

September 16, 2002

Step Aside, L.A. and Bombay, for Nollywood

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LAGOS, Nigeria — As the sun rises over West Africa's new moviemaking capital, the Surulere district of Lagos, the cast and crew of "Blackmailed" form a four-car convoy to leave for their first day of shooting.

"It's like a dream come true," said Nonso Diobi, 21, who had snatched one of the lead roles in "Blackmailed" only two months after leaving his home in southeastern Nigeria for Surulere, here in the country's commercial capital. "This is where it all happens, where all the stars are who make big money because they can sell movies. I'm not a big star yet. But when I am, I will fix a big price."

Since the late 1990's, Nigerian movies have found a place next to offerings from Hollywood and Bollywood, Bombay's equivalent, in the cities, towns and villages across English-speaking Africa. Though made on the cheap, with budgets of about only \$15,000, the Nigerian movies have become huge hits, with stories, themes and faces familiar to other Africans. It is now, according to conservative estimates, a \$45 million a year industry.

Serious movies about Africa that win awards in the West are usually made by African filmmakers based in Paris or London, and resonate little among most Africans.

But Nigeria's pulp movies have had a wide influence on African popular culture — so much so that they have suddenly made acting an attractive profession in Nigeria and have transformed Surulere, an otherwise drab neighborhood of two-story businesses and houses, into a crucible of dreams and desires.

"This is Hollywood in Nigeria," Emeka Ani, 45, an actor whose two-room office in Surulere serves as the center for the Actors Guild of Nigeria, said on a recent morning.

Outside, on Folawiyo Bankole Street, a steady stream of eager young men and women paused before the audition notices on two boards. They milled around on the street, exchanging gossip and tips, causing traffic jams on the narrow two-lane street. When a star came by, a crowd gathered.

In Mr. Ani's inner office, within easy reach of a bottle of brandy, he keeps a file of Nigeria's famous actors and a list of guild members, which has grown to 5,000 from 500 since its creation in 1996. In the other room, he sells videocassettes of hundreds of movies, which are known here as home videos.

"This is one of the most controversial movies ever made," he said, producing a copy of "I Hate My Village." Made in 1998, the movie deals with cannibalism, and the cassette's cover shows Mr. Ani chewing on what is supposedly human flesh.

Christian songs wafted through the office. By midmorning, the music had hardened to the dance rhythms of Nigerian high life, and the young would-be actresses working in his office — one in a clingy purple satin dress and one in tight jeans with a silver chain belt — were dancing to Ollie Gee's "Daddy Moh."

The crowd gravitated to Winis, a hotel and restaurant a couple of buildings away from Mr. Ani's that is the hangout for actors, directors and producers. They sit in the bar's very low chairs and, under the ceiling fans' deferential spinning, make deals over Gulder beer and hot pepper soup.

"If you stay here long enough, someone will talk to you and say, 'Come work for me,'" said Don Olaolu Richard, 23, an actor who, in fact, had just landed a role with the production manager standing next to him, Kingsley Atoe.

Mr. Atoe, 33, had prowled Surulere since 7 a.m. to fill eight minor speaking roles and 20 extra spots for "Love of My Life." By noon, his mission was accomplished — or almost. "The only role I haven't filled is one for a white man, a speaking role in just one scene," he said, immediately offering it to the reporter interviewing him.

Shooting was starting in a couple of days, in keeping with the frenetic pace of Nigeria's movie production. With such low budgets, the movies are typically filmed over several days, with just one digital camera. The stories are perhaps no different from those found in Hollywood movies, though many have Africa-specific themes, like ritual killings and witchcraft.

By all accounts, the first big hit dates to a 1992 movie about human sacrifices, "Living in Bondage." It gave birth to the film industry, which is dominated by the Ibo ethnic group, said Remy Ohajianya, an actor who is chairman of the actors guild.

But the explosive growth occurred after 1998, Mr. Ohajianya said, when Nigerian movies began to be exported all over Africa, especially in the English-speaking countries. So many films were being made that, early this year, producers spat out 54 titles in a single week. After a four-month voluntary recess, the industry has agreed to limit the releases to eight a week.

A week or two after shooting ends, the movies flood the Nigerian market, sold for \$2.15 a cassette and shown to the public for a few pennies in restaurants, video centers or private homes operating as movie houses. An average movie will sell about 50,000 copies and a blockbuster four times that.

According to estimates provided by producers and financial backers, the Nigerian movie industry now produces more than 400 movies a year. At that rate, the producers bring in an estimated \$45 million a year; but other people, at movie centers, and bootleggers, also capitalize from the movies.

"I went to Ghana recently, and people recognized me," said Kate Henshaw-Nattall, 31, a popular actress who dropped by Mr. Ani's office. "I was shocked. People came up to me and said, 'Aren't you the Nigerian actress?'"

Top actors like Ms. Henshaw-Nattall now earn perhaps \$4,000 a movie, a sum that was inconceivable only a few years ago and one that remains out of reach for most working Nigerians.

Charles Awurum, 39, another popular actor, began his acting career in sleepy Imo State in 1982. He appeared on a weekly soap opera called "Dusk of the Gods" and made less than \$7 an episode.

After his first movie in 1994, he said, he left Imo State for "greener pastures" in Surulere. He had a breakthrough with "Ekulu," a love story about an African slave and a white woman who frees him. When they come to Africa, she is rejected by his society, and they flee into the jungle.

"Upon which they meet some cannibals and become separated," Mr. Awurum recalled.

Nigerian intellectuals may dismiss these movies as exploitation. But their growing popularity, coupled with the big salaries, has changed the traditional perception of acting and actors in Nigerian society.

"Before, if you were an actor, people would just wave you away," Mr. Awurum said. "Before, you would kill your daughter if she told you she wanted to become an actress. Actresses were regarded as no better than prostitutes, kissing on the screen.

"Now, everywhere I go, people embrace me. Everybody wants to be my friend."

Surely, that change explained why 115 aspirants showed up at the audition of "Blind Justice," a work in progress about a state governor whose daughter is killed. Most of the hopefuls were young men and women, though the audition also attracted older people, children and a 3-foot-tall man.

They appeared before the director, Paul Obazele, whose effusiveness was not diminished by some truly bad performances and was perhaps fueled by the bottles of Guinness at his feet.

"I want attitude! Attitude!" he yelled at an actor. "That's why I brought you back. You have depth! I want you to release it!"

More candidates came in. More waited outside. An hour passed. The director lost none of his effusiveness.

"Fine, fine-looking boys in this place," he said, looking at one actor. "The girls here are not as beautiful as the boys."

"I've found some good candidates," he said later. "I like the dwarf very much. I'll place

him in the governor's office. He'll just stand there, without speaking. People will wonder who is this mysterious figure."

One hopeful actress, Miriam Isaiah, 19, said her parents had agreed to let her pursue her acting career as long as she stayed in college, where she was studying mass communications. She had appeared as an extra in three movies already.

"I want to be an actress," she said, adding that nowadays she spent more time in Surulere than in school. "That's my dream — to be a star."