African Film: Telling African Stories on Screen

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — Nollywood and Pan-African cinema

Nollywood: The World's Second-Largest Film Industry

Nigeria's film industry — known globally as Nollywood — is the second-largest film industry in the world by volume of output, producing approximately 2,500 films per year. It employs approximately one million Nigerians, making it the country's second-largest employer after agriculture. It generates an estimated $1 billion in annual revenue. And it has achieved something that Hollywood, Bollywood, and the entire European art film tradition have never managed to achieve for African audiences: it tells African stories, in African languages, reflecting African realities, for African audiences.

Nollywood began not in purpose-built studios with high production budgets but in Lagos's Idumota market in the early 1990s, when entrepreneur Kenneth Nnebue shot a Yoruba-language drama on video and sold it directly to market traders on VHS tapes. The model spread rapidly: low-budget, fast-produced video films that could be shot in days, distributed through market networks, and sold for prices ordinary Nigerians could afford. Quality was initially low. Storytelling was often melodramatic. But the content — the stories, the languages, the social dynamics, the spiritual frameworks, the family conflicts — was unmistakably Nigerian and unmistakably African.

The rise of streaming platforms — Netflix, Amazon Prime, Apple TV+ — has transformed Nollywood's second act. Netflix launched a dedicated Nollywood content strategy, commissioning high-budget Nigerian productions and distributing existing Nollywood films globally. The result has been a rapid increase in production quality, a globalisation of Nollywood's audience, and the emergence of a new generation of Nigerian filmmakers — Kemi Adetiba (The Wedding Party, King of Boys), Kunle Afolayan (Citation, Swallow), Jade Osiberu (Gangs of Lagos) — producing work of genuine cinematic ambition.

Pan-African Cinema: Beyond Nollywood

African cinema extends far beyond Nollywood. The Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène — often called the 'father of African cinema' — established the intellectual

and aesthetic foundations of African art cinema in the 1960s and 70s, making films like Mandabi (1968) and Xala (1975) in Wolof — becoming the first filmmaker to create feature films in an African language — that used the cinematic form to critique colonialism, neo-colonialism, and African complicity with both.

South African cinema, shaped by the apartheid experience and its aftermath, has produced works of international distinction: Zulu Love Letter (2004), Yesterday (2004, South Africa's first Oscar-nominated film), and more recently Silverton Siege (2022). Ethiopian cinema is resurging. Moroccan and Egyptian cinema — with long traditions in Arabic — produce films that reach Arab-African audiences of hundreds of millions. The FESPACO biennial film festival in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso — the oldest and largest film festival in Africa — has since 1969 provided a dedicated platform for African filmmakers and critics to develop and celebrate Pan-African cinema on African terms.

African Film: Key Facts
Nollywood produces approximately 2,500 films per year — the world's second-largest film industry by volume.
Nollywood employs approximately 1 million Nigerians — the country's second-largest employer after agriculture.
Ousmane Sembène was the first filmmaker to make a feature film in an African language (Wolof).
Yesterday (2004) was South Africa's first Oscar-nominated film.
FESPACO, founded 1969 in Ouagadougou, is Africa's oldest and largest film festival.

Key Takeaways

Nollywood built the world's second-largest film industry from market-stall VHS sales, and now streams globally through Netflix partnerships, while Pan-African cinema — from Sembène's pioneering Wolof-language films to FESPACO's decades-long platform — has always told African stories in African languages on African terms. The next lesson turns to a different but related canvas: African fashion's reclamation of aesthetic authority.