which 3 participants chose. All 9 other participants waived their right to anonymity.

Out of 12 interviews, 5 were conducted online using Zoom video conferencing due to participants’ availability and preference. The other 7 interviews were conducted in person between Lagos and Abuja, two of Nigeria’s major cities, at preferred locations decided by the participants that prioritized

their comfort, confidentiality, and safety. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed after the interview sessions.

Using thematic analysis, data were organized using an inductive reasoning approach to recognize patterns and prevalent themes. This open coding method allowed for an exploratory, unstructured process to identify frequent and recurring themes and draw apt and relevant conclusions that answer the research questions and fulfill its objectives. Themes were coded into categories, and conclusions were based on themes derived from the interview material.

Identifying participants for this study and establishing personal contacts and interview arrangements were completed by the end of May 2026. Over six weeks, interviews took place between June and July of 2026. Data analysis followed immediately after the interview period, throughout July 2026. The final research output will be completed by August 2026, after which all audio recordings and transcripts of participants who have chosen to remain anonymous will be securely stored or destroyed in accordance with ethical research guidelines. Otherwise, and with their consent, participants who have chosen to be identified will be informed that excerpts from their audio recordings may be used as a reference for future research and academic outputs, or archival depositions.

Findings & Discussion

This section organizes the data obtained from semi-structured interviews with 12 participants into categories that explore the implications of prevalent themes (as mentioned by the interviewees themselves) on their personal experiences and self-identity during the defining years between 1990 and the early 2000s that characterized that initial period of Nollywood's rise.

The findings reveal that 'Y2K' Nollywood was beyond passive entertainment for these Nigerian women who watched and contributed to it. Rather, all interviewees report that they were actively learning from the movies, which they were able to apply in their personal lives and navigate their experiences. The findings are grouped into the following themes;

- ***‘Y2K’ Nollywood as a ‘Template’ for the Modern Nigerian Woman***

When Anonymous Grandma, now well into her 80s, recounts that ‘Y2K’ Nollywood influenced her understanding of who she wanted to be, she echoes a truth familiar to 9 other interviewees. Starting with education, 3 of these 10 women who were viewers and not actresses, and missed the opportunity to get a formal education, reiterated that watching movies such as *Glamour Girls* (1994) kept ablaze their desire to get educated and equally portray themselves as educated, confident, eloquent, and articulate speakers, characteristics common to the female protagonists in this era. Despite not having the privileges of a formal education, these women understood from these films why education was important, a value they were able to pass down to their children. A poignant example comes from Anonymous Gwari Woman, who recalled how watching these films compelled her to fiercely encourage her sons to “put head for inside book” (Nigerian parlance for remaining studious) so they could master the “good English” spoken by her favorite on-screen actresses.

Whether ‘Y2K’ Nollywood was a trampoline for greater triumphs in the personal lives of these women is indisputable, transforming them from passive monolithic viewers into active authors of their own lives. For Joyce, a hospital waitress based in London since 1986 (who has not been back to Nigeria since then), she alludes that watching some of these movies was a partial source of her boldness in resisting and standing up to her abusive ex-partner; inspired by *Patience Ozokwor* (whom she affectionately calls *Mama P*), her tough stance and nature, and *Lola Idije* (*Toyin Afolayan*), Joyce recounts that such apt representations were a tool to navigate her husband’s abusive behavior. Furthermore, Monique describes Nollywood’s melodramatic endings of a suffering widow, who later finds joy in life against all odds, as her “moving power to see the light at the end of [her] tunnel, which kept [her] going” at a time in her life when she had just been widowed at a young age and tasked with raising her 3 young children alone. Halima, who has lived in the diaspora since 2003 across Saudi Arabia and Brunei, recollects how watching these movies as a teenager made her aspire to become a “business tycooness”. Motivated by the resilience of the characters in these movies, who, despite having so little, struggled to establish businesses, Halima reflects that watching such productions made her want to be self-employed and exercise her “leverage and freedom”. Halima is now a successful entrepreneur in Saudi Arabia.

Nothing is quite as universally agreed upon by the 10 interviewed women (who viewed these movies, rather than contributed to them) as the idea that Nollywood served as a lifestyle

template. And nowhere is this consensus more visible than in the era's most distinctive feature: fashion. These women show immense pride and dignity in what has been a resurgence of 'Y2K' fashion trends among younger Nigerians, noting that it was a standard of beauty choices and expressing gratitude that this generation is beginning to claim their roots by embracing black beauty. While 'Y2K' Nollywood fashion presents an apparent contradiction by being heavily Western-inspired, the data reveals it still functioned as a reflection of Nigerian cultural identity.

To understand this dynamic between consumer perception and industry intent, the perspectives of the creators themselves become vital. Lilian Amah, a pioneering actress of the time, provides that answer: Nigerian fashion "spoke its own language." She adds that "Nigerian fashion is vibrant, the colors are alive, and the creativity is daring and bold," and these characteristics reflect Nigerians as a people. This creative authenticity directly resonated with the audience; Magdalene, a teacher at a Lagos private school, reminisces that it was the best kind of fashion because it was "timeless" and added "value to [her] style."

- ***The Authenticity of The Craft, Insider's Perspectives***

Kate Henshaw, now one of Nollywood's biggest names, recounts that her career began by coincidence, and that her early days in the industry following *When the Sun Sets* (1994) were driven by passion, inquisitiveness, and adventure. Despite the often negative backlash this era received for centering negative themes, Henshaw insists that she was part of an industry that was showcasing what was "prevalent at the time". She notes that while the ultimate onus was on individual viewers to draw their own conclusions, Nollywood was simultaneously instrumental in informing moral choices, hers included. Furthermore, Henshaw highlights that 'Y2K' Nollywood provided her with a representation of the "resilient Nigerian spirit", which was instrumental in showing her the possibility of life, contrary to what she was taught to believe growing up as a teenager: that a woman's place was in the kitchen.

Parallel to this experience, Lilian Amah maintains, and strongly affirms, that 'Y2K' Nollywood was an authentic reflection of the Nigerian people and the society at the time. Amah further expresses satisfaction that she was part of a generation of actresses that laid the foundation for less

stereotypical roles of women, and says that Nollywood helped her understand her place “intuitively” in society. Essentially, she emphasizes that this early foundation paved the way for the contemporary, globally recognized industry that now centers women’s stories from women’s perspectives.

- ***‘Y2K’ Nollywood as a Source of Moral Consciousness***

For the interviewed women, the relatable representations on screen directly influenced their internal conceptions of morality and personal values. The data reveals that viewers actively used these storylines to navigate complex social realities, using the characters’ experiences to anchor their own moral choices.

For Gloria, who watched these movies as a teenager and is now a hairstylist, she reflects that the movies of this era remain nostalgic for her because they prevented her from “loose-guarding” when navigating often conservative situations such as a teenage romantic relationship. “Loose-guarding” is an informal Nigerian term that describes losing one’s vigilance or leaving oneself vulnerable to precarious situations. She further mentions that the blueprint of dos and don’ts these movies often showcased, depicting negative consequences to achieve a didactic ending, provided her with experience in how to train her children more effectively than if she were navigating parenting entirely on her own. This same sentiment of raising one’s children better due to a more nuanced knowledge of values such as betrayal, trust, friendships, contentment, and satisfaction gained from the melodramatic narrative arcs of movies such as *Living in Bondage* (1992) and *Evil Passion* (1993) was shared by 6 other participants aside from Gloria. 3 other interviewees also reflected on how this same didactic blueprint was essential in navigating their university expectations and realities, and the challenges of transitioning to a new environment.

Despite the internalization of certain values depicted by these movies, two women still report that their home was an important frontier for filtering out the messages and themes communicated through ‘Y2K’ Nollywood, which also contributed to a better layered perspective of the era’s major tropes. For instance, Lynda, who is now a university professor, grew up as a young girl in the epicenter of where ‘Y2K’ Nollywood films were marketed—Aba, Abia State. She partly credits Nollywood, notably *Glamour Girls* (1994), for her understanding of healthy solidarity across female friend groups, where she said that these characters “were each other’s ride-or-dies,” a detail she

attributed to her early understanding of feminism. However, she also establishes that her parents and school were instrumental in contextualizing feminism on a “case-by-case basis”, especially as it applies to Nigerian cultural frameworks. Similarly, Anonymous Grandma mentions how, as a parent during that period, scrutinizing the moral depth of themes presented as appropriate in Nollywood movies kept her family united because it helped her be hands-on as a guide and decipher what she wanted her children to learn. Although seemingly ordinary, the individual agency exercised by the above 2 interviewees directly corroborates Kate Henshaw’s earlier assertion for individuals to draw their own conclusions from such productions. This makes it abundantly clear that, despite the often one-dimensional narratives in these movies, as argued by earlier researchers, the intuition gained from one movie is never identical for two women due to their distinct lived experiences.

- ***‘Y2K’ Nollywood and Cultural Connection***

“‘Y2K’ Nollywood reminded me of who I was in a distant land, especially if there were things I was missing out on, such as new lingo. It made me stay connected to home”, recounts Halima. Halima further adds that during the years she lived in Brunei, at a time when digital communication technology was not so developed, watching these movies was the primary medium she could relate to. Consuming these movies alone propelled her to build a community of other viewers, such that this experience nudged her (and perhaps others too) to see the hope and vibrancy out there in the world, as often showcased by these movies rather than retreating to the loneliness that often characterizes the immigrant experience. This profound feeling of a transnational connection to Nigeria through active viewership of ‘Y2K’ Nollywood movies is shared by the three women who all lived abroad between the 1990s and early 2000s. Chiamaka, a younger international student in the US in the early 2000s, recounted that ‘Y2K’ Nollywood was instrumental in shaping her sense of belonging to the diaspora community and eventually navigating life in the US. She recalls that watching movies such as *Nneka the Pretty Serpent (1994)* made her value her cultural originality and embrace the opportunity to showcase Nigeria’s cultural heritage to others beyond the stereotypical and myopic narratives. Joyce would further add that Nollywood was a significant cultural entry point for her three children born in London. She expresses immense pride that, despite never visiting Nigeria, their watching these movies resulted in a tangible connection to their motherland, such that they can speak Yoruba, one of Nigeria’s indigenous languages and one that was often woven into ‘Y2K’ productions. All three interviewees who lived abroad note that ‘Y2K’ Nollywood was also

valuable in helping them keep tabs on the current social realities of the time, which is also an indicator that Nollywood reflected society.

In a multicultural and multilingual country like Nigeria, where ethnic differences have historically often resulted in political and social tensions, cultural differences have made it difficult for citizens to align with Nigeria as a nation-state because more loyalty lies within ethnic circles.

This need for cultural connection was not alien to the women within Nigeria's borders. Instead, it could be argued that these cultural ties were even deeper, resulting in a form of cross-cultural exchange that allowed these women to see people from other regions and their cultural practices, whom they otherwise might never have had the opportunity to witness and appreciate. As the interviewees who lived in Nigeria within that period report, watching 'Y2K' Nollywood movies helped them learn how people from other parts of the country behaved and prepared them for future interactions, providing them with a baseline understanding of what to expect from unfamiliar regions. Agatha, a petty trader, is one of four participants who praise certain cultural frameworks (that are not indigenous to their ethnicity) they think reflect "true Nigerian identity and values". Of notable mention is the Igbo apprenticeship system, which communicated values such as satisfaction, contentedness, and the essence of trust and resilience across ethnic lines for economic mobility.

Regretting that 'Y2K' Nollywood often "told specific Nigerian stories that projected a certain perception which unfortunately, exaggerated the negative aspects", especially regarding the portrayal of African traditional religions, Lynda expresses mixed feelings about the weight of 'Y2K' Nollywood's impact on her own cultural connection. However, despite her stance that she didn't gain any longstanding cultural virtue, Lynda is proud that such productions "created an awareness, regardless of their assumptions, giving others a basic understanding of Nigerian culture," calling it a "big plus". She's proud that Y2K Nollywood was a form of "soft power" within the African continent that "is good for any country, [and was certainly good for us]".

Summary & Conclusion

The depth and impact of the participants' responses, as highlighted above, show the undisputed extent to which the women in this sample, and perhaps the women who constituted avid audiences

between the 1990s and early 2000s, were actively gaining from 'Y2K' Nollywood movies. While previous studies often overlook the agency of early Nollywood audiences, the findings reveal that women who actively watched and engaged with 'Y2K' Nollywood productions were more than passive viewers. Moreover, these women were able to transform the themes and messages depicted in such productions into active principles that guided and eventually shaped their social, political, and cultural understanding of themselves and those around them.

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