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# **PRODUCTIVITIES**

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**VINZENZ HEDIGER**

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**BERTRAM LANG**

**CORNELIA STORZ**

**DISTRIBUTED**



## **Distributed Productivities**

Dedicated to the memory of Ute Röschenthaler  
(1960–2024)

# **Distributed Productivities: Digital Transcreation and the New World Order of Cultural Production**

**edited by Vinzenz Hediger, Matthias Krings,  
Bertram Lang, and Cornelia Storz**



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## Configurations of Film: Series Foreword

Scalable across a variety of formats and standardized in view of global circulation, the moving image has always been both an image of movement and an image on the move. Over the last three decades, digital production technologies, communication networks, and distribution platforms have taken the scalability and mobility of film to a new level. Beyond the classical *dispositif* of the cinema, new forms and knowledges of cinema and film have emerged, challenging the established approaches to the study of film. The conceptual framework of index, *dispositif*, and canon, which defined cinema as photochemical image technology with a privileged bond to reality, a site of public projection, and a set of works from auteurs from specific national origins, can no longer account for the current multitude of moving images and the trajectories of their global movements. The term “post-cinema condition,” which was first proposed by film theorists more than a decade ago to describe the new cultural and technological order of moving images, retained an almost melancholic attachment to that which the cinema no longer was. Moving beyond such attachments, the concept of “configurations of film” aims to account for moving images in terms of their operations, forms and formats, locations and infrastructures, expanding the field of cinematic knowledges beyond the arts and the aesthetic, while retaining a focus on film as privileged site for the production of cultural meaning, for social action, and for political conflict.

The series “Configurations of Film” presents pointed interventions in this field of debate by emerging and established international scholars associated with the DFG-funded Graduate Research Training Program (Graduiertenkolleg) “Konfigurationen des Films” at Goethe University Frankfurt. The contributions to the series aim to explore and expand our understanding of configurations of film in both a contemporary and historical perspective, combining film and media theory with media history to address key problems in the development of new analytical frameworks for the moving image on the move.



# **Distributed Productivities: Digital Transcreation and the New World Order of Cultural Production**

Vinzenz Hediger, Matthias Krings, Bertram Lang, and  
Cornelia Storz

In a 2019 interview with Trevor Noah, the South African-born host of *The Daily Show* (1996–) on the Comedy Central cable network in the US, Emmy Award-winning Nigerian singer/songwriter Burna Boy compared his music to pizza: Afrobeats are the dough, and the other genres Burna Boy fuses into his songs are the toppings (The Daily Show 2019). In particular, these genres include reggae, rock, and soul, that is, musical forms derived from African sources but developed elsewhere along the trails of the transatlantic slave trade: the Caribbean, North America, and Europe. Burna Boy's choice of pizza as the metaphor is significant in several ways. Pizza is a dish with a very specific regional origin, the city and province of Naples, Italy. Not least because of its simplicity, variability, and adaptability, pizza has become a global favorite (even though some variations, such as pineapple pizza, a British favorite, are frowned upon by Italians). A relatively cheap food that cuts across social strata in most parts of the world, pizza is also a lifestyle item in the city of Lagos, where Burna Boy, the son of a professor of French at the University of Port Harcourt and the grandson of Fela Kuti's former manager, first rose to prominence. At least from a Lagosian point of view, pizza stands simultaneously and somewhat paradoxically for popular, democratic appeal and cultural distinction.

## **A New World Order of Cultural Production**

Burna Boy's pizzaiolo poetics of contemporary Afrobeats tells us not just something about his music but points to new modes and a revised global map of global popular culture. Megacities like

- 10 Lagos, Istanbul, Mumbai, and Seoul have emerged as major sites of cultural production and primary markets alongside the cultural capitals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries like Paris, London, Berlin, New York, and Los Angeles. This change is largely driven by digital technologies, which facilitate the circulation and appropriation of cultural products, create new audiences and cultural frameworks, and facilitate new, often distributed and collective modes of production.

This transformation, however, is not necessarily a harmonious growth process in which the established power differentials suddenly melt into the air. Burna Boy's appearance on *The Daily Show*, a platform that reaches a global hip youth audience and is usually reserved for artists under contract with major music labels or film studios, points to the complex power dynamics between established cultural industries and emergent organizational forms and patterns of production and distribution below and beyond the corporate networks dominated by European and North American companies. Burna Boy's music is anchored in the West African scene and particularly in the Lagos music world. He owes his initial notoriety to the rhizomatic collaborative distribution structures afforded by digital platforms and collaborations with artists from the Global North such as Ed Sheeran, but was ultimately signed by Warner Bros., a major US label. A similar point can be made for K-Pop and the artist who first put it on the map for many people outside of South Korea and Asia. "Gangnam Style," a satirical take-down of the lifestyle of the nouveau riche in Seoul's upscale Gangnam neighborhood by rapper Psy from 2012, became the first video to cross the threshold of one billion views on YouTube and reached 4.6 billion views by 2022 (Young and Kim 2022). The video popularized a new music genre and a new set of highly codified dance moves and was instrumental in facilitating the global surge of K-Pop.

Comparable logics play out in the production of films and television programs. Over the last three decades, Nigerian video film industries have reached global audiences through low-threshold

distribution formats such as video cassettes, VCD, and satellite television, and now increasingly through streaming platforms like Iroko TV. At the same time, the entrance of Netflix into what we might call the global cultural in-between space between the dominant Hollywood studios and various national and local film industries changes the dynamics of film production on the ground and leads to a complex stratification of the production and distribution landscape (Añulika Agina and Sonia Campanini, in this volume). These dynamics play out not just in West Africa, but in all emergent production centers in the world, including East Asia. In South Korea and Taiwan, which were considered developing countries in the 1960s and have emerged as globally competitive high-tech export economies in the twenty-first century, industrial policies shifting from consumer goods to information technology have included a focus on cultural production, always with an eye to countering the seemingly overwhelming presences of the US entertainment industries. Apart from pop music and TV drama, the emergence of Korean cinema as a global factor has been particularly significant. In 2019, Bong Joon-ho's social satire *Parasite* was the first non-English language film to win Oscars in three of the main categories (best film, directing, screenplay), as well as in three other categories (editing, set design, and best foreign language film). *Parasite* was also the first film since Delbert Mann's social drama *Marty* from 1955 to win both the Golden Palm in Cannes, the world's most prestigious festival award, and the Oscar for Best Picture. *Parasite*'s international success—both in terms of box office revenue and in terms of the established, Western standards of global prestige in the film industry—was the culmination of a surge of Korean cinema since the late 1990s. Notably, several films scored major hits at the domestic box office while also winning awards at international film festivals. Bong Joon-ho had made his name with sophisticated genre films that resonated with Korean and Western festival audiences, before making one with French producers, *Snowpiercer* from 2013, and another one with Netflix, *Okja* from 2017. Special effects blockbuster action films, long

12 deemed the exclusive domain of Hollywood studios and the most lucrative genre of popular cinema, are now a mainstay of Korean cinema. Taking advantage of lower labor costs and the country's proficiency in digital technology, South Korean films like *Ode to My Father* (2014), *The Admiral* (2015), or *Ashfall* (2019) are increasingly challenging US studios on their own turf (Kim 2019). Korean television dramas, streaming series like *Squid Game*, and Korean films offer a competitive alternative to Hollywood. Going up against the increasingly exhausted Western canons of superhero, fantasy, and science fiction franchises, Korean film producers create new forms, formats, and a Korea-specific canon that challenges the Western dominance of cultural industries, subverting its associated norms, such as the masculinity trope in many Western genres.

This has far-reaching consequences as “Global Nigeria” or “Global Korea” transcend their geographic boundaries while simultaneously re-inscribing cultural specificity into cultural production, blending traditions and ethnic belongings in complex ways into forms with transcultural appeal.

## **Distributed Productivities: Collective Modes of Entrepreneurship and the Despatialization of Culture**

To map the “new world order of cultural production” (Bhutto 2019) we propose an approach that combines a creative and cultural industries perspective (Potts and Cunningham 2008) with a focus on digital infrastructures and the study of formats and form.<sup>1</sup> Such an approach allows us to look at the ways in which new modes of digital production and distribution challenge established notions of cultural space, aesthetic value, and, with

1 In regard of digital infrastructures see Larkin (2008 and 2018) and Star (1999), concerning formats see Jancovic, Volmar, and Schneider (2020) and Turquety (2019), and for form see Miozzo, Storz, and Casper (2024).

it, established frameworks for analyzing cultural production and innovation.

The “container model” of cultural space, which was long dominant in area studies, could be described as a wholesale, if largely unacknowledged, projection of nineteenth-century European notions of national cultures onto places and ethnicities outside of Europe. According to this model, “culture” is a set of expressive behaviors shared by spatially contiguous and ethnically and linguistically homogeneous populations. For most of its history these conditions were hard to satisfy even in Europe, and often only at the price of organized violence. In the first half of the twentieth century writers as diverse as Antonio Gramsci and Simone Weil challenged the homogenizing notions of “national culture” and cultural authenticity from the late nineteenth century (Jessop 2005; Weil 1952). In the early 1990s, Arjun Appadurai proposed the concept of “global cultural flows” to account for the changing configurations of socioeconomic and cultural spaces of the second globalization (Appadurai 1990). More recently, cultural production has been identified in area studies proper as a privileged pathway to a more nuanced understanding of the transformation of social and political spaces in a world that is moving beyond the third wave of hyper-globalization. While this argument originally refers to the impact of television, cinema, and recorded music, it becomes even more relevant with the ascendancy of digital media and low-threshold globalized communication and distribution networks, particularly personalized digital devices such as the iPhone, first introduced in 2007 (McDonald, Donoghue, and Havens 2021). In particular, distributed modes of production and “pizzaiolo poetics,” which combine templates and ingredients from all over the world, call into question established notions of cultural specificity and authenticity as markers of distinctiveness.

George Steiner has defined artistic creation in terms that closely align (if unintentionally) with Schumpeter’s classic definition of the role of the entrepreneur. Both artistic creation and entrepreneurship are best understood as processes of the recombination

- 14 of pre-existing elements. However, an invention only becomes an innovation if it is broadly implemented and accepted. This usually requires significant investment in capital and labor, whether in the arts (think of the role of publishing houses or galleries) or industry (securing patents, mass production, marketing). In a pre-platform world without omnipresent personalized devices, individual entrepreneurs (like African or Korean artists) relied on corporate multipliers, major labels, and institutions of national cultural policy as dominant agents. Struggles for visibility and exposure were struggles for institutional access, and access was controlled by gatekeepers—producers, publishers, festival curators, and to a lesser extent critics (even though the ultimate arbiter is always the audience, but they must be exposed to and given access to works or products to exert the power of their judgment and their aggregated preferences).

One of the remarkable characteristics of Korea's cultural policy since the consolidation of the transition to democracy in the late 1990s has been that it has focused less on gatekeeping than on capacity building, and less on preferred content than on infrastructure and opportunity. Among other things, South Korea established the most important film festival outside of Europe, the Busan International Film Festival, located in a signature building designed by the Viennese star architects Coop Himmelblau (Ahn 2016). But the more important investments were those in digital infrastructure to facilitate the distribution and production of digital media formats (Casper, Miozzo, and Storz 2023). This allowed Korean artists to produce capacity-demanding products sold on platforms, and due to the early dissemination of broadband, early network externalities on the consumption side emerged.

Digital technologies plug artistic creation directly into networks of circulation that easily reach beyond the artist's places of origin. They facilitate more direct feedback loops between audiences and creators and increasingly cast audiences in the roles of creators, something Tom Simmert (this volume) has

explored in depth. As such, digital technologies drastically increase the opportunities for re-combination, invention, and innovation. Importantly, however, faster feedback loops and novelty spirals, in which previous innovations become the source material for new forms of expression, do not necessarily lead to a higher degree of radical novelty than in the pre-digital age. Korean webtoons are a good example. Digital technologies have increased the opportunities for re-combination and facilitated the adjustment of visual storytelling to audience reactions, but the genre itself is not new, and the changes produced in the network feedback loops are gradual rather than disruptive or revolutionary. The spiral of novel combinations may thus enhance productivity, but not necessarily innovation. Digital platforms enhance access to resources and actors and facilitate new forms of interactions, but it is far from clear what this means for the innovation of creative and cultural products.

## **Digital Transcreation: Collective and Transnational Forms of Cultural Entrepreneurship**

In particular, the new configurations of infrastructures, formats, and institutional frameworks allow for new forms of collective and transnational forms of cultural entrepreneurship. These forms imply less predefinition in the locus of entrepreneurial agency and involve a broader, more diverse, and often continuously evolving set of actors. Such collective groups of entrepreneurs are not only transnational in composition and outlook, they also mark a shift from a model dominated by predefined, focal, national agents to dynamic and multipolar collections and often ephemeral alignments of agents with varied goals, motives, and capabilities. Importantly, such collectives are often dynamic in the sense that actors opt in and out based on their own individual goals and motivations.

16 The emergence of new creative collectives also offers new perspectives on the current debate about cultural appropriation. Contemporary critiques of cultural appropriation sometimes seem to presuppose a concept of “culture” as a spatially well-defined set of practices very much in the spirit of the original container model of culture, that of nineteenth-century European romanticism. As early as the 1990s, however, it has been pointed out that cultural appropriation is best understood a multi-directional process that can play out across a variety of power structures.<sup>2</sup> A critique of power differentials in the appropriation of cultural markers and artifacts is indispensable, but it is also evident that appropriation is an integral part of cultural innovation (Krings 2015; Siems 2019). As writer Arundhati Roy recently argued with a focus on her own craft, “there can be no fiction without appropriation.” The appropriation of literary styles and motifs can go hand in hand with political or moral disapproval and still work as a form of appreciation: “I have tried to learn my craft not only from politically irreproachable writers like Toni Morrison and James Baldwin, but also from imperialists like Kipling, and from bigots, racists, troublemakers and rascals who write beautifully” (Roy 2023). As Roy reminds us, cultural appropriation is typically described as a form of predation by its critics. But as Bakar Abdul-Rashid Jeduah (in this volume) points out, the critique of cultural appropriation also often assumes a difference between static and dynamic cultures, in which the dynamic cultures are the predators and the static cultures the victims. This dichotomy can be read as a reiteration of a temporal disjuncture between civilizations that have a history and make history, and peoples who lack history—a disjuncture which, as Johannes Fabian (1983) has shown, informs much of the anthropological research of the colonial period and finds another expression in the many statements to the effect that “Africa has no history,” which run from English poet Alfred Lord Tennyson in the nineteenth century to French president Nicolas Sarkozy’s

2 See for instance Ziff and Rao (1997).

notorious Dakar speech of 2007. Rather than arguing for a different understanding of appropriation, we propose thinking of traveling cultural forms in terms of distributed productivities. A key element of the “new world order of cultural production” is that distributed productivity also means distributed historical agency, and that there is no hierarchy between cultures in terms of stasis or dynamism, or their ability to make art history. Rather, there are specific power differentials that are structured and reinforced by technology, money, or status, and which need to be studied and analyzed on a case-by-case basis.

This also implies that in the new world order of cultural entrepreneurship cultural specificity may best be understood with a term borrowed from translation studies and suggested by Artemis Saleh (in this volume), “digital transcreation.” In translation studies “transcreation” designates creative forms of translation meant to facilitate the transport of meaning between two different cultural contexts (de Campos 1985; Camps 2022; Katan 2021). This implies that a text or any other kind of cultural product—once it has undergone transcreative processes—may turn out to be something quite different from what it used to be (Matthias Krings and Solomon Waliula, in this volume). While the more common term “adaptation” captures similar notions, “transcreation” emphasizes both transportation and creativity and therefore better grasps the multi-directional dynamics of the cultural phenomena at issue in this volume. These phenomena are notably tied to processes of digitization, in particular, changes brought about by social media and platform capitalism: for one, the “pizzaiolo” poetics of re-combining cultural materials of heterogeneous origins with such great ease and on a breathtaking scale; second, new forms of collective creativity afforded by digital infrastructures, which we refer to as “distributed productivities.” Our coinage of this term seeks to account for the distribution of creation processes across multiple actors (humans and non-humans alike, i.e. entrepreneurs such as producers, consumers, prosumers, technical scripts, and

18 algorithms). It also captures the fact that due to the potentially open-ended procreative nature of remix, adaptation, and appropriation practices constitutive for digital spaces, cultural products are almost always “unfinished business,” and should therefore be conceptualized as “distributed products.” Such products may or may not be claimed by individual authors, and more often than not result from distributed authorship, thereby incidentally transcending the distinction between copyrighted products and “orphans,” that is, authorless and unclaimed work, which has become important over the past few years in intellectual property law. The third profound change induced by digitization is a transformation of cultural and social spaces whose former boundaries and distinctiveness are of less cultural significance and political importance today, even though they still matter in attributing certain kinds of “origin” to individual cultural products. This also implies the transformation—or even dissolution—of hierarchies of taste whereby standards of taste are set in metropolitan centers of production and consumption like New York, Los Angeles, Berlin, Paris, or Cannes, as well as the emergence of new types of what we propose to call “global validation chains,” that is, conduits and circuits of distribution and reception beyond the established pathways of cultural appreciation that dominated the old world order of cultural production.

The last idea also points to a transformation of the concept and dynamics of cultural “soft power.” The concept refers to a nation’s ability to influence others through non-coercive means such as culture, ideology, diplomacy, and the attractiveness of its values and ideas. Joseph Nye, who proposed the soft power concept in the early 1990s, once famously said that in the arena of soft power, “the United States must win” to promote liberal democracy on US terms across the globe (Muppidi 2012, 139), thereby closely tying the attractiveness of cultural products to national power. Such a conceptually nationalist framing of culture has been further reinforced as the soft power concept has traveled to other contexts and has been eagerly adopted by

other countries and their governments, not least in Asia.<sup>3</sup> Distributed productivities and digital transcreation, however, not only erode any spatial definition of cultural specificity but render the connection between soft power and the nation state more tenuous—withstanding the ongoing efforts of states like South Korea and Taiwan to harness the soft power of culture for their economic and security policies. Instead, digital platforms controlled by multinational companies worth more than many countries' annual GDPs arise as core infrastructures for digital transcreation.

“Digital transcreation” as a concept thus aims to capture both the complex transformations of creative processes, in which distributed and collective forms of creation and the appropriation of a wide variety of source materials are the rule rather than the exception, and the transformation of cultural and social spaces as a result of these new forms of creation.

The book is organized into four sections. The first section, “Distributing Culture,” addresses some of the conceptual and methodological challenges of mapping the new world order of cultural production. In her discussion of the convergence of music, stand-up comedy, online influencers, and film in the so-called New Nollywood cinema of Nigeria, Añulika Agina shows how an analysis of contemporary digital culture requires a multi-layered approach to cultural industries. Sonia Campanini traces the impact of an emerging new film historical consciousness driven by internet platforms and memes on the production process in the Nigerian video industries. Her focus is on remakes of now-classic 1990s and 2000s Nollywood films, which she analyzes both with an eye to formal and organizational innovation. In his study of Nigerian Afrobeats and the dynamics of global platforms, Tom Simmert studies new forms of distributed productivity that go beyond the “prosumer” model developed of the 1980s and the “co-creation” concept of the

3 See for instance Kurlantzick (2008).

- 20 2005. Simmert shows how platforms allow creators from different parts of the world to jointly create new music and dance moves in both coordinated and uncoordinated ways, with significant implications for our understanding of how cultural innovation works.

The second section, "South Korea as a Hub of Transnational Cultural Entrepreneurship in East Asia," focuses on the practices and policies that facilitated South Korea's rise to become one of the leading non-Western centers for the production of music, television, and film. Egbert Amoncio uses an AI application to study how the 2006 import quota reduction in South Korea changed advertising strategies in the domestic film industry, with a particular focus on color patterns in film posters. He detects a clear shift towards color patterns resembling those of Hollywood film posters. This can be seen as the expression of a market signaling strategy of competition by assimilation, which the Korean film industry similarly employs at the production level by emulating and in many cases surpassing the special effects spectacle aesthetics of Hollywood blockbusters in the years after 2006. Tabitha Adler focuses on K-pop's nation branding strategy in the digital sphere and focuses in particular on how domestic policy expectations shape the creative process. As Adler shows, these expectations often delay and hinder processes of cultural hybridization, which she considers to be a crucial prerequisite for the genre's transnational appeal. Casandra-Angela Chistinean and Yonson Ahn tackle a transformation in the representation of career women in K-dramas. They argue that the surge of streaming platforms has created a new space of possibility for social representation, in which conservative gender politics can be challenged in narratives of the workplace. Drawing on the concept of "structured ambiguity," which Thomas Elsaesser proposed to describe Hollywood's strategy of building screen narratives in such a way as to accommodate the broadest possible spectrum of ideological positions, they argue that seemingly progressive

narratives do not necessarily reflect progress for women in the workplace but have a broad audience appeal beyond Korea.

The third section, "Nigerian Digital Innovation and New Transnational Dynamics in Africa," offers a series of case studies with significant theoretical and methodological implications. Nico Nassenstein studies the dynamics of one of the most important cultural flows in West Africa, the flow from and to Congo and the cultural hub of Kinshasa. In a detailed analysis, Nassenstein shows how the growing presence of Nigerian films and music on digital platforms drives the change of linguistic patterns in online communication in Lingala and French. Artemis Saleh focuses on the online presence and self-presentation of queer Nigerian youth on social media apps like TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Twitter. Saleh diagnoses a double shift, a digital shift from other forms of communication to online apps, and a narratorial shift towards digital storytelling as the new preferred mode of self-presentation and community interaction. Both of these increase the visibility, but also the plurality of queer experiences in Nigeria, even as the digital space mitigates the risks involved in queer self-representation in an often-adverse social environment. Usaku Robinson Wammanda explores the potential of Virtual Reality for documentary filmmaking in Nigeria. Pointing to the relatively marginal role of documentaries in the Nigerian film industry over the last three decades, he argues that VR historical reconstruction may serve as a gateway to broader audience appeal and impact. And finally, Izuu Nwankwo studies the work and impact of non-African content creators in the Nigerian social mediasphere. Nwankwo focuses on how these performers, some of whom have never even set foot on Nigerian soil, build up a following in Nigeria by engaging in portrayals of Nigeria's everyday life and popular culture, and by doing so expand our very notion of digital transcreation.

The fourth section, "Transregional Cultural Travellings," explores the dynamics of exchange between the two main areas in this book, South Korea and East Asia and Nigeria and West Africa, and

22 some of the transitory spaces in between. Tracing the growing fascination for African culture in South Korea in the wake of the 2002 football World Cup, Ute Röschenthaler provides an in-depth study of Afrobeats influence on contemporary Korean music and dance cultures. She shows that Afrobeats advanced from an exotic curiosity to lifestyle items once Nigerian artists gained visibility on US platforms (like Burna Boy appearing on *The Daily Show*). In the process, she demonstrates how Korean cultural industries are shaped by a global validation chain that was established in the post-war period and that gives currency to anything associated with the United States. Bakar Abdul-Rashid Jeduah looks at the dynamics of digital transcreation by zooming in on a K-pop video that adapts the rhythmical patterns and dance moves of Afrobeats. Jeduah studies the reception of the music video in the Afrobeats community and across the globe to offer a critique of a concept of cultural appropriation that distinguishes between static (read victimized) and dynamic (read predatory) cultures. Instead, he argues for a concept of distributed agency in the production, reception, and evaluation of transcreative cultural products. In an excerpt from a larger study on film narrators in East Africa, Matthias Krings and Solomon Waliaula analyze a version of a Korean film with voice-over narration in Kiswahili by DJ Afro, Kenya's most popular film narrator. They argue that DJ Afro's performance can best be understood as transcreation, as a form of creative adaptation that sits between the oral and the filmic, and that seeks to convey the meaning of the Korean film for Kenyan audiences by accommodating and adjusting it to their everyday social experiences.

## **Productivities Distributed: Shifting the Focus from Production to Distribution**

TikTok and Instagram users tailor their performances to the requirements and affordances of the respective apps, Nigerian

“New Nollywood” filmmakers retrofit their productions to meet the requirements of the mall multiplex cinemas that have sprung up across West Africa and of Netflix audiences across the world, and Korean musical artists like rapper Psy forfeit strong copyright claims to secure global exposure for their videos on YouTube. One of the key insights of this book, and of the research project from which it emerged,<sup>4</sup> is that the digital transformation of cultural production is primarily driven by distribution: by the infrastructures, formats, and institutions that enable the operation of digital networks, platforms, and portals with a global reach, by the organizational forms that create order by disseminating knowledge in space, to use a definition of distribution from Michel Serres’s (1977) philosophy of communication. That the medium shapes the message is, of course, the foundational truism of media theory. The fact that distribution, the least glamorous part of the industry, is the key to market control, has been true for Hollywood cinema for more than a century now. But Douglas Gomery’s insight into age-old Hollywood structures and practices also applies to digital distribution (1984, 69). In a time when global physical and digital platforms and markets increasingly shape aesthetic and organizational innovation, the moment has come to spell out the consequences of McLuhan’s and Gomery’s insights in more detail, and in a global perspective. The distribution aspect in “distributed productivities” is key to understanding the production side, and production studies need to be rethought as distribution studies. But this is work for another day.

*This volume is dedicated to the memory of Ute Röschenhaler (1960–2024). A cultural anthropologist by training, Ute Röschenhaler was pioneer in the study of the material cultures and cultural industries in West Africa. Her groundbreaking research at the intersection of cultural anthropology and law on the copyright regimes of West Africa in particular were fundamental for the research group CEDITRAA, which produced this volume. Joining the group as a principal*

4 <https://ceditraa.net>.

investigator in 2021 Ute Röschenhaler tirelessly shaped our work with her intellectual brilliance and generosity until her untimely passing. Her ideas and her inclusive approach to collaborative research will continue to serve as an inspiration and a model for our own research.

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## DISTRIBUTING CULTURE

**NEW NOLLYWOOD**

**COLLABORATION**

**CREATIVE INDUSTRIES**

**NIGERIA**

**NEOLIBERALISM**

[ 1 ]

# **New Nollywood and the Creative Industries in Nigeria**

**Añulika Agina**

**With the film industry in Nigeria leading the growth of the creative industries (CIs) in a neoliberal structure, collaborative production and innovation across a range of CIs are inevitably altering New Nollywood, with growing implications. One such implication is the need to update the characterization of New Nollywood to account for its intersections with the music and comedy industries. Previous attempts to outline the features of New Nollywood have focused on individual filmmakers, thematic analyses, and the distribution of films made from 2010. This chapter focuses on the innovative practices emerging from the collaboration among film producers working in**

30 **the New Nollywood period and their relationships with the music and comedy industries. To respond to New Nollywood's evolving innovations, the chapter explores the narrative choices, tensions, and production models that bring together filmmakers, musicians, and comedians. Using *The Wedding Party 1* (2016) & *2* (2017) as exemplars of this creative collaboration among film producers and across the CIs, the chapter emphasizes the integral (dis)connections between the film, music, and comedy industries. It argues, among other things, that the dominant roles played by Nollywood in the creative economy give rise to new forms of pastiche productions in unconventional albeit productive reconfigurations of African screen media broadly speaking.**

## **Introduction**

In 2015, four young companies that came into existence between 2010 and 2013 pulled their resources together under the ELFIKE Film Collective to produce a Nollywood film. ELFIKE is the acronym of the four companies: **E**bonylife Films, **F**ilmOne Distribution, **I**nkblot Productions, and **K**oga **E**ntertainment. The idea of the film was born in Filmhouse Cinemas, the exhibition arm of FilmOne Distribution, which is based in Lagos, Nigeria, and which had begun operations three years earlier. The intended budget for the film of NGN 100 million (450,000 euros) was unavailable to the individual companies, whose CEOs had to raise the money. A strategy meeting was convened by Moses Babatope (FilmOne co-founder) and attended by Mo Abudu (EbonyLife CEO), Chinaza

Onuzo (Inkblot Productions), and Chris Jeyibo (Koga Entertainment). There, the idea for what became *The Wedding Party 1* (*TWP*) crystalized under the auspices of the ELFIKE Film Collective. On its release in December 2016, *TWP*, which was shot in Lagos, Nigeria, was a box office hit. For the first time in the history of cinema-going in the country, audiences who prior to that time had hardly visited the few existing cinemas to see Nollywood films (the majority went to see Hollywood movies only) went to see the film multiple times during its opening weekend. Not only did *TWP* become the highest grossing film at NGN 450 million after 3 weeks, the following year, the second instalment of *TWP*, shot in Lagos, London, and Dubai, was released to become a bigger box office hit at NGN 500 million, even beating out *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017) in Nigerian cinemas.

This anecdotal account on the romantic comedy, *TWP*, opens the discussion on New Nollywood and the collaboration of four companies within the film industry and across the creative industries—music and comedy—in Nigeria, allowing for an exploration of the ongoing innovations and intersections between them. The huge success of *TWP* was attributed to certain factors. The central theme of the film is the inter-tribal marriage between two prominent but warring families, which created the excitement that usually trails elite weddings in Lagos. This, coupled with the injection of comedy, Nigeria's most-loved genre according to Moses Babatope (an industry leader in the film exhibition sector), heightened audience expectations. The star-studded production drew celebrities from the film, music, and comedy industries, thereby attracting other fans beyond those generated by the film industry alone. The role of social media in creating a buzz around the film must also be acknowledged and linked to the celebrities whose large followership was instrumental in amplifying the film's publicity. Lastly, each of the four production companies also made their unique contributions to the project by reaching new audiences hitherto uninterested in Nollywood.

32 Such uninterested audiences had become accustomed to watching snippets of poor-quality films made on tiny budgets of NGN 1 or 2 million with underdeveloped scripts, which therefore had predictable storylines. The thematic focus of such films was didactic and conservative, privileging the ills associated with questionable wealth acquisition and corruption in personal and public spaces (Adejunmobi 2015; Haynes 2014; Ryan 2023). These were the key traits of Old Nollywood films produced from 1992 to 2009 in an informally structured industry, driven by semi-educated electronics marketers who wielded power by distributing the films first on VHS tapes and later on CDs and DVDs, and also by dictating which actors were cast in lead roles. From 2010, however, and with the gradual formalization of the industry within the neoliberal arrangements that the country was participating in through the capitalized intervention of multinational companies and local corporations, filmmakers like Kunle Afolayan began to attract huge funding for his films (Haynes 2014). This meant that he could bypass the marketers and exhibit his film in the newly erected cinema theaters at the time. Bigger film budgets improved production values significantly, and audiences whose tastes had been solely for American films began to patronize Nollywood in the luxurious shopping malls where cinema theaters were built from 2004. One aspect of this chapter, as is evident in the following sections, is to highlight the features of New Nollywood with a particular reference to its collaborations and talent swaps with the creative industries of music and film.

Research on the creative industries in Africa, an emerging area of interest, focuses on the links between higher education and the creative industries (Comunian and Gilmore 2016), on productivity, and on the economies of national actors through cultural policy, entrepreneurship, and sustainability (Barrowclogh and Kozul-Wright 2008). This is echoed by international agencies like UNESCO and the International Labour Office (ILO) in their latest reports on the Cultural Industries in 2021 and 2023 respectively. Research on Nigerian creative industries has

focused on Nollywood (Lobato 2010), music (Serres 2024), or stand-up comedy (Adejunmobi 2013; Fasan 2022; Tsaaior 2022), leaving out aspects of the skit economy and what creative collaborations might yield within Nollywood and by extension across the CIs in a neoliberal age. These studies and reports rarely focus on the collaborations of the leading CIs (film, music, and comedy); yet innovations within the film industry are the result of producers increasingly casting musicians and comedians in lead roles. Reference to the comedy industry includes both stand-up comedy and skit-making, with the latter primarily driven by technological affordances including social media. The comedy industry ranks third in the entertainment sector, according to an Africa Polling Institute (API) report on the Skit Economy published in 2021. Therefore, a reflection on the creative collaborations between these industries is necessary. Creative collaboration in this chapter borrows from industrial convergence and refers to the blurring of boundaries between industries due to the intersection of elements such as value propositions, technologies, and markets (Geum, Kim, and Lee 2016). I define creative collaboration as the intersection and cooperation within and across the creative industries for greater impact. Hence, to frame the objective of this chapter within African film and creative industries research, the following question is pertinent: how has the growth and collaboration *within* Nollywood and *across* the creative industries, namely music and comedy, shaped the production and aesthetics of New Nollywood films?

This chapter therefore has three objectives. First, to re-characterize New Nollywood and outline some of its features vis-à-vis Old Nollywood, while situating *TWP* in the New Nollywood period. Second, I aim to describe the CIs of interest—music and comedy—in the chapter to signal my concerns regarding their growth and the kinds of creative collaboration they engage in. Third, I use *TWP* to illustrate the forms of pastiche productions observable within this collaborative filmmaking practice, which is converging with the CIs. This is one major implication of the

- 34 collaborations taking place. The chapter will enrich our understanding of Nigerian film in the age of growing interest in and critical dialogues on the explosion of the creative industries in Africa and the broader discourse within media and cultural industries scholarship.

## **New Nollywood in a Neoliberal Age**

The release of *The Wedding Party* in 2016 fell within a period of film history (from 2009 to the present time) in Nigeria known as New Nollywood. According to the writing of Jonathan Haynes (2014), who describes the neoliberal conditions that gave birth to New Nollywood, Nigerian filmmaker Kunle Afolayan ushered in the period with his film *The Figurine* (2009), with its budget of NGN 50 million and a box office success enviable to many. According to a 2021 UNESCO report, New Nollywood is characterized by the “emergence of higher-budget productions, (between \$150,000 and \$750,000 on average) ... released in the cinemas. If successful, a Nigerian film can expect to recoup its entire budget through ticket sales, with subsequent ancillary sales (television, airlines, and VOD) bringing in pure profit” (UNESCO 2021, 44). The use of the term New Nollywood has been sustained even when newer features such as digital distribution on global streamers like Netflix are used to describe the film industry today.

Nollywood, the name used to describe the Nigerian film industry (even though there are multiple regional film industries in the northern, southeastern, and southern geopolitical areas of the country) emerged in 1992 from what Jonathan Haynes (2014, 53–54) has referred to as a political, economic, and social crisis, which, among other things, signaled an end to celluloid film production (although celluloid filmmaking continued sparingly until 2016 with Izu Ojukwu’s film, ‘76) and the closure of the cinema houses in the late ‘90s. New Nollywood itself emerged from another kind of crisis, namely the overproduction of films that the industry witnessed from 2007, which led to or further deepened

the infrastructure of piracy. This meant, according to Haynes (ibid.), that for every film released, four or five different pirated copies existed on the streets. Attempts to formalize what many called an informal economy such as Nollywood failed due to a stranglehold on production budgets and distribution by groups of electronics marketers who controlled the informal distribution networks. Government intervention led by the National Video and Film Census Board (NFVCB) in 2007 to introduce a new and formalized distribution framework to attract new investors and structure the industry failed woefully. The distribution problem led filmmakers to turn away from the default model of CDs/DVDs to the cinemas, but there were only two main ones in Lagos: the Silverbird Galleria and the Genesis Deluxe Cinemas, both in upscale Victoria Island. It became obvious to filmmakers that alternative distribution avenues were needed, but for that to happen (and while they explored distribution on satellite television) the production values of the films had to be improved.

Audiovisual production in the neoliberal age paralleled the unequal and unstable insertions into the structure of global capitalism that developing African cities such as Lagos were experiencing. As Haynes (2016) has noted, the growth of Nollywood from 2007 to 2015 coincided with rapid developments in contemporary global media environments but produced an unstable and uncertain direction for the film industry. Its pace of growth did not necessarily match international standards due to the inequalities that exist in infrastructure and capital, but the film industry thrived and responded to the transnational corporations' distribution interests. This signaled major shifts within this African film industry, with Moradewun Adejunmobi (2015) highlighting certain indicators for reckoning with New Nollywood in what she termed the neoliberal rationalities for making sense of the period and its films, for identifying ideology and narrative as bearing the imprint of the conditions of their productions. To specify these shifts, Adejunmobi discusses how neoliberal policy, that is, the "liberalization of markets,

36 deregulation of currency, privatization of public services, and reduction in state expenditure" (33), even on basics and essentials, might influence the aesthetics of Nollywood. This economic climate intensified the pursuit and attainment of capitalism as well as the attendant innovations in audiovisual production that it yielded, including early but undocumented collaborations within and across the CIs. Contrasting this view with Haynes's, New Nollywood filmmakers differed from "Old Nollywood directors in their preference for unique stories departing from the genre-of-the-moment approach, and in their avoidance of the many narrative devices that had come to typify Old Nollywood's style of storytelling, such as killing off or at least punishing a character with moral flaws in order to obtain a happy ending" (Adejunmobi 2015, 35). In *The Figurine* (2009), which heralded the turn from Old to New Nollywood as stated above, there is no happy ending, no resolution, no punishment of the villain, and the film favors an ambiguous, open-ended ending.

There are other major points of departure between Old and New Nollywood. While Old Nollywood films were predominantly shot within a couple of days with improvised scripts or none at all, were distributed on VHS cassettes and later CDs/DVDs, and thematized wealth acquisition, witchcraft, and the place of Christianity in personal and communal identities, New Nollywood decidedly stayed away from these themes, as Adejunmobi (2015) has noted. Old Nollywood films were aired on satellite and terrestrial TV with the filmmakers paid between \$1,000 and \$5,000 per film. New Nollywood films, however, were made on slower production schedules of up to three months, had the possibility of shooting films on celluloid, used scripts that went through many drafts over a year or more, and could hire international casts or crews. Furthermore, revenues from foreign distribution were built into financial calculations, and filmmakers could now afford international training. They could therefore insert themselves into elite transnational circuits and international film festivals, notably Toronto and Cannes.

In Adejunmobi's work, therefore, elements of the neoliberal are invoked not only to unpack the films of the period but also to rationalize the choices made by the protagonists as neoliberal subjects. Hence, for New Nollywood filmmakers like Afolayan and Kemi Adetiba, the director of *The Wedding Party 1*, religion and the occult are sidelined in favor of human agency and drawing one's own destiny, as we see in *The Figurine* and in *The Wedding Party*. Thus, instead of attributing the embarrassing drama during a couple's wedding party to religious or occult forces as old Nollywood directors would do, the protagonists leave their guests waiting and resort to dialogue, negotiation, and compromise to settle the squabbles before returning to conclude their wedding party. The films are "invested in economies of self-governance and unfettered subjectivity as these are played out in neoliberal Africa" (Adejunmobi 2015, 36, referring to Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 279). But narrative choices such as these are not the only determinants of New Nollywood.

A widely acclaimed feature of New Nollywood films is the effort to represent upper class citizens as characters to be envied or aspired to. The metaphor for this representation is the Lekki-Ikoyi Link Bridge, constructed by Julius Berger and completed in 2013 as an alternative to existing bridges in Island Lagos metropolis in order to decongest other bridges and redistribute their daily load. Lekki and Ikoyi, the two most affluent neighborhoods in Lagos, are mostly residential areas (although some companies have offices there) for upper-class citizens, and to live or work beside those areas is also a symbol of affluence or of being on the path towards it. As Adejunmobi (2015) states, New Nollywood presents middle-class characters who take a certain level of affluence for granted. These characters, such as those we see in *The Wedding Party 1 & 2*, routinely drive across the Lekki-Ikoyi bridge, own SUVs, and are self-employed professionals or CEOs of multinationals, who "enjoy a quality of life in almost all respects identical to what one might associate with the middle class in the global North" (37). Unlike the other bridges constructed

38 before it, the Lekki-Ikoyi Link Bridge connects two affluent neighborhoods (others connect the Mainland to the Island, the poor and rich areas), thus signaling to viewers the social status of its users regardless of the direction of travel. It also signals the setting of the film, which is an invitation to viewers to explore the dimensions and scale of affluent living attained by only a few in Nigeria's cosmopolitan city.

In the Nigerian imagination, the bridge represents both an aspirational mode of being and an actual one. It is aspirational because just as many Nigerians desire to live in Lagos Island where the bridge is located but cannot because it is prohibitively expensive, likewise, they desire to drive or walk across the bridge without necessarily living on either side of it. As soon as the bridge was opened to the public in 2013, it became a fad for Lekki and neighboring residents to perform their fitness routines by walking or running along the curb of its 1.4 kilometers in the mornings or evenings. Some would pause during such regimes for selfies that revealed the bridge's pylon to share on social media. Among the consumers of Nollywood, therefore, the sight of the bridge introduced them to a new character and a life of affluence that could presumably be theirs if they learned any of the traits displayed by the human characters in the film. The bridge also represents an actual mode of being, as some Nollywood stars have purchased property in Lekki due to their acting careers. Hence, driving through the bridge takes them to their fictional or actual homes and offices. In an amusing interview posted on an online entertainment platform called Zikoko, the bridge is personified and takes on a performative role as Nerd Efiko (pen name) interviews it:

The rise of New Nollywood has brought with it a host of exciting new stars like Adesua Etomi, Enyinna Nwigwe and many more. However, one star who never seems to get the due they deserve is the Lekki-Ikoyi bridge.

Very few Nollywood performers are as relentless and as hard-working as the bridge, who, without any formal training, has appeared in just about every hit Nollywood movie since coming onto the scene in 2013.

Zikoko: When did you know you wanted to be an actor?

Lekki-Ikoyi Bridge: I actually never planned to become an actor. I thought I was only ever going to be a link between Lekki and Ikoyi, but a few Nollywood directors noticed my potential, especially when shot at night, and my life has never remained the same.

[Zikoko:] Amazing. When did you get your big break?

[Lekki-Ikoyi Bridge:] I think my big break came in 2015, when I starred in Biyi Bandele's *Fifty*. Getting to act alongside talented actresses ... was a dream come true. I think I had about the same amount of screen time as all four leads. (NerdEfiko 2020)

Another major shift of New Nollywood within the neoliberal economy, which Haynes and Adejunmobi both write about, is what I, borrowing from Graham and Gandini (2017), refer to as creative collaboration within the cultural industries. According to them, "we cannot ignore the integral role that collaboration plays in contemporary forms of cultural production," and this collaborative work is being transformed by the intermediation processes afforded by social media platforms (8). Nollywood participates in such creative collaborations *within* the film industry as demonstrated by the ELFIKE Film Collective and several other undocumented alliances, but also *across* the creative industries in a kind of convergence. The intersection of New Nollywood with the music and comedy industries is its latest and enduring characteristic.

New Nollywood producers like ELFIKE cast famous musicians, stand-up comedians, and skit-makers in popular films to boost their financial viability. This is a marketing and promotional

40 strategy adopted by filmmakers to reach unyielding or critical audiences who previously avoided Nollywood films but follow the music and comedy industries avidly. Within this collaboration across the industries, filmmakers hope to harness what Graham and Gandini call the “primary driver of economic growth” (4). Creative workers routinely collaborate within their industries; therefore the novelty of the trend formalized by ELFIKE, and other producers is the artists’ mindful and temporary crossing over to Nollywood and vice versa while retaining their original position and stardom. Not all the musicians or comedians who feature in films go on to become filmmakers and vice versa, but the practice is further driving the growth of the respective industries and simultaneously raising concerns of what future collaborative work might look like. The taken-for-granted assumption of acting expertise where it does not exist might point to the new ways in which musicians or comedians negotiate multiple roles simultaneously, such as autonomous artist (as a musician or comedian) and employer (with their own record label), dependent actor on a film set, alongside other roles, all of which must be borne with humor for whatever contradictions they might contain. This paradoxical mode of subjectivity continues to invite an assessment of the creative worker’s abilities and their impact on the intersection of the CIs as another indicator of New Nollywood. Trained actors argue that their profession is undermined when musicians and skit-makers are cast in film roles based on their social media followership rather than on their acting competence. This is further discussed below.

## **The Creative Industries in Nigeria: A Snapshot**

For a long time, research on CIs focused on the West, and when attention was given to CIs in developing countries, from 2008, it was approached from a development agenda, proffering suggestions on how, according to Barrowclough and Kozul-Wright

(2008, 3), to “take greater advantage of the opportunities that are emerging in global creative industries markets.” This idea was echoed by Ramon Lobato (2010) in his article, “Creative Industries and Informal Economies: Lessons from Nollywood,” when he pointed out that the “recurring theme across the body of research on CIs in developing nations and regions, has been the need to effectively leverage their cultural assets and integrate them into global economic networks, thus providing new sources of revenue, employment and growth” (338). But, as has been demonstrated by scholars over two decades, Nigerian creative industries, particularly film and music, have by-passed the global networks and markets to create home-grown thriving businesses, albeit informal and unstructured ones, thereby achieving “many of the objectives of official CIs planning policies elsewhere,” (ibid.) including in the global North. Nollywood is a film industry of global importance and reckoning, given its size, the number of jobs it creates annually, income generated, number of films produced, and the sheer number of its heterogeneous audiences at home and abroad. For example, tickets for *TWP 2* sold out in London before the completion of its post-production (personal communication, Moses Babatope, August 2021).

By far the most comprehensive report on the film and TV sectors of the creative industries in Africa is the UNESCO (2021) document on the African Film Industry. Covering the 54 countries that make up the continent, the report discusses, among other things, the economic significance of the film industries by region, the factors responsible for their growth, the different filmmaking models in operation, and the policy implications of these in each of the regions of the continent. The report states that CIs on the continent are creating over five million jobs but have the huge potential to achieve five times that number. As the largest regional hub, Western Africa’s 15 countries including Nigeria generate an average GDP per capita of \$3,125.5, the least of the other African regions but with the highest population size of 501 million. Recognizing an average population age of 18 years, the

42 report highlights the huge potential for growth that exists within the industries if resources are redeployed and efficiently managed. Since 2013, the Bank of Industry has provided funds of up to \$1.3 million for the creative industries at an interest of 9%, payable within a decade, and in 2020, the Africa Export-Import Bank launched a \$500 million initiative. Although the disbursements of these funds have been trailed by controversy, the initiatives reflect unprecedented institutional support for the CIs.

The report on promoting decent work in the African cultural and creative economy by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), like that of UNESCO, focuses on economic growth with all the variables that enhance it, namely job creation, income generation, and the legal frameworks—or lack thereof—that guarantee it. Covering five African countries including Nigeria, the report indicates, though arguably, that many African governments do not understand how the cultural industries are organized and therefore struggle with providing institutional support across the board. Both the UNESCO and the ILO reports, which should be read together for a comprehensive picture of the CIs, recognize the growing youth population of African countries, women's roles, including discriminatory practices against them, and the need to create sustainable development in these sectors, since they hold huge economic and transformative potential.

A 2021 KPMG report on the music industry in Nigeria revealed that the music sector's revenue grew from US \$26 million in 2014 to \$34 million in 2018. This figure is expected to have grown to \$44 million by 2023 (Obinwa and Adeniji 2021).

The statistics from these studies reveal that the music industry possesses both the capacity to support millions of teeming youths and to generate considerable revenue for the economy. However, the industry is bedeviled by a number of problems such as a lack of proper corporate governance, business structure, adequate education, and guidance of artists and other relevant players in the industry. The data below by Statista.com provides

us with a sneak peak into the performance of Nigeria’s music industry:

- Total revenue in the music segment was US\$ 4.08m in 2022.
- Total revenue is expected to show an annual growth rate (CAGR 2022–2027) of 12.27%, resulting in a projected market volume of US\$ 7.57m by 2027.
- In-app purchase (IAP) revenue in the music segment reached US\$ 1.35m in 2022.
- Paid app revenue in the music segment reached US\$ 0.69m in 2022.
- Advertising revenue in the music segment reached US\$ 2.03m in 2022.
- The number of downloads in the music segment reached 35.58m downloads in 2022.
- The average revenue per download currently amounted to US\$ 0.11.
- A global comparison reveals that most revenue was generated in the United States (US\$ 4,189m in 2022).

There has been a steady growth in the number of popular musicians featuring in Nollywood films as actors or as the performers that they are in their professional practice. Banky W, who began his career as a song writer and musician, was the lead actor in *The Wedding Party 1*. Although he played no musical role, casting him in the film contributed to its popularity and massive success. Without being an exhaustive list, some of the prominent musicians who have crossed into Nollywood as actors or for cameo musical appearances to boost the film’s profile include:

- Banky W.—TWP 1 & 2 (2016, 2017); Up North (2018)
- Falz—New Money (2018); Chief Daddy 1 & 2 (2018, 2022)
- Reminisce—King of Boys 1 (2018)
- Seun Kuti—Citation (2020)
- Oma Lay/Ilbliss—King of Boys 1 (2018)
- P Square—Lionheart (2018)
- MI—Namaste Wahala (2020)
- Phyno—Lionheart (2018)
- Teniola—Dear Affy (2020)
- Seyi Shay—Lara and the Beat (2018)

44 The stand-up comedy industry in Nigeria developed in the 1990s with Atunyota Alleluia Akpobome, popularly known as Alibaba, the grandfather of stand-up comedy. He built his career as a Master of Ceremonies (MC) in Lagos, where there was always a private or public event and too few who had the skill to keep guests entertained and mostly amused through those events, which could last between three and six hours. As James Tsaaior (2022) describes, stand-up comedy participates in the construction of ethno-cultural representations and the consolidation and legitimation of ethnic/national identity formation processes in Nigeria through the powerful sieve of running laughter and dripping humor. It produces insightful commentaries about the nation's pathologies, morbidities, and corpus of contradictions (2). Individuals engaged in this practice will narrate a collection of jokes and satirical commentaries in pidgin and the local languages, taking swipes at ordinary citizens, businessmen, and particular ethnic groups for any number of follies they are known for as well, as religious and political leaders. From acting as MCs at social events and entertaining them in the ways just described, Alibaba and his protégé, Ayodeji Richard Makun (AY), created events annually, specifically to bring people together for a laugh at highbrow hotels in Lagos for a fee. So instead of going to the movies or other outings at Easter, Christmas, and other festive seasons, people would go to what became known as AY Live. This creative enterprise, now extended to skit-making, owing to the availability of digital and social media, has now spread across the country, creating jobs and wealth for about half a million youth, and more relevant to this paper, creating stars, who are then cast in Nollywood films. These celebrities also cross over to Nollywood, taking with them their social and institutional capital.

Recent reports have emerged on the skit-making and content creation economy to reflect the youth's engagement with digital technologies and its transformative and employment capacity. According to the Africa Polling Institute's (API) report titled "An

assessment of digital content creators in Nigeria,” published in 2021, the rise in youth unemployment is the major reason for the development and growth of skit-making, with men leading the practice. The report does not reveal the revenue generated by the industry; instead, it examines public perception of its growth and the popularity of its key players such as Samuel Perry (Broda Shaggi) and Emmanuella Samuel of the Mark Angel fame. Stand-up comedians and skit-makers who have been featured in Nollywood include:

- Ali Baba—The Wedding Party 1 & 2 (2016, 2017)
- AY—30 Days in Atlanta (2014); The Wedding Party 1 & 2 (2016, 2017)
- Julius Agwu—Wives on Strike 1 & 2 (2016; 2018)
- Basket Mouth—Brotherhood (2022)
- Bovi—My Village People (2021); Perfect Arrangement (2022)
- Okey Bakassi—Onye Ozi (2013); Madam President (2017); Bank Alert (2023)
- Frank Donga—The Wedding Party 1 & 2 (2016, 2017)
- Mr Macaroni—Ponzi (2021); Day of Destiny (2021)
- Hafiz Oyetoro (Saka)—The Wedding Party 1 & 2 (2016, 2017)

These entertainment heavyweights—AY, the comedian coming off the back of *30 Days in Atlanta's* (2014) success; Ali Baba, who is known as the grandfather of comedy in Nigeria; Saka, the renowned skit maker known for the commercial success of his MTN ad, *I don port*; and Frank Donga, another famous skit maker—were cast in *TWP* because they enjoy a stardom made possible by social media platforms, specifically by Instagram. It is almost impossible to talk about creative collaboration in 2023 outside the mechanisms of a networked digital environment that both tracks and promotes visibility, celebrity status, fandom and stardom. ELFIKE relied on social media and followership to gauge what the outcome of its collaborative idea might be. As stated above, this has become a trend in casting in New Nollywood, sometimes drawing severe criticism from professional actors on what they consider to be undermining the art of filmmaking.

46 It is important to emphasize that the production of *TWP* also ties in with the growth of the creatives industries, that is, the global recognition of the music industry, and the local and regional reckoning of the comedy industries as well. The collaboration heightened the popularity of the film. Weddings in Nigeria and especially in Lagos are status-defining and status-conferring events. *TWP* featured two of the dominant ethnic groups in Nigeria in a country that is always divided along ethnic lines. The film was a socialization of ethnicity that allowed both key actors and viewers to investigate the complicated forms of subjectivity that developed as a spin-off of allowing oneself to be entangled in a combative familial relationship, even on one's wedding day. It was released in December during the Christmas holidays, which meant that people had plenty of time to see it as many times as possible. But the most important factor that led to its success is the aggregation of film, music, and comedy icons.

## **Actors, Musicians, and Comedians in *The Wedding Party 1 & 2***

As Graham and Gandini (2017) argue, collaborative production, in this case with comedians, is a multi-faceted beast, and the new competition is an asset for many industries in information-based economies. It is the primary driver of economic growth in a neoliberal economy, which coincides with David Harvey's (2005) assertion about (creative) cultural industries as the ascendant areas of production in neoliberal economies, in which the state and its agents are retrenched. *The Wedding Party* represents the first major and formal example of this collaborative practice within Nollywood. It was also arguably the first major collaboration across the CIs, pooling the director (Adetiba), lead (Banky W.), and other supporting actors from the music industry together with the most prominent stand-up comedian, Alibaba (1 million followers on Instagram) and the second biggest stand-up comedian, AY (12.9 million followers on Instagram), as well as the

skit makers, Frank Donga (671,000 Instagram followers) and Saka (Afeez Ayetoro). Cast alongside these musicians and comedians were Richard Mofe Damijo (RMD), a movie star for over two decades, famous actresses like Sola Sobowale, Ireti Doyle, and others.

Set in Lagos (as well as London and Dubai for the second part), this romantic comedy follows two families from different ethnic groups as they plan the wedding of their children. A series of mishaps from the groom's exes, his father's randy behavior, and the bride's father's pretentious lifestyle stand in the way of a successful nuptial event. The parents of the soon-to-be-wed disagree on every detail from their outfits to the choice of caterers and, most ridiculous of all, which family will process into the wedding reception hall first. Each moment of decision is complicated by embarrassing back stories from both families and each one's effort to conceal it from their future in-laws. The director, popularly known for directing music videos, said: "Everyone knows how colourful, chaotic, hilarious, emotional and beautiful a NIGERIAN wedding is. The task of weaving a Rom-com story around these variables absolutely intrigued me" (Adetiba 2016).

The hilarity of the romantic comedy is intensified by the comedians and their antics. AY plays the same role as he would in his real professional life—as an MC and stand-up comedian. He initiates the wedding reception proceedings in the film in the way he would normally begin his live comedy shows. The pastor invited to pray at the same reception is beyond comical, insulting the family while pretending to pray. Other elements of comedy are recognizable in the performances of the caterers provided by each family. While the Onwuka's caterer struggles with a feigned foreign accent to direct the ushers to serve food that no guest wants to touch, Dunni's family's caterer pleases the crowd with her delectable local dishes. Running out of plates because of the popularity of her dishes, the local caterer in a moment of climatic hilarity goes over to her competitor's side to take the stack of unused plates to meet the increasing demands for her food.

48 In the Nigerian social consciousness and national imagination, weddings are not just eventful moments, big or d-days for the couple and their families, they are also occasions to show off family, social, and economic capital, beauty, lifestyle, fashion, and a host of other material and immaterial aspects of culture. It is a huge investment for the families, especially the groom's in Nigeria's patriarchal society, in which the male figure is expected to fund the entire ceremony no matter how lavish the bride's family wants it to be. And, if the latter's family is wealthy, as we are made to believe in *TWP*, the groom's family must surpass that wealth as a demonstration of their capacity to take care of the bride and the children from the marriage.

*The Wedding Party 1 & 2* provide satirical commentary on Nigerians' ethnic, class, and power structures within the social fabric of everyday lived experiences and on individual and national governance. The pretentious family must come to terms with the real objective of the ceremony they are engaged in for the good of their daughter and to spend within its means to avoid the embarrassing situation of finding itself neck deep in debt for non-essentials and in its glorification of a wealth it does not possess. To make his daughter's wedding a memorable one, the father unintentionally acts not as a parent but as a deceitful guardian and impostor, whose telephone conversations invite viewers into shocking revelations of his confused state of mind and liabilities. This is similar to Nigeria's ruling class who borrow millions of dollars to fund politicians' affluent lifestyles rather than developing the economy. In its second instalment, sub-titled Destination Dubai, the unintended consequence of a false proposal between Dozie's (Banky W.) brother and an English girl, is that the groom's family must purchase flight tickets to and hotel accommodation for family and friends in Dubai. The emphasis is on the budget and expenses rather than on joyfully accompanying the young couple who are beginning their lives together. As a reflection of the Nigerian society where people seldom attend the church ceremony, the screen time devoted

to the blessing of the marriage is negligible (also evident in the title of the film). It is the party, the less important element, that demands attention, takes center stage, and is where all the drama unfolds.

## **“Pastiche” Productions in *The Wedding Party* and Other Films**

In the words of Lobato (2010), creative industries researchers potentially have a lot to learn from Nollywood, as it “opens up a space through which we can begin to theorize many different kinds of media, not just African cinema, in a new way” (339). For this reason, the business and narrative model set by *TWP* makes it an exemplar of the intersections between the CIs in collaboration productions. Arguably, several other films, indeed, 90% of the films after *TWP*, have at least one musician, a stand-up comedian, and one skit-maker. The kind of media that brings together conspicuously key players in other sectors of the CIs then opens up the avenue for unpacking this reconfigured media. I use the term pastiche productions to refer to the new and unfolding aesthetic in New Nollywood from 2016.

As a characteristic of Postmodernism, pastiche is defined by Frederic Jameson (1992) in his essay *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* as the imitation of some unique style, but it is an empty “neutral practice,” which lacks the intention and assertions of parody, as well as the “satiric impulse” of most social criticism (17–18). The postmodern artist, he argues, is reduced to pastiche because he cannot create new artistic forms; he can only copy old ones without creating new meaning. Pastiche is now apparent in all spheres of cultural production but reaches its epitome in global American television and Hollywood culture. It extends to an assemblage of a diversity of recognizable representations, parts, styles, and genres, a technique of performance that is implicitly parodic and at times can even be subversive in unique ways. However, critics of Jameson’s view

50 exist, such as Linda Hutcheon (1989), Douglas McFarland (2009), and Margaret Toscano (2009). Linda Hutcheon, in her *Politics of Postmodernism*, offers one of the most significant arguments in opposition to Jameson, asserting that the parody of pastiche has tangible cultural currency, often involving the “politics of representation,” because its self-reflexive core examines the power structures that create “ideological legitimization” (1989, 97). McFarland’s critique is particularly interesting. He writes that the “postmodern pleasure of pastiche is the pleasure of recognizing references, so that engaging a text becomes a game of identification” (50), which then creates an elite audience of those in the know. This is the kind of engagement created by New Nollywood films for local audiences who identify the music, stand-up comedy, and skit-making stars and their artistic expressions.

My adaptation of pastiche here bears traits similar to those of Jameson’s critics of the concept in film and literary studies. Pastiche describes the insertion of a mini performance or skit by a recognizable non-Nollywood creative—such as Frank Donga in *The Wedding Party* or Broda Shaggi in *Namaste Wahala*—into a film both as an honor to the performer and to leverage his “celebrity” status for promotional purposes, thereby attracting his fans to that film. In certain scenes, *TWP* appears to be a “visual citation,” even a tribute of sorts to the comedians and skit-makers featured in it. It makes use of copying scenes or cinematographic properties such as camera angles, etc. from another director’s work in order to honor or compliment that style within the current production. It also inserts within a feature film a skit that could be found in Broda Shaggi’s, Frank Donga’s, or Saka’s YouTube channels. In other words, the sequence in which these comedians or skit-makers appear bears a resemblance to their original work as skit-makers before venturing into Nollywood. In many cases, especially for actors in *TWP* such as Banky W, Ali Baba, and AY, these figures straddle the lines between the music or comedy industry and Nollywood. While prominent directors have adopted

and endorsed this approach to their filmmaking, others have criticized it for ridiculing or even dishonoring the acting profession by casting non-professional actors, as discussed below.

The motivations behind this new aesthetic, often performed in pidgin or code-switched between pidgin and local languages are strictly commercial, seeking to attract the fans of those stars cast in the Nollywood roles. These stars also go on to become brand ambassadors of fast-moving consumer goods (FMCGs), and the marketing departments of the companies they represent follow their work and career to ensure that their product or service is sufficiently promoted. The implication of this is that approaching such companies to fund film projects becomes relatively easier, thus creating additional layers of film funding for Nollywood. It is believed that such stars promote the films on social media pages, thus adding a new dimension to film marketing, which in the Nigerian context used to be the responsibility of the film's producers.

Another interesting dimension of the intersection observed among the non-film creatives (that is, the musicians and comedians) is that they in turn go on to produce their own films, leveraging the networks built with film crews when they collaborated on productions with them or were cast for roles in other people's films (AY is now a full-time actor and producer). Again, this opens up debates about the boundaries between art and business, about whether the quest for material gains drives the creative process or if the creation of artistic value is prominent in minds such that the consequence becomes patronage and profit. In this process, skit-making fuses with professional filmmaking and an actor occupies both worlds with ease.

## **Reception and Criticisms**

The reception of New Nollywood and its intersection with the creative industry is a direct consequence of the foregoing. Filmmakers and distributors believe that a lot of improvement

52 has been achieved in the technical quality of Nigerian filmmaking as well as in narrative and ideology and the prominence given to the actors' subjectivity. Moses Babatope of Filmhouse states,

we have come a long way in terms of aligning Nollywood with international standards on production quality... what we are currently striving to achieve is taking it ... to the level where the global audience would resonate with our stories, which would be certain when our films not only make global streaming charts but successfully open in other theatrical markets, boosting the lifetime value of contents. (ShockNG 2022)

While fan cultures are expanding, owing to the celebrity status and profile that trail film and music and the increasing attention to Nollywood by various other audiences, concerns about professionalism are being raised by industry dons regarding the production model it has created.

For instance, in a previous study on local film audiences (Agina 2022), a key finding was that women were the major consumers of Nollywood because the films were melodramatic and were mostly viewed in the domestic spaces that they occupied. This position is gradually shifting to new and alternative forms of consumption. More men are now taking notice of Nollywood because their favorite musicians are featured in them (Banky W—*TWP*; Reminisce and Oma Lay—*King of Boys*). The collaborative practice that sees actors and audiences crossing over with their favorite stars is not new. Speaking of Ola Balogun (intellectual filmmaker) and Hubert Ogunde (popular Yoruba traveling theater specialist) and their audiences, Jonathan Haynes (1995, 6) writes:

Nevertheless, the conjunction of Ola Balogun with Hubert Ogunde and the others was of great symbolic as well as practical importance: the intellectual director embraced a popular and indigenous form, and thereby gained access to an enormous, enthusiastic and unalienated audience, which simply followed their beloved actors into the new medium

of cinema. The problem of establishing rapport with the audience, which took time to resolve in the francophone countries evaporated.

This can be likened to the musicians and comedians who have migrated to Nollywood while retaining their musical or comedic careers but taking their audiences with them wherever they go.

Several actors trained for the screen do not share the excitement that audiences have about casting actors from the music and comedy industries. Complaints about this convergence undermining the profession, casting skit-makers for film roles solely on the basis of the numbers of their social media followership, have been making the rounds. This particular tweet from Ireti Doyle, a major actress in *TWP*, underscores the sentiments of professionally trained actors:

perhaps if casting is based on talent and the hunger to succeed as opposed to social media numbers and who is willing to push YOUR film aggressively (at no added cost), producers wouldn't have this particular problem. (23 Mar 2022)

## Conclusion

As seen above, the implications of the growing collaborations between New Nollywood and the CIs are multi-faceted and controversial. The intersection of Nollywood with the music and comedy industries creates the synergy that the CIs need for sustainable growth, given the commercially driven innovation of casting musicians and comedians in lead and supporting roles. Such efforts enhance the professional and collective developments of the film and media industries broadly speaking.

First, for practitioners and as previously highlighted, creative collaboration as the new competition implies more funding which could improve the technical quality of the productions across the industries. As Adejunmobi (2015) claims, new Nollywood's

54 discourse on higher production values represents an attempt to manage a crisis in local film production and distribution, but also an attempt to tell diverse, more inclusive, and representative stories from Africa. Filmmakers, notably Femi Odugbemi and Mo Abudu, have repeatedly stated in industry meetings that Nollywood is not always about *juju* or stories set in the rural areas; it is also about a new wave of Africa in conversation with itself (Odugbemi) and a reflexivity that was largely absent in Old Nollywood, in which Africans are telling their own alternative stories.

Second, filmmakers are also taking the fullest advantage of the liberalization of markets to raise funds, attract investors, create unique locally consumed stories, and even attract diverse audiences abroad. In this effort, the music and comedy industries are making significant contributions. Now, more than ever, the inclusion of indigenous languages and pidgin—the language of music videos and skit-makers—in dialogues is increasing. While some may attribute this to filmmakers' resistance to the colonial legacy, which translates into a decolonizing process of identity and ownership, others insist that it is part of the program to insert themselves into global and transnational film-making activities while enhancing the appeal of the films to local audiences.

An immediate implication of this for researchers would be the kinds of meaning and readings made possible by these collaborations and innovations. What is New Nollywood doing that the old did not do and how, to paraphrase Adejunmobi, are Nigerian and other African audiences at large engaging with these new modes of production? Further investigations on Nollywood and African cinema broadly speaking needs to take cognizance of the neoliberal contexts of production, with its emphasis, among other elements, on popularizing the ideal of self-governance and the erasure of entry levels or the question of who makes a film and what genre and styles of filmmaking there are. There is also a need to reflect on the cultural significance of collaborative productions beyond the material benefits that accrue to industry

actors and what the future might look like. Significantly, the fusion of technology, creativity, stardom, and business may not always be as productive as expected. It could give rise to production models that lose their freshness and creativity because they fall short of audience expectations, or they can actually inaugurate bolder narrative and aesthetic patterns enjoyable to audiences. Indeed, it may be counterproductive when commerce is privileged and cultural production is diluted down to a formulaic and repetitive configuration of filmmaking that attracts musician X and comedian Y, with film thus becoming any permutation of these variables.

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**NOLLYWOOD**

**REMAKE**

**KENNETH NNEBUE**

**CHARLES OKPALEKE**

**CIRCULATION NETWORKS**

**CULTURAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

**NIGERIAN CINEMA**

[ 2 ]

# Remaking Video Nollywood in the Digital Era: Distributed Productivities Between Entrepreneurship and Heritage

Sonia Campanini

Recent years have seen a significant number of remakes and sequels being produced by the Nollywood film industry, a phenomenon that has been defined as a “remake boom.” This essay discusses Nollywood remaking practices as forms of distributed productivities, taking as examples the entrepreneurial strategies of two key producers: Kenneth Nnebue, the pioneer of Video Nollywood, and Charles Okpaleke, who gained the title of King of Remakes in contemporary Digital Nollywood.

## Nollywood Remaking Practices

In 2019, the film *Living in Bondage: Breaking Free* directed by Ramsey Nouah was released in cinema theaters and subsequently made available on streaming platforms as a sequel

60 to the legendary 1992 video film *Living in Bondage*. Since then, a “remake trend or boom” can be detected in the Nigerian film industry, with an increasing number of films being released as remakes or sequels of classic Nollywood films from the 1990s (Ezepue 2021). The list includes successful movies such as *Nneka the Pretty Serpent* (Tosin Igho, 2020), *Rattlesnake: The Ahanna Story* (Ramsey Nouha, 2020), *Glamour Girls* (Bunmi Ajakaiye, 2022), *Domitilla: The Sequel* (Zeb Ejiro, 2023), and the TV series *Blood Sisters* (2022). The present article focuses on contemporary Nollywood remakes with the aim of discussing how digital transformations have affected cultural entrepreneurship and the circulation of Nigerian films. In this analysis the term remake is used as an umbrella concept to encompass all kind of movies that build upon the narrative, stories, and characters of previous films in different ways, thus including the diverse typologies of remakes, sequels, reboots, prequels, requels, and spin-offs. Rather than analyzing the final products, my research focuses on *remaking practices*, which I define as the processes adopted for the production and distribution of remakes intended in the extended sense defined above. In particular I inquire into the implications of remaking practices both economically in terms of cultural entrepreneurship, and socially in terms of forming collective memories (Assmann 1999; Erll 2005; Brunow 2015). Remaking practices are mostly driven by commercial imperatives, with the objective of leveraging the success of prior successful movies and building on their imaginary capital in order to reduce production risks. At the same time, these practices have an impact on the collective imaginary and symbolic realm, given that remakes contribute to processes of validation and canonization of film cultures.

In addition to their role in Nigerian cinema, remaking practices are well established in global film industries. Remakes, sequels, and franchise productions have indeed represented a major source of revenue for Hollywood over the past few decades. While the majority of research on contemporary remaking

practices has been conducted in relation to Hollywood (Forrest and Koos 2001; Verevis 2006; Loock and Verevis 2012), the case of Nigerian remakes has yet to be investigated in academic research. However, it presents interesting and distinctive aspects in terms of cultural entrepreneurship and collective memory. First, it is important to note that almost thirty years have passed between the original films and the contemporary remakes or sequels. The originals and the remakes can be considered as belonging to two distinct phases in the recent history of Nigerian cinema: Video Nollywood and Digital Nollywood.

One of the first uses of the term *Nollywood* to indicate Nigerian cinema is to be found in the 2002 *New York Times* article “When There’s Too Much of a Not-Very-Good Thing,” where American journalist Matt Steinglass critically describes the boom of Nigerian video production. Initially, the term was used to refer to English-language Nigerian cinema produced in the southern part of the country, although later it was used as a collective term for the entire Nigerian film industry. In recent decades the Nigerian film industry has emerged as the second largest globally,<sup>1</sup> after Bollywood and preceding Hollywood, with an annual output of approximately 2,500 films. Nigerian cinema, however, is

1 The first source of international confirmation and recognition of the importance of the Nigerian film industry is the 2009 UNESCO report “Analysis of the UIS international survey on feature film statistics” with the following statement: “data on film production confirms a ranking of main film producers that has existed for a number of years, with India as the top producer (1,091 films produced in 2006). Nigeria would rank second with 872 productions in 2005, exclusively in video format. However, this type of film statistics is limited to productions that are shown in cinemas and produced in 35mm format, whereas all Nigerian productions are distributed and shown in private homes or video theatres. In the United States, 485 films were produced in 2006, which puts it in second place for that year.” Despite the fact that Nigeria produced twice as many films as the United States, video films were not considered part of the “proper” cinema business due to their lack of theatrical distribution. With the advent of digital cinema, however, this argument was rendered obsolete. While there are no current public statistics or data on the matter, it is generally asserted that Nigeria produces approximately 2,500 films per year.

62 characterized by considerable heterogeneity, with the presence of regional film cultures belonging to various ethnolinguistic groups, including Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, among others. The Hausa-speaking industry of North Nigeria, also known as Kannywood, differs significantly from the southern, predominantly English-speaking Nollywood film industry (Larkin 2008, 194). In my view, the analysis of contemporary remaking practices offers a valuable opportunity to comprehensively understand Video and Digital Nollywood from an economic, technological, and social perspective, highlighting both the differences and similarities between these two phases.

As highlighted by Jonathan Haynes (2016, 15), the advent of Video Nollywood in the early 1990s marked a paradigm shift in the industry's evolution, with films being financed independently through private investment within a commercially driven sector of small entrepreneurs. Films were shot on video cassettes and distributed straight to video in different formats (VHS and later VCD and DVD), eschewing theatrical release. During the 1990s, cinemas and cinema-going<sup>2</sup> experienced a deep crisis because of the negative effects of the Structural Adjustment Plan enforced in the Nigerian economy. The rise in petty crime had a deterrent effect on people, discouraging them from venturing out and spending time in public spaces, especially during night-time hours. Consequently, cinemas remained deserted and were forced to close down (Haynes 2016, 6).

In the late 2000s, a new wave started in the Nollywood industry, which was defined as New Nollywood, New Nigerian Cinema, or New Wave to denote a change in relation to the "old" Video Nollywood of the early 1990s.<sup>3</sup> In this analysis I use the terms

2 One of the first academic studies on Nigerian cinema audiences and cinemagoing can be found in the book *Film in Nigeria* by film scholar Hyginus Ekwuazi (2018 (1987)).

3 As pointed out by Alessandro Jedlowski, the term New Nollywood is debatable: "On the one hand, those who propose the term new Nollywood tend to emphasize a relation of continuity between the video-boom era and

Video and Digital Nollywood. Rather than following a mere technological reductionism, the distinction between Video and Digital Nollywood underscores the deep changes affecting the production, distribution, and consumption of Nigerian film cultures over the past three decades. The term Digital Nollywood refers to the industry that emerged in the late 2000s, when digital technologies were progressively adopted in both production and distribution, following the global transition to digital cinema. Digital technologies had a significant impact on Nollywood cinema in relation to the modes of production and post-production, distribution, and circulation. The shift to digital cinema has been instrumental in reducing the financial burden associated with production and post-production expenses, including the acquisition of equipment such as digital cameras, computers, hard drives, and lighting and sound systems. Whereas video films were characterized by low image and sound quality, digital technologies enabled filmmakers to achieve high technological and stylistic standards, even with small budgets. As highlighted by Jedlowski (2013), digital distribution channels, such as digital TV and online streaming platforms, have significantly increased the circulation of Nollywood films within regional, transnational, and global circuits.

the new releases and argue that the emergence of this new trend is a direct consequence of the video phenomenon. On the other hand, those who prefer the term new Nigerian cinema underline the specificity of this new trend and its distance from the defining aspects of the video phenomenon (low-budget production, straight to-video modes of distribution, popular and populist narratives, and aesthetics). Personally, I prefer to define it as a 'New Wave' in Nigerian cinema to underline the fact that although it emerged from the experience of the video phenomenon, it is a trend whose defining aspects differ from those of mainstream Nollywood releases" (Jedlowski 2013, 37).

## Circulation Networks and Distributed Productivities

In a previous article I discussed Nollywood remaking practices elaborating on the concept of *circulation networks*, which indicates “economic, technological, infrastructural as well as geopolitical networks that allow films to be produced, distributed, consumed and preserved” (Campanini 2023). In my view one of the major effects of the shift to digital cinema on a global scale is that of rendering more permeable the previously well-defined boundaries between production, distribution, consumption, and archiving of film cultures. The notion of circulation networks serves to describe the interconnections and entanglements of these sectors; it encompasses a variety of structures and processes, including production working networks, commercial distribution circuits, informal and non-commercial distribution networks, film festivals, as well as the dissemination of film culture through film heritage institutions and independent associations, press, reviews, and fan circuits.

The commercial distribution networks have undergone significant transformation over the past few decades of the Nollywood industry, going from the markets, video shops, and pirated circuits of the video era (Arewa 2012) to the rise of cinema exhibition and streaming platforms in the digital era. I argued that by establishing relations between films of the video and digital era, Nollywood remaking practices also mirror and reflect the changes in the circulation networks (Campanini 2023, 91). In this contribution I expand upon this argument by exploring remaking practices as forms of distributed productivities and digital transcreation. The notion of circulation networks resonates in my view with the concept of *distributed productivities* intended as collective creative processes, as proposed in the introduction to this volume (18). In what follows I argue that digital circulation networks not only regulate the dissemination

of digital cultural products, but they also enable the formation of distributed productivities.

The primary argument for considering remakes as forms of distributed productivities is rooted in the inherent nature of remaking practices. In the extended connotation proposed before, remakes can be regarded as a collective type of production which is distributed and disseminated not only geographically but also temporally. Remaking practices activate forms of distributed productivities in the temporal dimension since the production of the remake interacts with that of the “original” film in terms of copyright, story developments, talent scouting, marketing, and so on.

In addition to the aspects of distributed productivities, remaking practices can be interpreted as digital transcreation, as the term has been defined in the introduction to this volume (17–19). Remaking practices entail processes of adaptation and creative translation in which an old narrative material is adapted to a new narrative and aesthetic form. In order to address the question of what the concept of digital transcreation brings to remake theories, I argue that interpreting remaking practices as transcreation processes allows for a reflection on the forms of *optimal distinctiveness* activated by remaking practices. Brewer’s social theory of optimal distinctiveness postulates that social actors seek to embody a state of being “the same and different at the same time” (1991, 475). According to this theory, the need for assimilation and inclusion in a social group expressed by the desire of being similar to the others goes hand in hand with the need for differentiation from other members of that group. When applied to industrial or cultural products, the concept of *optimal distinctiveness* indicates the optimal balance between similarity to other products and the newness and distinctiveness that each product should have. This concept can be applied to remaking practices: each remake has to be similar to the original but also sufficiently novel. Achieving the appropriate balance between similarity and newness represents a significant challenge in

66 the process of producing a remake. The concept of *optimal distinctiveness* can be used to articulate this equilibrium between novel narrative/aesthetic elements and the pre-existing elements derived from the ur-text.

In the preceding passages I highlighted the extent to which remaking practices can be considered as distributed productivities and digital transcreations on a general level. The following case studies demonstrate how Nollywood remaking practices bring to the fore peculiar forms of distributed productivities, which reveal certain characteristics of Nollywood entrepreneurial culture. In this framework I discuss the work of two producers, Kenneth Nnebue and Charles Okpaleke, who put into place entrepreneurial strategies based on remaking practices and distributed productivities. The analysis takes into account the production dynamics of the film industry together with the discursive practices of the actors involved in these dynamics. In this last regard I am interested in the way film entrepreneurs and filmmakers construct a particular storytelling about their entry and affirmation in the business. Unlike the European and North American contexts, where the state intervenes in the film sector either with direct funding or tax credits, Nigerian film industries are predominantly driven by private entrepreneurs and commercial companies. Producers and filmmakers frequently finance their projects either with private capital or bank loans, relying on commercial revenues from theatrical releases, home video sales, and streaming distribution to recoup production costs and potentially generate profit.

## **The Origins of Nollywood Video Remaking Practices: Kenneth Nnebue**

In historiographies concerning Nigerian cinema, Kenneth Nnebue has been assigned the role of pioneer and initiator of the Nollywood video industry with the production of the iconic movie *Living in Bondage* in 1992 (Haynes 2016). In the early 1990s,

Kenneth Nnebue was working as a video store salesman at the Idumota Market in Lagos, the most important market for electronics in Nigeria, selling pirated video copies of films from Hollywood, India, and China. The story that has been passed down recounts how Nnebue had accumulated a stockpile of imported blank video cassettes that he was unable to sell. In order to make use of these VHS and subsequently sell them, he decided to produce some original content. In this first instance we already see a first overlapping between distribution and production practices.

With this purpose in mind, Nnebue employed Okechukwu Ogunjiofor, a former student at the NTA television college who was unemployed and experiencing difficulties in raising the necessary funds to produce his first film. The screenplay for *Living in Bondage* was written by both Nnebue and Ogunjiofor. The narrative revolves around the character of Andy Okeke who, in his pursuit of financial wealth, becomes involved in a Satanic cult, ultimately sacrificing his beloved wife, Meredith, in a money ritual. Despite his sudden fortune and a subsequent marriage, Andy's life is characterized by profound unhappiness, perpetually haunted by the ghost of his deceased wife. Blending the genres of moral fiction, soap opera, and horror film, the film is recognized by Haynes (2016, 23) as the forerunner of the genre *money ritual films*. Since Nnebue and Ogunjiofor were both new to the film industry, they looked for an experienced director and recruited Chris Obi Rapu, an employee of the national television NTI, who worked under the pseudonym Vic Mordi because of contractual restraints with the television.

Nnebue founded the company NEK Video Links and raised ₦150,000 (approximately US\$12,000) to produce a film, a modest budget in comparison to the requirements for professional filmmaking on celluloid. Giving this financial constraint, he decided to shoot the film on S-VHS video format; since VHS cameras were not commercially available in Nigeria at the time, Nnebue had to fly to Japan to buy a Super-VHS camera (ibid., 31). VCR recorders

68 were used to edit the final master copy and duplicate it easily on blank video cassettes. The low-cost production of video films was made possible by the availability of a particular format and technology. The material characteristics of the video technology contributed to define the temporal format of Nollywood home video films: in order to fill a 3-hour VHS, the usual film length ranged from 2 to 3 hours, which is considerably more than the international standard of 90 minutes. The narrative format of Nollywood films was strictly dependent on the technological format of the VHS. This early production was termed “video films” in academic writing (Haynes 2000) and “home video” in popular usage in Nigeria (Larkin 2008, 270), indicating that films were often consumed in domestic or private settings.

Counting on personal connections with the marketers, Nnebue’s distribution strategy was to have the VHS of *Living in Bondage* sold directly in video stores and markets across the country. Notably, the film was one of the first to be shot in the Igbo language, a decision influenced by Nnebue’s ethnic background. To make the film marketable beyond the Igbo-speaking audience, Nnebue added English subtitles to the video copies. *Living in Bondage* rapidly became a national success, encouraging other marketers and filmmakers to make their own video movies. Although *Living in Bondage* was not the first video film to be produced and sold directly in video stores, it is generally considered to be the first Nollywood movie because of its sudden commercial success. Haynes posits that the cassette’s full-color jacket and cellophane wrapper contributed to the film’s widespread popularity: the VHS jacket, which features five silhouettes of wealthy and fashionable characters dressed in vibrant colors, made it in fact look “comparable to an imported Hollywood film” (2016, 14).

The story of the creation of *Living in Bondage* and the entrepreneurial strategy adopted by Nnebue can be regarded as a pioneer example of distributed productivity in the video era. The creative agency of the project, initially centered around

three figures (Nnebue, Ogunjiofor, Obi Rapu), rapidly expanded to encompass other marketers and video shop owners. Emulating the example of *Living in Bondage*, Nigerian marketers, who were in the first instance actors in the field of legal or pirated distribution, progressively assumed the role of producers of video films. This tension between production and distribution agencies gave rise to a variety of forms of distributed productivities. I argue that in the Nollywood industry, to a certain extent even before the digital turn, video technology and video infrastructures had already enabled “collectivities of cultural entrepreneurs” (see Introduction, 15) who acted across the board of established structures in the media system. Marketers also enlarged networks of talents (screenwriters, actors, directors, technicians) besides the established professional creatives working in film and television industries, thus distributing creative agencies in new ways, to new actors, and across new production and distribution structures.

In addition to the aforementioned considerations on distributed productivities, *Living in Bondage* served as a catalyst for the transformation of remaking practices in Video Nollywood, as it launched the multi-part format in the Nollywood industry. In 1993, immediately following the first film, Nnebue released *Living in Bondage Part 2*, directed by Obi Rapu. The first film reportedly sold approximately 750,000 copies in Africa, however the effective revenues were significantly diminished due to the rapid production of pirated copies. To overcome this challenge, the second part was released with a better organized distribution strategy that enabled consistent revenues (Haynes 2011, 204).

The second film constitutes a sequel to the first. Part 1 ended with the protagonist, Andy, collapsing at the reception of his new marriage, while Part 2 commences with his discharge from the hospital following the incident, thus concluding the narrative arc initiated in the previous part. The narrative structure suggests that the conception of the second part may have begun during

70 the production of the first, as Nnebue decided to split the initial story into two parts in order to capitalize on the investment. This indicates that Nnebue adopted an entrepreneurial strategy based on sequels and a multi-part format even before the success of the first film was evident. Both films had a length of 2 hours and 40 minutes, which cumulatively spans a duration exceeding five hours. Video Nollywood movies frequently presented such extended length. In this respect they can be regarded as a precursor to the contemporary tendency to mix the formats and aesthetics of film and TV series in digital productions. The long format of video films is sustained by narrative compositions in which dialogues between the characters tend to prevail over action. The prominence of dialogue scenes is indicative of the pivotal role of orality in Nigeria and the influence of indigenous theater traditions. However, it is also reflective of the consumption of video movies in a private television setting at home or in small public places.

The "multi-part" remaking practice, in which a first movie is followed by second and third ones continuing the story, was adopted by numerous films produced in the Nollywood video era: *Nneka, the Pretty Serpent 1 and 2* (Zeb Ejiro, 1994/95), *Domitilla: The Story of a Prostitute 1 and 2* (Zeb Ejiro, 1996/98), *Glamour Girls* and *Glamour Girls 2: The Italian Connection* (Chika Onukwafor, 1994/96), *Rattlesnake 1 and 2* (Amaka Igwe, 1995/96), *Violated: A Tale of Secrets 1 and 2* (Amaka Igwe, 1996), *Onome 1 and 2* (Chico Ejiro, 1996/97), also *Osuofia in London 1 and 2* (Kingsley Ogoro, 2003/2004), *Diamond Ring 1 and 2* (Tade Ogidan, 1998), *Ti Oluwa Nile / The Earth is the Lord's 1-3* (Tunde Kelani 1993/94/95), *Dead End 1 and 2* (Chico Ejiro, 1996/97), *Flash and Blood: The Jessie Chukwuma Story 1 and 2* (Chico Ejiro, 1996/97), *Freedom 1 and 2* (Chico Ejiro, 1999), and *Lies of Destiny 1 and 2* (Madu Chikwendu, 1996/98).

These examples demonstrate that the adoption of remaking practices was a prevalent feature of the nascent Nollywood industry, thereby familiarizing the audience with long-format

storytelling. The multi-part film format can thus be considered to be a form of transcreation determined by a diffuse entrepreneurial strategy adopted by many actors in the Nigerian video industry. While marketers assumed the dual role of producers and distributors, filmmakers adopted the strategy of leveraging the success of a movie by producing a second part of the story in rapid succession, if not in parallel to the first movie.

Remaking practices were prevalent not only in the southern English-speaking industry of Nollywood, but also in the Hausa-speaking industry of the north, also known as Kannywood. In these contexts popular movies from Bollywood and Hollywood were used as template (Krings 2015, 88). An illustrative example of Kannywood video remakes is the 2003 movie *Masoyiyata/ Titanic (My Darling/Titanic)*, directed by Farouk Ashu-Brown, which transposes the story of James Cameron's colossal *Titanic* (1997) onto a Nigerian ship travelling from Lagos to America. The film contains several scenes, notably wide angle shots of the ship and its sinking, which were cut from the DVD version of Cameron's blockbuster and incorporated into the remake to support the troublesome love story between the two Nigerian protagonists.

Going from a remake of *Titanic* in 2003 to a sequel of *Living in bondage* in 2019, Nigerian remaking practices have evolved considerably over the past two decades. This shift can be interpreted as a repositioning of cultural hegemony, previously dominated by the United States or Bollywood, towards a re-examination and re-appropriation of Nigeria's own cultural heritage. The recent proliferation of actual remakes suggests that Nigerian cinema, a lively and commercially driven content-based industry, is leaning towards a copyright-based industry where the old movies acquire new values in cultural, economic, and memorial terms (Hediger, Cheeka, and Campanini 2021, 70). The rediscovery, re-appropriation, and re-evaluation of Nigeria's own audio-visual past is affecting the creation of new films in many ways. This process is of particular interest when considering the significant cultural influence of Nigerian film, which extends not only throughout

72 West Africa, but also across the African continent, within the diaspora, and further afield.

## **Charles Okpaleke, King of Remakes in Digital Nollywood**

If the first phase of remaking practices involves the multi-part films of the 1990s in Nollywood and remakes of Bollywood and Hollywood blockbuster in Kannywood, the contemporary wave is unfolding in the production of remakes and sequels of classic Nollywood video films. The first undertaking in this direction unsurprisingly dealt with *Living in Bondage*, the iconic film recognized as the initiator and progenitor of the Video Nollywood boom. Charles Okpaleke, a prominent figure in the realm of Nollywood's film production and entrepreneurship, has been instrumental in shaping this contemporary trend. Okpaleke has earned the appellation "King of Remakes" (Akinkuotu 2022) through his prolific output of Old Nollywood remakes, which served as a catalyst for his emergence within the film industry. In a remarkably brief span of less than eight years, he established Play Network Studios, one of the major entrainment companies in Nigeria. Born in Anambra, a locality situated in the southeast of Nigeria, Okpaleke pursued his studies in medical sciences at the University of Nigeria and health economics at the University of Birmingham. In the mid-2010s, Okpaleke entered the entertainment business by opening two of the most popular nightclubs in Abuja: Play Lounge and 345 Nightlife, the latter being opened on weekends from 3:34 to 6:45 a.m., featuring a bar display of around 3,000 bottles, one of the largest in the world.

Okpaleke was a newcomer to Nollywood when he acquired the rights to produce a remake of *Living in Bondage* in 2015. Interviewed by Nijdeka Agbo (2020), Okpaleke articulated his motivations for entering the film industry as follows:

One day my wife and I were watching a documentary on how Nollywood was birthed through *Living In Bondage* on CNN and she said, "Why don't you do a 360, and do a sequel?" And I thought, that's a brilliant idea from a business man's angle, it is a brand name and a story that would give me the boost I wanted as a newcomer [to establish what I was bringing to the table]. I also knew that it was a brand that I didn't want to ruin. For me, one of the benefits of *Living In Bondage* is that it is a title that has a worldwide confirmation. For me, it was easy to break into the market with classics and stories that would excite them. My aim is to retell our stories but by telling that, we'd still get that international attention.

The supposedly casual incipit of a successful business, in this case an extemporaneous comment by Okpaleke's wife, is a common feature in many entrepreneurial narratives, which are constructed on the argument of chance or clever intuition. As argued by Lounsbury and Glynn (2001), "the early stages of entrepreneurial venture formation are mainly about establishing legitimacy in order to access resources that can help fuel the development of a fledgling enterprise." Okpaleke's account reveals that the producer strategically employed the practice of remaking as a tactic to break into the dynamic and competitive Nigerian film industry and overcome the challenge of being a novice.

Okpaleke's acquisition of the remake rights can be interpreted as a move to validate his position within the industry, but also as a first step in the distributed productivity process. The *Living in Bondage* brand name could serve as a catalyst for enhancing the appeal of the project for cast and crew during the initial phases of development and preproduction. The second step in the process of distributed productivity can be seen in Okpaleke's decision to entrust direction to first-time director Ramsey Nouha. Besides directing, Nouha, an actor who had gained popularity in the early 2000s for his roles in the critically acclaimed film *The Figurine* (Kunle Afolayan, 2009) and in the historical film '76 (Izu Ojukwu,

74 2016), played the villainous role of Richard Williams. Kenneth Okonkwo, the actor who portrayed Andy Okeke in the 1992 film, was also contracted to star as the old Okeke. By involving Nouha and Okonkwo, Okpaleke ensured the project had an additional brand name that could attract both the audience's interest and industry validation.

While writing the script, Okpaleke and Nouha decided to develop the story as a sequel rather than a proper remake. The film's story focuses on Andy Okeke's secret son, Nnamdi Nworie, who, echoing his father's actions, becomes involved in an occult organization known as the Brotherhood of The Six. This group requests him to perform a money-making sacrifice. In Okpaleke's words: "What we did here was to modernize it [the story], we made the spiritual, occultic thing a refined organisation. You didn't use juju for money to fall down on you. Everything was more like a corporate system" (Agbo 2020). The film *Living in Bondage: Breaking Free* was released in November 2019 and achieved significant success in the Nigerian theater circuit, earning a total of 168 million naira and becoming the 14th highest-grossing Nigerian movie.<sup>4</sup> In May 2020, the film was distributed internationally on the Netflix streaming service, garnering considerable attention and views. The film's success both in Nigeria and globally was further underscored by its 11 nominations at the Africa Magic Viewers' Choice Awards (AMVCA) in 2020, of which it won seven, including Best Overall Movie and Best Movie (West Africa).

In the wake of *Living in Bondage: Breaking Free's* remarkable success and popularity, Okpaleke secured the remake rights to several other Nollywood classics, including the aforementioned *Glamour Girls*, *Rattlesnake*, *Nneka the Pretty Serpent*, *Osuofia in*

4 According to the list of the highest-grossing Nigerian films based on the reports on the domestic theater revenues earned by CEAN (Cinema Exhibitors Association of Nigeria), which collected data from 2008 on. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_highest-grossing\\_Nigerian\\_films](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_highest-grossing_Nigerian_films) (accessed February 2023).

*London, Diamond Ring*, and *Aki na Ukwa* (Amayo Uzo Philips, 2002). The so-called Play Network “nostalgic collection” includes the remakes or sequels of these movies, which were recently released in Nigerian theaters and/or on Netflix to great acclaim. *Aki and Pawpaw* (Biodun Stephen, 2021) had a theatrical revenue of ₦136 million (ca. US\$ 295 thousand), *Rattlesnake: The Ahanna Story* (Ramsey Nouha, 2020) earned ₦70 million (ca. US\$ 170 thousand), while *Nneka the Pretty Serpent* (Tosin Igbo, 2020) garnered ₦50 million (ca. US\$ 120 thousand). *Glamour Girls* (Bunmi Ajakaiye, 2022) was released directly on Netflix in June 2022, attaining the status of the number one film in Netflix Nigeria for several weeks, while it was reported to be number four globally on Netflix (Akinkuotu 2022), with particular success in countries such as South Africa, Kenya, Venezuela, Belgium, Panama, and Nicaragua.

The list of successful remakes produced by Play Network Studio over a relatively brief period of five years suggests that these remaking practices were based on a precise production strategy directed by Okpaleke with the objective of building an entertainment business on the revival of Video Nollywood movies. Okpaleke describes his motivation as follows:

To be honest, what drives me is our heritage. I am making films for Africa. The problem with people is that they are so dependent on the international film industry accepting them and when they don't, they feel that they are not there yet. What is important is Nigerians and Africans telling our stories. (Agbo 2020)

Okpaleke further claims to be inspired by the international success of the Nigerian music industry, culminating with Afrobeats artist Burna Boy winning a Grammy Award, and expresses his conviction that that “very soon Nigerian movies will get Oscar nominations” (Akinkuotu 2022).

It is important to note, however, that some remakes have received partially negative reviews and critiques. In the case of

76 *Glamour Girls*, for instance, reviewers highlighted that the story development, script, dialogue, and acting performances were questionable, despite the exceptional quality and aesthetic of the film. As remarked by critic Alo Folakemi (2022): “The picture quality was beyond HD and the visual elements, from the outlandish locations to the million-dollar wardrobes, looked like something straight out of a Hollywood film.” In a Twitter message following the hashtag “leave our classics alone,” veteran Nollywood actor Ego Boyo made the following statement in relation to the release of *Glamour Girls*: “#leaveourclassicalone or at least do the work to make them worth watching” (Akinkuotu 2022).

In June 2020, Okpaleke published a Twitter message suggesting the possible production of a sequel for *Living in Bondage: Breaking Free* (BellaNaija 2020): the studio’s first “original” film. *The Six* will follow the story of Richard Williams, the leader of the Brotherhood of The Six. The enigmatic character of Richard Williams was present in both *Living In Bondage: Breaking Free* and *Rattle-snake: The Ahanna Story*, thus the film should be considered a spin-off of both remakes (Nwogu 2020). Okpaleke’s production strategy appears to be oriented towards developing new original narratives that either have a direct link to Nollywood classics or are related to Nigerian history and heritage. Future projects at Play Network include movies drawing on facts or events from the recent history of Nigeria, such as *Hijack 93*, the biopic *King Jaja of Opobo*, and *Shina Rambo*.

In addition to the production of remakes, the strategy employed by producer Okpaleke can be interpreted in terms of distributed productivity with regard to other formats and platforms than film. The Play Network studio recently released the game *Aki and Pawpaw Epic Run*, the first Nollywood-themed game app. This game, developed by Blue Portal Software, features Aki and Pawpaw, the famous characters of the classic *Aki na Ukwa* recently revived in the remake *Aki and Pawpaw*. The game’s narrative is

based on a cult scene from the original and the remake film, the epic run of the two rascals attempting to escape trouble.

As a final point in relation to new forms of entrepreneurship in the Nollywood industry, Okpaleke announced that his company is working on developing an application to connect film professionals: "We are about to launch an app because we cannot really find professional scriptwriters except the popular ones. ... the app known as the Film Academy App, will be a one stop shop for writers, producers, actors and others so you just sign up and then pitch" (Akinkuotu 2022). The development of this application reveals an additional facet of digital forms of distributed productivities, namely the utilization of digital platforms as a form of aggregating creative agents and agencies within the pre-production and production processes.

## **Conclusion**

In light of the proposed analysis, the work of producers Kenneth Nnebue and Charles Okpaleke sheds light on particular dynamics of cultural entrepreneurship within the Nollywood film industry. I argued that remaking practices can be interpreted in terms of distributed productivities and transcreation in both the Video and Digital Nollywood phase. The examples discussed demonstrate the differences between remaking practices and modes of distributed productivity in relation to the various circulation networks that have emerged around the video or digital format.

While remaking practices in the video era concerned the production of Nollywood's multi-part films and Kannywood's remakes of Hollywood or Bollywood films, contemporary remaking practices revive films from the early Nollywood era. As this study suggests, remaking practices contribute significantly to the cultural and economic validation of Nigerian film cultures as well as to the canonization of Nigerian film heritage in terms of collective memory. Contemporary youth, through exposure to these remakes and sequels, may develop a heightened

78 awareness of the significance of older films and subsequently seek out the original cinematic works online. In the vibrant and prolific Nollywood industry, the original films that have been revived through remakes or sequels will seamlessly integrate into the Nollywood canon and become entrenched in the collective memory of a predominantly youthful demographic.

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**DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY**

**HYBRID ETHNOGRAPHY**

**TIKTOK**

**AFROBEATS**

**AUDIO MEMES**

**PLATFORM CAPITALISM**

**CULTURE INDUSTRY**

[ 3 ]

# **Sounds from the “Center of Excellence”: Nigerian Afrobeats and the Distributed Productivities of Global Platforms**

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**This essay examines the rapid global popularization of Nigerian Afrobeats through the distributed production of audio memes on TikTok. Based on a hybrid ethnographic approach, it explores the roles of institutional and individual actors involved in this process. Through case studies, I demonstrate how Afrobeats has emerged as a fluid genre, intertwined with the global pop scene, highlighting the importance of cyclical cultural production for its success. I argue that as a Nigerian genre, Afrobeats benefits from decentralized dissemination and transcreation facilitated by digital platforms and global user engagement, while perpetuating existing dependencies**

## 82 **on infrastructure and capital from other continents.**

### **Introduction**

2017 saw the release of “Sounds from the Other Side,” the third album by Nigerian musician Wizkid. It was his debut on the major label RCA/Sony and one of the first contemporary Nigerian pop albums to be distributed widely across the globe, including digital streaming platforms. The title could be interpreted as a promise of difference, if not of otherness: a new flavor introduced to the world to enrich American-produced mainstream pop for a while. However, Claire Lobenfeld (2017) noted in her review for Pitchfork that this project wasn’t about American music executives and collaborating musicians “looking for another trend to engage with, it was about WizKid’s [*sic*] globalist, genre-hopping vision.” Six years later, Grammy nominations and sold-out shows at venues like London’s O2 Arena and Madison Square Garden have become the norm for Wizkid, Burna Boy, Tems, and their colleagues from the Lagos-based music industry (Krings and Simmert 2020). The West African metropolis, which carries the slogan “Center of Excellence,” has since gone from being a production site of “Music at the Margins” (Robinson, Buch, and Cuthbert 1991) to the center of a musical phenomenon with an annually increasing global reach, which is about to be on par with that of K-Pop.

This contribution is based on the assumption that the rapid global popularization of Afrobeats is strongly related to the logic of convergence (Jenkins 2006), that is, a progressive condensation of formerly separated media systems across increasingly larger spaces, driven by consumers themselves. Convergence is even further promoted by the platformization (Srnicke 2017) of culture industries, which turns networked data into the central resource for the companies involved and in turn provides said consumers with access to new technologies for producing and distributing this data. As will be illustrated, this does not necessarily proceed

along previously established paths, but rather brings forth a new world order of cultural production. Whereas old functional models of the culture industry regarded production, dissemination, and reception as separable sub-processes, popular culture today, as in the case of Afrobeats, instead appears in the form of distributed productivities, a cyclical mode of collaborative production, instantaneous and constant dissemination, fragmented consumption, and direct reprocessing in creative ways, thereby never in a final state, always about to be transcended again. These hyperdynamic cycles are capable of bypassing and decentralizing established routes and hegemonic networks. The Lagos-based music industry is an example of a cultural industry that has experienced massive growth due to this logic and has demonstrated its ability to continually adapt to it.

Building on the concept of audio memes (Abidin and Kaye 2021; Shifman 2014), I aim to provide insight into the roles of digital platforms and their users in this process and the actions through which they participate. With a view to the concept of the content creator, I look at the increasingly blurring boundary between industry professionals and fans and raise the question of what feedback is generated in their joint production cycle.

## **Exploring Digital Ethnographic Fieldwork on TikTok**

This contribution is based on a hybrid approach. While a lot of my knowledge about Afrobeats and the Nigerian music industry stems from ethnographic research carried out in Lagos between 2015 and 2022, the contribution draws heavily on digital ethnographic research on the platform TikTok, conducted in 2021 and 2022. Ethnographic research on digital platforms has become widespread, with the COVID-19 pandemic playing a particularly important role (see, for example, Góralaska 2020; Paupini, Teigen, and Habib 2022; Shah 2023), and this is also the case for my own research. Yet, methodologically, we are still in a phase of

84 discovery, in which it is very much an open-ended question what ethnography on digital platforms can, and perhaps should, look like, given the variety of approaches.

For TikTok in particular, ethnographic research that seeks to relate to classical ideas of “being there,” or participant observation, has so far been rare. I would like to suggest a use of the platform within the boundaries of its own affordances (Davis 2020). This would mean aligning the research with the platform’s specific features and capabilities and thus learning how to use it, in order to gain understanding not just of the results—the finished videos—but of the interactions between users, and between users and the platform itself. This understanding comes primarily from viewing the videos in the context of an intended user experience, where, for example, the sound of one video becomes the springboard for a series of other videos. TikTok’s way of letting users discover new content is an important part of its user experience and should not be underestimated as a research tool for ethnographers, who can effectively use the platform in an explorative way by browsing it, instead of limiting themselves to searching for already known keywords. Thus, I created an account in June 2021. As a new user, my goal was to get to know the app, develop my own understanding of its affordances, and find out what the app shows me and what it doesn’t, in order to learn more about what is available on the platform with regard to Afrobeats. At that time, the primary media for most Nigerian artists were Instagram and Twitter, and it was impossible for me to predict whether TikTok would gain relevance, particularly not in the way things happened in the following months.

The app has a number of key features that differentiated it from competing platforms for the first years after its inception, even though some of them have recently been implemented by competitors as additional functions. On the consumption side, it is the algorithmic content curation. With its “For You Page,” the landing page upon opening the app, it affords users the opportunity to consume content that doesn’t necessarily come

from accounts they're following—unlike Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Instead, my user experience is shaped algorithmically, creating an individualized experience for me and everyone else, initially based on three sets of factors. The first one consists of demographic aspects like gender, age, and geolocation. The second one includes my preferences when entering the app and my watching behavior on the platform, determined by questions like: Which videos do I watch and for how long? Do I watch them to the end? Do I watch them multiple times? Do I pause them when they are on, do I interact via likes or comments, or do I keep swiping? The third factor is each video itself and its performance after upload. Each video is initially played out to an audience of a few hundred accounts, which in turn are additionally selected by interests, key terms, and hashtags. If a certain share of them watch the full-length video, the number of plays exponentially increases. So every time someone watches a video, the chance of it being flushed into my feed increases. The algorithmic curation of the feed essentially means that, unlike on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, I don't get to see the content of my friends, colleagues, or other people I already know from a specific context first.

Another important feature stems from its ability not only to record and edit videos with their original sound, but to make a video with any existing sound on the platform, allowing for lip syncing, dance videos, or simply musical accompaniment to visual content. The app affords users the opportunity to engage with sounds in this way through a variety of design choices. On the creator page, which can be reached by clicking on a colorful "+" button in the middle of the otherwise grey bottom menu bar, I am given a number of options for creating images and videos, uploading them from my camera roll, editing them and adding effects. At the top of the screen is the "Add Sound" button, whose text is illustrated by a small note icon. If I click the button, I'm first shown a selection of sounds "For You" that I already know from my For You page from a particularly large number of videos, with which I've interacted and which I'd most likely like to use for my

86 own content, before I try to find one myself using a search bar, for example. On the main page, the path to interaction with the sound is not far either, but almost imposes itself to me. For each video, at the bottom of the screen, directly above the menu bar, the name of the sound that belongs to the current video runs through the screen as text from right to left, on the left side again illustrated by a small note icon. To the right, much larger, is a round icon showing either a simplified record (if it's a user upload), or the cover image of the sound that is used (if it's a published song). By clicking either the icon or the text, I'm directed to the sound's page, where all videos are collected that are already using it, and a big red button to "Use Sound." Clicking on this, I'm in the creator view again, but the sound is now already selected and I can create visual content around it.

Furthermore, TikTok allows the interaction with existing audiovisual content using the "duet" and "stitch" functions. A "duet" will result in a split-screen video that may contain both the original sound and additional sound from the new video, whereas "stitch" combines a new video with an existing one in a linear fashion—the old one is followed by the new one (Pilipets 2023). Apart from these specific features, TikTok allows users to interact with videos in the typical social network way: like, comment and subcomment, share, follow. Zulli and Zulli (2020) point out, however, that "although TikTok does enable users to create profiles, follow friends, and send direct messages, interpersonal connections are downplayed on the platform. Creative interaction is ... prioritized over discursive interaction." Through its design decisions, TikTok encourages its users to produce their own content even more than other platforms, where these functions are less clearly emphasized. The amount of interaction possibilities is also greater than on other large platforms—since this contribution is focused on sounds, I have limited my description of the app to those features that revolve around them and would also like to emphasize that sound is a very important basis for interactions on TikTok (Vizcaino-Verdú and Abidin 2022, 885).

When I first opened the app, I was shown a lot of German content—much of which was comedy skits, for example. I then tried to counteract the geolocation factor by searching directly for accounts, tags, and songs, actively training the algorithm to show me more of the content I wanted to see. However, it took several hours of browsing the app until the algorithm adapted to my preference of content related to Afrobeats. I used the screen capture function of my phone to record my research sessions, during which I opened TikTok and scrolled through videos on the For You page. Whenever I came across a sound that seemed relevant, I went to look for the previous engagement with that sound, for example whether dance moves had been created for it and if these had been recreated. I then followed these sounds regularly—which was of course perpetuated by TikTok’s algorithm.

Using the algorithm is worthwhile if only because it is far more complex and shows me a broader picture than I could get from just using hashtags or individual sounds. Many songs that go viral on TikTok exist there in numerous variations uploaded from different accounts. Sometimes they are identical, in other cases they differ from each other—in the choice of the excerpt, in the speed, in the use of effects for alienation or the change in the form of a remix or cover version. On the other hand, my analysis is obviously biased by the TikTok feed and what I encountered using the For You Page. Where it seemed necessary, I supplemented my algorithmic selection with manual searches, for example, to gain insight into the popularity of things on TikTok that don’t play a role at all on my For You Page.

## **Platforms and the Success Narrative of Afrobeats**

When Wizkid’s album was released in 2017, Sony Music West Africa had just freshly reestablished itself in Lagos, after several decades of absence. Universal Nigeria followed suit shortly after,

88 while Warner Music had already established itself in South Africa in 2013. This period marks the beginning of a large-scale investment initiative by the “Big Three” major music labels. Spotify was not available in Nigeria until a year later (2018), Apple Music was freshly opened and had fewer than 10,000 subscribers. The Nigeria-based streaming service Boomplay, founded by the Chinese smartphone manufacturer Transsion Holdings, was also just getting established. Distribution of music was dominated by physical marketers and bloggers, both of whom largely supplied audiences with CDs and MP3s through informal channels—online and offline. At that time, the global distribution of Nigerian pop music was primarily shaped by download blogs and by DJs who downloaded songs from these blogs to play them on dancefloors and to record mixtapes that they uploaded onto YouTube—for a long time, they mainly catered to diaspora audiences.

From there on, an interplay of two types of players has been closely linked to the further developments. The major labels Sony and Universal on the one hand, and digital music streaming platforms (DSPs) on the other. Davido, who like his colleague Wizkid already was a Superstar across the African continent at the time, made a deal with Sony in 2016. Universal also started signing artists left and right from 2017 on. The albums that followed out of these deals were the first releases by the respective artists to be made available via formal distribution channels in large parts of the world, significantly improving both global distribution and monetization in one fell swoop. While DSPs are often criticized for paying out a comparatively small amount of money to the music labels, which will then pass on a minor share to musicians (Sisario 2021), this was a dramatic improvement over the previous situation, where oftentimes even the most popular musicians paid more money to publish their music than they were able to gain from sales, while income was based on live performances and brand endorsements. Major deals and DSP distribution expanded the market for these musicians to numerous countries with significantly higher

numbers in paid subscriptions to the streaming platforms and thus enabled them to get a share of these subscriptions, while the major labels made sure to get theirs as well. What contributed to this success story is the fact that the DSPs have opened up a new market segment for African popular music, for example through Spotify's "Afro Hub" (Tambini 2018), which has been dominated by Nigerian dance pop—now usually referred to as "Afrobeats"—ever since. Numerous playlists, which are the most common way to listen to music on the platforms, contain either the most popular African (i.e., mostly Nigerian) pop songs of the moment, or a subset of them, selected by subgenre or a certain mood, for example. To this fundamental infrastructure, Shazam and TikTok were added, which in subsequent years have become the most important tools for discovering new music.

Early on, Nigerian musicians, fans, and industry professionals promoted the genre with a strong success narrative. Many popular songs, like Burna Boy's "Ye" (2019), are based on individual rags-to-riches stories and collectively they propagate the idea of representing Nigeria, and even Africa at large, in the most prestigious cultural arenas of the world, from record-breaking stadium concerts to award shows and sports events. After the first wave of major label deals, a round table discussion titled "Afro-Beats to the world" was held at an industry event in Lagos, a slogan that would become the name for more events to follow. The comment sections of popular Nigerian music videos on YouTube are now filled with statements echoing this sentiment: "It's so beautiful to see one of our very own, Rema, taking Africa and Afrobeats to the world" (enochofie2903 2022).

The hype increased over the following few years, and it didn't matter that the faces that promoted the Afrobeats movement were changing over time. Selling the genre to the world has long since become a joint project of all parties involved—both the industry professionals and the fans alike. Across the past decade and a half, there have been several waves of artists who advanced to a certain point of popularity, after which they were

90 overtaken by another wave, which was able to advance even further. In keeping with the metaphor, however, each new wave spread not only forward but also sideways. Each year the list of those who attracted attention with international collaborations, chart placements, prestigious awards and record-breaking concerts grew longer. The reception attitude of the ever-growing crowd of people who are enthusiastic about Nigerian pop is comparable to that of a sports team—each win is hailed as a joint achievement, with less regard to which team member has scored it, or which players were on the field.

### **Afrobeats and Audio Memes on TikTok**

As outlined above, a distinctive feature of TikTok is that the platform heavily builds on the potential virality of sound, thus incentivizing its users to spread sounds and create new audiovisual content around it, which is a novel way for the mimetic circulation of content on platforms, resembling internet memes (Zulli and Zulli 2020). While the concept of memes has so far been applied primarily to visual media, Abidin and Kaye (2021) have argued for an “aural turn” of memes, meaning that audio memes have become a mass phenomenon promoted by TikTok. Similarly, Darvin (2022) has argued that on TikTok, sound is the primary anchor for the production of derivative videos, using the term sound memes. In the following, I will take up and expand on the idea of audio memes. To do so, I first want to make clear why the term is useful and accurate, especially in comparison to the concepts in which replicating sounds in digital spaces have been discussed before. Shifman proposes defining internet memes in a social constructivist way as “(a) *a group of digital items sharing common characteristics* of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed *via the Internet by many users*” (Shifman 2014, 7–8, emphasis in original).

Thus far, musical phenomena that spread in a comparable way have commonly been understood as *virals*, for example viral songs, viral music videos, or viral dances. Shifman makes it clear, however, that the terms *viral* and *meme*, while not easily distinguished, mark two different ends of a spectrum revolving around the engagement of users. In the case of *virals*, we are dealing with individual media artifacts (e.g., a photo or video) that spread but remain essentially unchanged. In contrast, she sees *memes* fundamentally as “a collection of texts. You can identify a single video and say ‘This is a viral video’ without referring to any other text, but this would not make much sense when describing an Internet meme” (Shifman 2014, 56, emphasis in original). She emphasizes that the terms viral and meme have often been used unsystematically or synonymously and clarifies that both phenomena represent modes of communication and interaction, even if, in the case of the viral, this takes place on a metatextual level and, in the case of the meme, also in the text itself (Shifman 2014, 59–60). Consequently, she proposes that media artifacts that are spread quickly and widely by many agents without being imitated and/or modified should be called *viral*; *founder-based memes* on the other hand are those that are based on a specific viral artifact, but whose unmodified variant remains the most popular; finally, *egalitarian memes* are varied formats and versions that cannot be related to a clear text of origin, and where dissemination goes hand in hand with modification (Shifman 2014, 58–59). I will use Shifman’s terminology in the following but relate it to internet memes mostly revolving around sounds, instead of visual media. Also, I will apply the concept here primarily to audio memes based on professionally published music and sounds from musicians’ accounts, as opposed to a string of recent newspaper publications that use the terms “audio meme” and “sound meme” exclusively for spoken word and remixes of spoken word (Shane 2022, for example), as I am interested in the effects that memefication has on commercially released music.

92 Viral music videos and dances existed long before TikTok. Among the most prominent examples are Psy's "Gangnam Style" (2012) and Baauer's "Harlem Shake" (2012). Both videos initially went viral but were then additionally imitated by a large number of internet users, turning them into founder-based memes centered around the songs and the relevant dance moves—yet the reach of the original videos far eclipsed all their creative adaptations. Inspired by this, in 2018 Nigerian musician Yemi Alade also called for a Dance Challenge on YouTube for the release of her song "Bum Bum," which led to numerous participations. Challenges such as these, however, were in uncertain legal territory from the start, as none of the platforms used for them—initially YouTube, but later also Instagram—had the ability to include user uploads of previously released music in exploitation chains, which formally obligated them to delete such videos from their platforms. As Dal-Yong Jin (2020, 54) noted, the success of Gangnam Style was already tied in significant part to the conscious decision of the labels YG and Republic/Universal to forgo any form of copyright enforcement. Even though the benefits of such dance challenges were obvious to many such rights holders, legal problems regularly arose, as most recently in 2021 when Warner took action against dance videos by commercial performers who participated in the challenge to the song "Jeruselema" by South African musician Master KG (Shabangu 2021). In the same year however, TikTok eventually solved this problem on a technical and legal level, so that rights holders generally receive royalties for the use of their songs on the platform, regardless of which user made a video with them. Uploads are analyzed and automatically attributed to the music they are using. This created the legal basis for memefying songs.

In relation to Afrobeats, a certain continuity can be noted here. From the mid-2000s Nigerian songs spread both in Web 1.0 and in the offline world, preferably along paths in which legal and illegal parts were difficult to separate, and legality alone gave little indication of whether the spread was considered desirable or

beneficial for musicians (Simmert 2020). Nevertheless, this condition regularly led to dissatisfaction with the musician's profit margins for the sales they earned from their recordings. Like the music DSPs before it, TikTok has provided a harmonization here, even if it relies on the fact that profit expectations are low. What seems to be much more important is that users today use platforms, and specifically TikTok, for creative processing of songs to a degree that is many times higher than in the days when dance challenges still had to be recorded in low resolution and uploaded to YouTube, and Afrobeats is at the forefront of this. Unlike DSPs whose business model still relies on the large-scale distribution of songs, TikTok capitalizes on the continuous production and distribution of content based on songs, each iteration of which has the potential to spawn more instances of distributed productivity.

This has been demonstrated in a particularly impressive way by CKay's song "Love Nwantiti," which became the most-used song on TikTok in 2021 after over 15 million videos were created with it on the platform. This development can primarily be traced back to an unforeseeable series of remixes and dance challenges which, in an upward spiral that spanned two to three months, transformed a previously rather unknown song into an audio meme, two years after its release on Warner, which only began to sign Nigerian musicians in 2019. Turning the paradigm of the founder-based meme on its head, TikTok users created an audio meme in a rather egalitarian fashion around a variety of versions of a song that only then gained traction outside of the platform and became a hit—and the same has happened to many other Nigerian songs since.

And yet, this second step is not a necessary consequence of the first—a song that becomes an audio meme on TikTok does not inevitably become a hit, as can be seen by a prominent example from 2022, the song "Beat Automotivo Tan Tan Viral" by a Brazilian producer called WZ Beat. The first seconds of the song, which form the basis of the meme, consist of only two acoustic elements: a bass drum that beats approximately once

94 every second, with a lot of reverb, and a short, dramatic and memorable synthesizer melody. Videos made with the sound show a user leaning on a wall, knocking with the bass drum a couple of times, while the camera slowly pans to the other side of the wall, showing the same user in a different appearance, for example the actor Dwayne Johnson, who turns into his on-screen character Black Adam. More than 20 million videos have been made with this sound, but the song counts less than 6 million streams on Spotify and even less on YouTube, while “Love Nwantiti,” on the other hand, counts over a billion Spotify streams and about the same amount on YouTube.

This striking example suggests that Afrobeats benefits to a particularly high degree from its use as the basis of audio memes on TikTok. It is difficult to determine the exact reasons for this advantage of the genre, but many factors suggest the possibility of optimal distinctiveness (Zuckerman 2016) needed in order to be both recognizable as a genre for a large and diverse audience, but still sufficiently correspond to individual listening habits. For example, the rhythmic structure of an overwhelming majority of the songs is based on a set of variations of the son clave (Marshall 2009), a rhythmic figure that recognizably establishes a relationship between Afrobeats and various kinds of Caribbean music from dancehall to reggaeton. At the same time, the actual variations of the clave prominent in Afrobeats slightly differ from those that define the two other genres, giving it a degree of uniqueness within the familiar boundaries. Similar things can be said about the harmonic structure, the use of language and the sonic qualities of the genre. However, I’d like to argue that besides its musical properties, there’s a narrative congruence of Afrobeats and audio memes. As indicated above, the genre’s success story has long been an important element in its proliferation. Audio memes now tie into this narrative in different ways and are often an expression of the individual content creator’s desire to participate in it, even though they sometimes come from very different creative fields. I would like to use the

topic of dancing as an example to illustrate how audio memes propagate the success narrative of Afrobeats.

Choreographers owe a significant portion of their success on TikTok to dance challenges. Two Lagos-based music and content marketers whom I spoke to in September 2022 confirmed to me that the development of such dances as targeted promotion had already been experimented with as early as 2021, but the enormous success of “Love Nwantiti” contributed significantly to the spread of this type of concerted promotional efforts. At the same time, even with successful dance accounts, it is usually impossible to determine in individual cases whether a choreography was developed as a commissioned work, because of the high value of the potential increase of reach that can be achieved by developing popular dance moves. In order to develop such moves, dancers are dependent on new songs, because only in conjunction with them is there a chance of memefication. As content creators, choreographers have a similar relationship with the music industry as they do with the TikTok platform itself. They provide the platform with the basis for numerous pieces of content and, in exchange, receive access to their audience and its potential for interaction. In the same vein, they gain free access to new and potentially successful songs—which, again, is one of the novelties of the TikTok age—and in turn potentially add value to the song through the creation of their choreography.

What ultimately contributes to the memefication of the song, however, is that large numbers of dancers learn and perform it in videos, in which they play with their knowledge of the song and the associated dance steps. Each video of a participation in a dance challenge is a testimony to the dancer’s knowledge of the dance and the song, but this is only the most direct level—dance steps and movements refer fundamentally to the rhythm, but also to other musical parameters and, for example, lines of song lyrics, thus becoming embodied knowledge (Pakes 2003). On TikTok, however, this knowledge is not simply performed by dancers in front of a camera but is often the part of an interactive

96 process between dancers filming themselves in public places and the people who witness these performances. Many such videos play with the trope of chance encounter, in which a supposed spectator is revealed to know the steps, and spontaneously becomes part of the performance. A recent example is the dance challenge to Omah Lay's song "Soso" (2022), initiated in December 2022 by Nigerian dancer Yasabelle Ywuala. In the video (Ywuala 2022), Ywuala begins dancing the steps in a public place, facing the camera, with three men standing behind her with some distance, who at first give the impression of watching her with interest, swaying with the beat. After a few beats, however, they surprisingly join in. Many videos that make use of the song and choreography have a comparable narrative component, for example that of the Tanzanian dancer Rayon Jeremiah (2022), who is seen in the video doing the routine, when he is surprised by his Danish partner, who also lives in Tanzania and, like him, is known on TikTok for dancing to Afrobeats. While he is looking into the camera, she walks towards him from the background of the picture seemingly by chance, recognizes him and his steps, and begins to dance along. Eventually, he turns around in the course of the dance steps and realizes he has company.

As in this video, we are often dealing with creators who record their videos while traveling or living abroad, and who invite other travelers and residents to participate in their videos. The mere dancing bodies of these people stand as testimony to the spread of a song. In addition, there is the component of storytelling as a marketing strategy. As Wagener (2019) has pointed out, the increased use of storytelling is directly linked to the affordances of social media platforms. It is thus no surprise that an incalculable number of individuals and institutions offering advice on how to become famous on TikTok—quite a few of which can be found on the platform itself—emphasize the importance of storytelling in videos. The narrative idea of the chance encounter that ends in a shared dance gives the viewer the highly rewarding impression of witnessing a phenomenon between seemingly

unknown people who playfully connect over their shared embodied knowledge. As a variety of comments show, the thinly veiled staging of many of these encounters does not harm the narratives because even if they are understood as fictional, they resonate with their audiences. Just as impressive music videos have been used for decades to charge songs with stories and feelings and thus contribute to their memorability, a large number of these short TikTok videos now do the same.

## **Blurring the Line: Musicians and Content Creators**

A few months after “Love Nwantiti” became a global hit, others began to follow suit. It quickly became apparent that labels and musicians were increasingly attempting to exploit the logic of the distribution of Afrobeats on TikTok for themselves. During my fieldwork on TikTok, a number of artists from the Lagos-based label Mavin Records stood out in particular. In 2019, its CEO Don Jazzy had signed a multi-million-dollar venture capital deal with US investment firms Kupanda Capital and TPG, enabling the label to seriously compete with the Big Three and build on old successes that had been several years in the past (Akan 2019). For Mavin, this was initially made more difficult by the fact that in the same year their most prominent artist, Tiwa Savage, moved over to Universal. In their activities on TikTok since the beginning of 2022, Mavin’s artists have regularly teamed up with Canadian R&B star Jason Derulo, who was already active on TikTok’s predecessor Musical.ly and managed to build up one of the TikTok accounts with the widest global reach. Derulo has excelled at releasing successful hit songs based on TikTok audio memes. In 2020, he released “Savage Love (Laxed—Siren Beat),” which (as indicated in parentheses) is based on an instrumental by New Zealand music producer Jawsh 685 called “Laxed (Siren Beat),” which already was an audio meme on TikTok. After an initial legal dispute, the two reached an agreement for the song, which

98 features Derulo’s vocals on an edited version of the instrumental and reached number one on the charts in several countries, becoming one of the most streamed songs of 2020—and Derulo’s first top ten hit since 2015. He has repeated this strategy to record vocals on successful TikTok sounds several times since.

In February 2022, Mavin musician Rema and Jason Derulo met in a recording studio, initiating two different projects. For the first one, they followed Derulo’s proven success formula. They recorded a song together using an instrumental that had already been established as an audio meme on TikTok for several months. Titled “Fayahh,” the beat was uploaded in November 2021 by a friend of the Congolese producer Robinson, who had not made any further appearances until then, in a video from his studio, in which the beat is played on his PC. Despite the suspension of the account from which the video was originally uploaded, other uploads of the instrumental were used over the following months as an audio meme on TikTok in over 100,000 videos and I encountered it regularly during my research on the For You page in dance videos and various variants, in which artists tried to enrich the instrumental with their vocals. A release of the instrumental as “Fayahh Beat” eventually took place in January 2022 on Derulo’s initiative and in March was followed by the joint recording of Derulo and Rema. Despite Derulo’s good track record, the song didn’t become a great success. But for Afrobeats it started a trend that was picked up only a few months later by Burna Boy, who also used a TikTok audio meme as an instrumental on his album: the remix of a song from the Netflix series “Squid Game” (2021–), which South African producer Kvn9 Vinci had shared on TikTok in 2021.

In a second collaborative effort, however, Rema and Derulo both posted a video they recorded together on TikTok that Rema captioned “So @jasonderulo taught me how to dance today 🤔👉,” with the hashtag “#calmdownchallenge.” In the video (Rema 2022), they perform a couple of simple dance steps to Rema’s song “Calm Down,” which had been released two weeks before.

The Canada-based choreographer Loïc Reyel created a set of moves for the song, which he posted on TikTok the same day (Reyel 2022), successfully sparking a dance challenge that may have offered a basis for the song to trend on the platform for the following weeks and months. Within the first half of 2022, “Calm Down” had become Rema’s biggest success to date on TikTok, with nearly a million videos that were created with it. It had also become his most streamed song with 66 million Spotify streams in July 2022. Eventually, in August, a remix of the song was released featuring American superstar Selena Gomez, who owns one of the top 10 Instagram accounts with nearly 400 million followers, and whose most successful songs easily surpass one billion Spotify streams.

The pair’s collaboration reached more than 600 million Spotify streams in the months that followed (with the curve still trending upward), giving both Rema and his original song enough exposure to boost its streaming numbers to over 300 million. Since the release of the remix, the song’s popularity on TikTok has also significantly increased. In October 2022, German choreographer and dancer Dennis Kyere created a new dance challenge that eventually memefied the song as successfully as it had not been done before, which added a storytelling component to the dance steps. In the videos (e.g. Kyere 2022), the dancing is introduced by a risky maneuver in which the dancer pretends to lose his balance on a staircase, for example, while the song’s instrumental kicks in. A frightened passerby looks at the dancer, walks towards him or tries to help, whereupon Rema’s voice kicks in with the chorus: “Baby calm down, calm down...” The dancer begins to dance and accompanies the text with a bobbing up and down movement of the flat hands, which conveys: “Everything is okay, relax, calm down, this is just a performance.” In the videos, the situation is correctly interpreted by the passers-by at this point and both begin to laugh while one continues the choreography. To this first level of memefication of the song, whose lyrics have become the punch line of a practical joke, comes the

100    forementioned storytelling trope. Some of the passers-by seem to know the dance steps and, after the initial irritation, join in and participate in the choreography.

Kyere himself participated with several dozen more variations of his meme over the course of the following months, while many dancers picked up on his steps in their videos without adopting the narrative element. One notable exception is another German dancer named Noel Robinson, who added a different twist to the choreography. In his numerous videos (e.g. Robinson 2022), he is seen walking toward other people holding their smartphones. Robinson takes a few steps towards one of the people in the right timing and quickly takes the smartphone out of their hand and starts with Kyere's dance steps, that is, the arm movement that conveys together with the lyrics: "Baby, calm down," while the person being robbed gets their device back. Robinson always wears a hood, which he pulls off his head a few seconds later, revealing his impressive afro and usually adding to the amusement and relaxation of the situation. As in Kyere's videos, people regularly show Robinson that they know the song, the dance steps, and possibly Robinson himself, and join in his performance. Eventually, Jason Derulo became one of Robinson's "victims." In a video published in February (Robinson 2023), Robinson pulls Derulo's smartphone out of his hand, whereupon he first signals his two bodyguards to calm down and then quickly joins in the choreography. Derulo, on the other hand, has already started the next collaboration with a Mavin artist, again using his established recipe. The song "Ta Ta Ta," which was released in September 2022 by the artist Bayanni, who had just signed his deal with Mavin, became an audio meme with 4.4 million videos on TikTok by April 2023 and had already garnered more than 30 million Spotify streams. This prompted Derulo to contribute his own verse to a remix released by Mavin and co-launched together with the two musicians on TikTok, in the hopes that content creators would continue to help drive the spiral upwards.

Afrobeats musicians and industry executives are taking advantage of existing audio memes and producing content that invites the creation of new ones. They are also teaming up with other musicians who are pioneers in the exploitation of TikTok, and can rely on a growing network of content creators who are interested in turning songs into dance challenges and other varieties of audio memes. This collaboration between artists and content creators is being used to build and maintain existing user engagement, supported by the platform-based market research capabilities of corporate structures operating in the background. The collaborative effort between artists and content creators has led to a cyclical production process, where audio memes can be transformed into officially released songs and vice versa, with indefinite ways to repeat. Labels and musicians are putting more and more thought into how to put their music into content that can be picked up by creators. The latter thus have far greater agency than provided by earlier models like that of the prosumer (Toffler 1980) or the co-creator (Pralhad and Ramaswamy 2000), assuming individuals that just have rudimentary means to co-create content or to produce and distribute it on a hobby level. Instead, they are formally on an equal level with professional players within the boundaries of the platform, and often even have a knowledge advantage in their use, which pays off especially for someone like Derulo, who has many years of experience in both areas. Conversely, all of the actors mentioned here are dramatically dependent on the platform, which is one of the few critical infrastructures for distributed productivities vis-à-vis an ever-growing part of humanity.

## **Conclusion**

The most recent developments in the rise of Afrobeats as a globalized genre can be attributed to the collaborative efforts of artists, content creators, and music industry professionals. This is largely due to the significant role played by music streaming platforms on the one hand, and social media platforms, particularly

102 TikTok, on the other, which provide a ground for artists and content creators to engage in the creation and transcreation of distributed products, connecting to and expanding audiences. As a result, boundaries between these different kinds of actors become increasingly blurred. This collaborative effort takes place within a closely interconnected network of cyclical global cultural production, where established industry professionals and other actors with varying degrees of professionalism make use of the memefication of Afrobeats and its success narrative on platforms like TikTok. Lagos serves as the center of this network, but it relies heavily on the infrastructure and capital of platform companies and investors that are largely based in America, Europe, and Asia, perpetuating long-existing dependencies that cannot be overcome by the culture industries alone.

For Afrobeats, it appears that the decentralized dissemination through a variety of actors with creative and economic interests, as it is happening on TikTok, is more of a continuity than a disruption when compared to the pre-internet days. At the same time, it builds on the final acknowledgement that restrictive use of intellectual property rights is no longer a way to make money from creative work, as it impedes established and widespread modes of doing so. Instead, methods of transcreation are legalized and actively promoted, and both content creators and musicians participate in their exploitation in ways inherent to the platform, which in turn leverages the distributed productivities of its user base.

Methodologically, my hybrid approach indicates that digital ethnographic research can be a useful starting point to better understand this interconnected network and has the ability to gain insights where more extractive methods might not be able to do so. However, classical ethnographic research among the involved actors could provide an even deeper understanding of individual cases and is thus much needed.

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SOUTH-KOREA AS A HUB OF  
TRANSNATIONAL CULTURAL  
ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN EAST ASIA

**FILM POSTER**

**COLOR SIMILARITY**

**HALLYUWOOD**

**HOLLYWOOD**

**CULTURAL POLICY**

[ 4 ]

# **2006 Screen Quota Reduction and Film Distribution in Korea**

**Egbert Amoncio**

**This study examines how the 2006 reduction of South Korea's screen quota influenced the visual presentation of domestic film posters, particularly their similarity to Hollywood designs. Using a dataset of 1,149 Korean film posters from 2003–2011 and employing computer vision techniques to extract RGB color profiles, the analysis reveals that genres most exposed to Hollywood competition shifted toward more visually similar poster designs after the policy change. An event study regression confirms that this convergence in color use persisted in the medium term. By linking policy reform to visual strategies in cultural production, the paper contributes to scholarship**

110 **on market signaling, institutional isomorphism, and cultural globalization, showing how deregulation can reshape not only content but also the visual language of national cinema.**

## **Introduction**

Film posters, as paratextual materials (Genette 1997), have long been recognized for their ability to shape audience expectations and form an essential bridge between a film's content and its potential viewers (Grainge and Johnson 2015; Gray 2010). Scholarship in this area has demonstrated that these visual cues can convey genre, tone, and value, ultimately influencing how a film is distributed, marketed, and perceived (Aronczyk 2013; Brookey 2010). Moreover, color in particular operates as an especially potent signaling device, swiftly communicating storylines and overall quality (Gray 2010; Spence 1973). Recent work also indicates that in competitive environments, such signals may become more similar, mirroring the larger cultural and industrial pressures that affect creative output (Caves 2000; DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

Questions remain, however, regarding the precise conditions under which such an increase of similarity occurs. Although we know that market intensity can push producers to adopt "safer" or more recognizable design formulas (Lampel, Lant, and Shamsie 2000), it is less clear how policy shifts and cross-industry interactions specifically foster or hinder the visual similarities of distribution and marketing materials. Past research has identified that competition may occasionally spur differentiation, while at other times it drives imitation (Gray 2010; Gross 2020). The precise tipping points—particularly where local industries such as Korean film industry (Hallyuwood) face global pressures (Hollywood)—are not fully understood.

In this paper, I investigate how a major policy change in South Korea's screen quota system contributed to a visible shift in Korean film posters toward a Hollywood-influenced visual style. By focusing on color usage, I test whether Korean distributors, especially those operating in highly competitive genres, increasingly mirrored Hollywood's poster designs following the 2006 quota reduction. In doing so, the analysis offers a clearer view of the relationship between industry competition, policy frameworks, and creative choices in an evolving global marketplace.

To explore this question, I draw data from two primary sources: the Korean Film Biz Zone (KoBiZ) database and the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). KoBiZ provided 1,149 Korean film posters released between 2003 and 2011, including metadata such as genre categorizations, production scale, and box office performance. IMDb served as a complementary source for Hollywood releases, enabling the construction of comparative samples across equivalent genres. By pairing these datasets, it became possible to trace the evolution of visual similarity—especially in color usage—over time, both before and after the policy change.

Given the complexity of systematically comparing color profiles in a large body of posters, I employed a computer vision (CV) technique that extracts the average red, green, and blue (RGB) values from each image (Chang and Mukai 2022; Yan et al. 2022). This numeric representation of color composition facilitates consistent, scalable comparisons across thousands of posters from different periods and industries. Leveraging Euclidean distance measures, the analysis identifies how closely each Hallyuwood film poster aligns with its Hollywood counterparts within the same genre.

Results indicate that before 2006, genres most exposed to Hollywood competition maintained more visually distinct color palettes to stand out in a crowded market (Kerrigan 2010). Following the screen quota reduction, however, these same

112 genres become more visually similar with Hollywood, suggesting that the shift in policy triggered new incentives to align with global market standards rather than rely on differentiation. The event study regression results further confirm that this visual similarity has persisted in the medium term.

This study contributes to existing scholarship on cultural industries by demonstrating how cultural policies can reshape visual strategies in film distribution and marketing. Building on theories of market signaling (Spence 1973) and institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), this study shows that local industries may increasingly adopt globalized design norms when protective policies recede. Furthermore, the emphasis on color enriches our understanding of paratextual functions and how creative choices are not merely artistic but also deeply strategic (Genette 1997; Gray 2010). By exploring changes in the color usage of Hallyuwood film posters following a significant screen quota reduction, this research illustrates the subtle yet powerful ways that market forces and policy shifts can influence creative decisions.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. First, I situate the role of color in posters within existing literature and discuss how competition affects design choices. Next, I contextualize the Korean screen quota system and its reduction, highlighting the implications for competition at the level of genre. I then describe the data sources, explain the methodological approach, and present the empirical findings. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the implications for cultural policy and future research.

## **Theory and Background**

Film posters have been widely acknowledged as crucial paratexts that shape a viewer's first encounter with a film (Genette 1997; Gray 2010; Grainge and Johnson 2015). Drawing on Genette's notion of the paratext as a threshold, these visual materials mediate between a film's narrative content and its audience's

early perceptions. Gray (2010), among others, argues that posters can be as culturally significant as the film itself, functioning as dynamic entry points that shape viewers' expectations through visual cues. As a result, film posters have garnered attention not only as strategic distribution and marketing tools but also as sites of cultural and industrial power, revealing how studios guide narratives and manage audience interpretation (Aronczyk 2013; Gray 2010). They can even influence how films are produced or branded (Brookey 2010). Building on this scholarship, I examine the role of color in film posters as a visual shorthand to communicate key information—such as genre and quality—and then argue that increased competition may drive visual similarity among these paratexts.

### **The Role of Color in Film Posters**

Color in film posters operates both as a paratextual element (Genette 1997)—shaping audience interpretation—and as a powerful signaling device (Spence 1973). Serving as a “visual shorthand,” color quickly conveys a film's genre, emotional tone, and perceived production values (Gray 2010). Consequently, examining how color is deployed provides insight into distributors' strategic choices in competitive markets.

First, color offers straightforward genre cues. A dark, desaturated palette often signals horror or thriller content, while bright, playful hues suggest family-oriented or comedic films (Gray 2010; Hanna et al. 2012; Ivašić-Kos, Pobar, and Ipšić 2014; Kress and van Leeuwen 2002). Second, color shapes emotional tone: warm reds and oranges can evoke excitement or tension, whereas cool blues foster a more contemplative mood (Kerrigan 2010). Finally, color can serve as a cultural signifier. National film industries may highlight culturally resonant palettes to appeal to local audiences (Throsby 2010). In each case, color succinctly conveys multiple layers of information at a glance.

114 Beyond genre, tone, and cultural signals, color can also communicate a film's value proposition. According to signaling theory (Kirmani and Rao 2000; Spence 1973), cohesive and refined color choices can imply high production values, thereby reducing viewers' uncertainty (Kerrigan 2010). Conversely, a poorly executed or inconsistent palette may suggest lower quality (Gray 2010). Aligning poster colors with established genre conventions further helps manage audience expectations (Kress and van Leeuwen 2002). In highly saturated markets, however, dissimilar color palettes may help a film poster stand out and attract viewers seeking something distinct (Genette 1997; Gray 2010).

In sum, color usage in film posters exemplifies the interplay between paratextual function and market signaling. By highlighting quality, among others, color guides audience expectations and informs distributors' positioning strategies—underscoring its central role in film distribution and marketing.

### **How Competition Affects Visuals in Cultural Industries**

Competition in cultural industries—such as film, advertising, and publishing—shapes design choices (Caves 2000). Moderate competition can encourage producers to differentiate themselves visually, while intense competition typically drives them to follow proven formulas (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Gross 2020). This dynamic influences both short-term and long-term creative strategies (Lampel, Lant, and Shamsie 2000).

When competition is present, producers have incentives to stand out through distinctive visuals. Even “low level features” (Ivašić-Kos, Pobar, and Ipšić 2014)—like a color palette—can capture attention and set a film apart (Gray 2010). This approach aligns with consumer curiosity for new experiences while still meeting basic genre expectations (Lampel, Lant, and Shamsie 2000). Moreover, unique visuals can spark word-of-mouth or social media buzz, providing added visibility (Kerrigan 2010).

As competition intensifies, however, producers often gravitate toward safer, recognizable designs to mitigate risk. This mirrors DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) concept of institutional isomorphism, wherein organizations imitate successful peers to signal legitimacy. In crowded markets—whether for blockbuster releases or streaming content—familiar color palettes in film poster could reassure audiences (Spence 1973).

While homogeneity can lead to visually repetitive offerings, it also offers short-run security by reducing viewers' cognitive burden (Gray 2010). Thus, the tension between differentiation and imitation underscores how design choices in cultural industries balance artistic expression and market logic (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Lampel, Lant, and Shamsie 2000). Over time, this cycle recurs, revealing how producers continually navigate the push for novelty against the pull of established convention.

## **Empirical Approach**

In this section, I outline the institutional background that explains why the design of Korean film posters may have increasingly becoming similar to their Hollywood counterparts following policy changes. I then describe the data sources—drawing from both Korean and international databases—and present the methodological framework used to analyze visual similarities between Hallyuwood and Hollywood film posters over time. Finally, I introduce the econometric approach employed to assess whether the impact of the 2006 screen quota reduction.

## **Institutional Background: South Korea Screen Quota System**

South Korea's screen quota system, formalized in the 1960s, required theaters to devote a minimum number of annual screening days to domestic films (Messerlin and Parc 2014; 2017). The policy emerged from a desire to protect local cinema from Hollywood dominance and to foster a distinct national film culture, recognizing the broader cultural significance of film (Choi 2010). By the 1990s and early 2000s, the quota peaked at 146 days and was widely credited with helping domestic productions secure substantial market share (Kim 2000; Paquet 2009).

In 2006, under pressure from trade negotiations with the United States, the Korean government reduced the quota from 146 days to 73 days, citing the country's broader economic priorities (Messerlin and Parc 2017). Officials argued that the Korean film industry had grown sufficiently competitive, while opponents warned that cutting nearly half the guaranteed screen time could hamper creative diversity and independent productions (Choi 2010). Despite protests, the government proceeded with the reduction as part of securing favorable free trade terms (Paquet 2009).

Although the quota cut applied to the entire industry, some genres appeared more vulnerable to Hollywood's influence than others. For example, action and science-fiction films, which often require large budgets, special effects, and extensive distribution and marketing, may be more vulnerable to Hollywood competition (Parc 2018). With audience expectations already shaped by global blockbusters, producers face stronger incentives to match Hollywood's visual and promotional standards to attract wide viewership (Yecies and Shim 2011). In contrast, dramas and horror films—often grounded in local and culturally specific narratives—rely less on costly visual spectacle (Hyeryoung 2009). Their appeal tends to be more localized, so they face comparatively fewer pressures to align with

Hollywood-driven visuals and can maintain distinct styles (Jin 2020).

From a cultural standpoint, genres with global appeal may be more susceptible to adopting internationally recognizable tropes and distribution and marketing tools (Jin 2016), whereas films centered on localized dialogue and themes typically retain a stronger domestic orientation (Yecies and Shim 2011). Higher production costs also play a role as they can drive more risk-averse strategies in action and science-fiction, sometimes leading studios to emulate Hollywood's proven formulas (Murschetz, Teichmann, and Karmasin 2018). Meanwhile, lower-budget genres that focus on domestic audiences have fewer financial imperatives to conform to globalized visuals (Jin 2020).

By halving the screen quota, the Korean government introduced new competitive pressures on local cinema. Though all genres were affected, action and science-fiction films are two of those that appear more vulnerable to Hollywood's influence. Dramas, horror films, and other culturally specific genres, on the other hand, seem better positioned to preserve unique visual styles.

### **Data and Sample**

This research draws upon two major datasets, namely the Korean Film Biz Zone (KoBiZ) database and the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). Both repositories were selected for their extensive collections of film posters and accompanying metadata, allowing for comprehensive cross-industry comparisons. The KoBiZ database, administered by the Korean Film Council, offers a wide range of Hallyuwood film posters, spanning various genres, production scales, and periods. From this source, I obtained 1,149 Korean film posters released between 2003 and 2011.<sup>1</sup> KoBiZ also provides ancillary information such as release date, genre

1 The study period from 2003 to 2011 is chosen to analyze the impact of South Korea's 2006 screen quota reduction on film genres, using 2002 as a baseline for pre-policy conditions. The endpoint of 2011 is selected to exclude the

118 categorizations, production companies, and box office performance, enabling a more nuanced exploration of color usage within specific genres.

In contrast, IMDb is widely recognized for its global film coverage, which includes Hollywood productions and international releases. For this study, I focused on Hollywood films, gathering posters from the top 200 grossing titles for each year between 2000 and 2011.<sup>2</sup> I also gathered additional metadata, such as genre classifications. These data served as the basis for determining the closest Hollywood counterparts for each Korean film poster, ensuring that each Korean poster was compared to Hollywood posters from the same genre. By pairing the KoBiZ database for Korean films with the IMDb dataset for Hollywood productions, it becomes possible to observe whether Korean film posters became more visually similar to their Hollywood counterparts over time, particularly after the 2006 screen quota reduction.

### **Method: Color Summarizer and Visual Similarity Measure**

Comparing similarity of color usage across large sets of film posters from different time periods and industries poses multiple challenges. First, the sheer number of images makes manual inspection time-consuming and prone to errors (Chang and Mukai 2022). Even with sufficient manpower, human perception of color can fluctuate based on lighting, context, or individual experience (Yan et al. 2022). Moreover, film posters often incorporate various design choices—from subtle gradients to bold, high-contrast blocks of color—which complicates consistent

influence of the rise of over-the-top (OTT) streaming platforms, which began significantly altering the film industry in the early 2010s.

- 2 Note that to analyze the evolution of visual similarity between Hallyuwood and Hollywood film posters, I have collected Hollywood film posters starting from the year 2000. As discussed in the following section on method, the pre-sample period allows for a comprehensive comparison between focal film posters and their Hollywood counterparts.

To address these obstacles and obtain a reliable measure of visual similarity, I adopted a computer vision (CV) approach that transforms each poster's raw pixel data into quantifiable color profiles. Drawing on established numeric RGB extraction methods (Chang and Mukai 2022; Yan et al. 2022), each film poster is distilled into three values representing the average red, green, and blue (RGB) components. This step ensures consistent color measurement across all images by eliminating variations caused by lighting or subjective perception. As a result, every poster in the dataset is represented by a straightforward triplet (e.g., 40% red, 20% green, 40% blue), facilitating direct comparisons (Weller and Westneat 2019; More and Rayan 2024).

Building on these color profiles, I then applied a nearest neighbor (NN) approach to measure the visual similarity between Hallyu-wood and Hollywood film posters within the same genre. Specifically, the 1, 3, and 5 nearest neighbors (1-NN, 3-NN, 5-NN) are identified based on Euclidean distance, where a smaller distance indicates stronger resemblance in color usage. By systematically comparing each poster to its most similar predecessors, the analysis reveals both immediate and broader patterns of color similarity. This approach provides clear insights into how color trends evolve over time. By incorporating these multiple levels of similarity, the study offers a nuanced perspective on the evolving influences that shape color usage in film posters.

### **Econometric Approach**

The goal of this analysis is to examine whether the 2006 screen quota reduction led to a shift in the color similarity of Hallyu-wood film posters vis-a-vis Hollywood film posters. Specifically, I investigated whether this shift was stronger in certain genres that were more exposed to Hollywood competition after the policy

120 change. To formally test this, I used an event study approach, estimating the following regression model:

$$\text{VisualSimilarity}_{it} = \beta_0 + \sum_{t \neq 2006} \beta_1 \text{Year}_t + \beta_2 \text{Treated}_i + \sum_{t \neq 2006} \beta_3^t (\text{Year}_t \times \text{Treated}_i) + \varepsilon_{it}$$

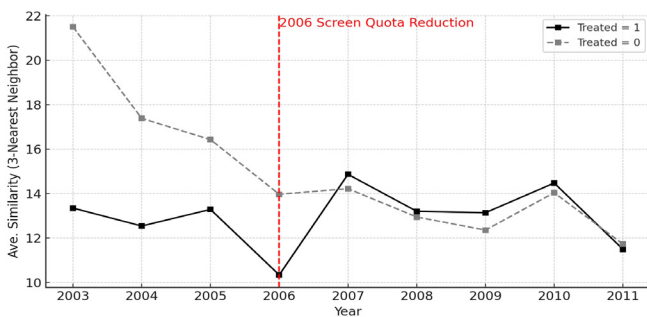
where  $\text{VisualSimilarity}_{it}$  is the Euclidean distance between a Korean film poster and its one, three, and five nearest Hollywood film poster neighbors, for film  $i$  in year  $t$ ;  $\text{Year}_t$  is a dummy variable that equals 1 if film  $i$  was released in year  $t$  and 0 otherwise;  $\text{Treated}_i$  is a dummy variable equal to 1 if the film belongs to the treated genres.<sup>3</sup>  $\sum_{t \neq 2006} \beta_3^t (\text{Year}_t \times \text{Treated}_i)$  captures the difference between treated and control genres; and  $\varepsilon_{it}$  is the error term, capturing any unobserved factors influencing color similarity.<sup>4</sup> Please note that as the policy change occurred in 2006, I omit this year so that the effects are interpreted relative to 2006.

## Results

### Descriptive Results

Table 1 presents the summary statistics for the similarity measures based on the 1, 3, and 5-NN similarity scores. The mean values for these measures—10.763 for 1-NN, 13.536 for 3-NN, and 14.765 for 5-NN—suggest that while there is a slight increase in

- 3 I determine which genre has strong competition based on pre-sample values (2000 to 2002). Specifically, I use the median revenue per theater of Hollywood films shown in South Korea as a threshold. Genres with above-median revenue per theater are classified as high competition, as they indicate stronger Hollywood dominance in the market, while those below the median are classified as low competition.
- 4 For the event study to be valid, the similarity trends between treated and control films should be parallel before 2006. This means the interaction coefficients ( $\beta_3^t$ ) for years before 2006 should not be statistically significant, ensuring that any post-2006 changes can be attributed to the Screen Quota Reduction. If  $\beta_3^t$  is significant before 2006, it suggests pre-existing differences, violating the parallel trends assumption. A valid event study should find no significant pre-trends but allow for significant post-2006 effects if the policy had an impact.



[Figure 1] Average Similarity of Korean Film Posters to Their Three Nearest Hollywood Film Posters.

similarity as the number of nearest neighbors expands, the differences are not substantial. This indicates that the overall pattern of similarity remains relatively stable across different nearest-neighbor measures. Given this consistency, I use the 3-NN similarity measure as a representative metric to illustrate how the similarity of Korean film posters to Hollywood films evolves over time.

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Visual Similarity (1-NN)	10.763	6.079	6.154	31.251
Visual Similarity (3-NN)	13.536	8.169	7.795	44.262
Visual Similarity (5-NN)	14.765	7.475	8.989	40.040
Treated	0.379	0.485	0	1
Year	2007.762	2.464	2003	2011

[Table 1] Summary Statistics ( $N=1149$ ).

Figure 1 tracks this evolution of visual similarity between Hallyu-wood and Hollywood film posters, particularly in relation to the 2006 screen quota reduction. Specifically, figure 1 displays an event study setup, where the black solid line represents the

122 treated group (i.e., genres affected to the policy change), and the gray dashed line represents the control group (i.e., genres less affected by the policy change). The vertical axis is the outcome of interest—similarity between Hallyuwood and Hollywood film posters—and the red dashed line at 2006 denotes the policy intervention (the screen quota reduction).

The figure shows that before 2006, genres facing high competition with Hollywood films exhibited film posters that were more visually distinct compared to those in genres with lower levels of competition. This suggests that distribution strategies for these highly competitive genres prioritized differentiation in visual presentation. However, this pattern changed after the screen quota reduction in 2006. The genres treated, which previously maintained visual distinction, became more similar to Hollywood film posters. In contrast, genres less affected by Hollywood’s entry did not exhibit the same shift. I formally tested these results in the section.

### Regression Results

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Treated	-3.139*** (1.076)	-3.374*** (1.167)	-4.005*** (1.376)
2003	3.088* (1.862)	5.756** (2.579)	2.344 (1.949)
2004	1.302 (1.625)	3.182 (2.146)	0.627 (1.885)
2005	-0.121 (1.405)	1.033 (1.793)	0.051 (1.851)
2007	0.751 (1.039)	-0.004 (1.252)	-0.580 (1.398)
2008	-1.614 (0.981)	-1.034 (1.106)	-1.636 (1.292)
2009	-1.913* (1.020)	-1.765 (1.147)	-2.821** (1.284)

2010	-0.849 (1.018)	-0.386 (1.166)	-1.432 (1.283)
2011	-1.314 (1.004)	-2.404** (1.054)	-3.075** (1.231)
Treated 2003	1.637 (2.485)	1.119 (3.474)	3.008 (2.670)
Treated 2004	0.424 (2.083)	-0.492 (2.770)	1.121 (2.439)
Treated 2005	3.000 (1.859)	3.361 (2.445)	3.760 (2.454)
Treated 2007	3.230** (1.450)	3.734** (1.901)	4.314** (2.048)
Treated 2008	3.601** (1.403)	3.464** (1.612)	3.027* (1.710)
Treated 2009	3.422** (1.393)	4.194** (1.687)	4.137** (1.723)
Treated 2010	3.736** (1.472)	4.518** (1.824)	4.616** (1.838)
Treated 2011	2.719** (1.294)	4.058*** (1.428)	4.471*** (1.626)
Constant	11.452*** (0.887)	13.916*** (0.950)	16.222*** (1.126)
<i>N</i>	1149	1149	1149
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.048	0.054	0.040

[Table 2] Regression Results.

The results reveal a significant shift in the visual similarities between Hallyuwood and Hollywood film posters in response to increased levels of competition. Prior to 2006, genres facing higher levels of competition tended to differentiate themselves visually. This is evident in the negative and highly significant coefficient for Treated across all three models, indicating that film posters from these genres were, on average, more visually distinct from their nearest Hollywood counterparts. This effect is consistent across different levels of similarity measurement,

**124** with the magnitude increasing from the 1-NN (-3.139) to the 5-NN (-4.005). The findings suggest that before the 2006 screen quota reduction, these genres deliberately adopted distinct visual strategies, possibly as a means of carving out a unique market identity in a highly competitive landscape.

Interestingly and consistent with the figure, this pattern changed after 2006. The interaction terms between Treated and post-2006 years reveal a gradual but clear reversal. Beginning in 2007, genres that previously maintained strong visual differentiation began shifting towards a more similar visual style to Hollywood films. This effect grows stronger in later years, with statistically significant positive coefficients in 2007, 2008, and particularly in 2010 and 2011, where the similarity increases by approximately 4 to 4.5 points across all models. By 2011, the genres treated—those initially maintaining distinct visual identities—were now adopting film poster designs that closely resembled those of their Hollywood counterparts.

The results additionally point to an interesting dynamic. While prior literature suggests a cyclical pattern of alternating similarity and dissimilarity, these findings indicate a sustained higher level of visual similarity between Hallyuwood and Hollywood. Moreover, this heightened similarity persists even in the medium term, extending up to five years after the policy's implementation.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study investigates the impact of the 2006 reduction of South Korea's screen quota—a policy that cut the mandated days for domestic film releases from 146 to 73 (Messerlin and Parc 2014; 2017)—by examining the visual similarity between Hallyuwood and Hollywood film posters. Specifically, the findings indicate that while moderate competition is associated with more distinctive color usage, Hallyuwood posters increasingly becoming more visually similar to Hollywood film posters after the screen quota reduction. This shift suggests that Hallyuwood relied

more on standardized color schemes and “tried-and-true” poster formulas, especially in genres facing strong competition from imports from Hollywood.

Building on these insights, this research contributes to cultural industry studies in two key ways. First, by integrating theories of market signaling (Spence 1973; Gray 2010) and institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) into the analysis of paratexts, it underscores how policy changes can prompt local industries to mirror global (design) norms. Scholarship on cultural industries has long noted a tension between creative expression and market imperatives (Gross 2020; Jin 2013). This study extends that observation to paratextual strategies, showing that film posters—which frequently offer audiences their first impression of a film—became more similar as market competition intensified. In doing so, they conveyed consistent cues regarding genre, tone, and production quality. By linking these design choices to policy-driven market changes, the findings reveal how paratexts act as dynamic sites where creative decisions intersect with strategic signaling. Notably, the focus on color highlights that these elements are not purely creative design choices but are also highly strategic (Genette 1997; Gray 2010).

Second, the results illuminate how policy shapes creative choices in an increasingly globalized film landscape. While many discussions of globalization focus on box office performance or content, this work demonstrates that policy changes—such as reducing a screen quota—can have wide-ranging effects on the visuals of film distribution and marketing. When protective measures are scaled back, local studios may adopt “safe” or internationally recognizable visuals, reflecting a process akin to institutional isomorphism. Empirical evidence from post-2006 Korea shows that local marketers responded to heightened competition by standardizing poster designs, thus adding a fresh perspective to cultural policy debates and creative industry management.

126 Beyond contributing to the literature, these findings suggest three insights for cultural and industrial policy. First, in light of the homogenizing pressure observed, policymakers should consider measures that sustain local cinema's visibility. This could include introducing streaming content quotas requiring a certain share of local films in catalogs. Even as full protectionism wanes, a modest requirement can ensure locally produced films regularly reach audiences. Complementary policies might involve financial incentives or grants for domestic filmmakers, specifically earmarked for distribution and marketing.

The second insight is that government and industry bodies can promote initiatives that counteract one-size-fits-all distribution and marketing trends. For instance, cultural agencies could host design competitions, festivals, or awards for innovative film posters, thereby celebrating creativity over conformity. Offering recognition and even funding for visual dissimilarity would incentivize distributors to take more creative risks in poster design. Additionally, investing in training programs or workshops for designers can expose them to a wide range of design philosophies—from traditional art-inspired posters to cutting-edge digital campaigns—beyond the prevailing global templates. Such efforts could help ensure that even as films compete commercially, they do so with a rich array of creative expressions, keeping the industry vibrant.

Lastly, from a broader perspective, cultural policymakers should stay vigilant about the effects of globalization on creative output. The dominance of Hollywood and other major players can lead to concerns about cultural homogenization. Regular industry audits or research funded by arts councils could track trends in domestic film distribution and marketing—are we seeing an erosion of cultural distinctiveness? If metrics (such as diversity of poster styles or themes in top films) indicate excessive homogenization, policymakers might respond with targeted programs, such as bursaries for films rich in cultural themes or partnerships with national museums or galleries to integrate art

and film promotion. Policies could also facilitate collaboration between local filmmakers and international experts to find new ways of marrying global appeal with local identity, effectively turning globalization into a two-way exchange. In essence, a continuous feedback loop—where policymakers gauge cultural health and intervene as needed—could help balance market efficiency with the preservation of Korea’s cultural voice in cinema.

Despite offering valuable insights into how policy changes shape film distribution strategies, this study is not without limitations. One notable constraint is its focus on Korean film posters following a single policy event in 2006—a specificity that may limit the generalizability of its findings. Industry contexts and regulatory frameworks differ across countries, raising questions about how these insights might translate to other regions and cultural environments. Hence, future research could extend similar analyses to markets such as China or Europe, exploring whether film posters in those contexts also converge visually when policies shift and whether certain industries develop alternative strategies to maintain distinctiveness.

Another limitation arises from using only static film posters as a proxy for broader film distribution and marketing strategies. While posters offer a convenient snapshot of visual strategy, film distribution has become multifaceted, encompassing trailers, social media campaigns, and numerous other paratexts that might exhibit different adaptation patterns. It remains unclear whether these other distribution and marketing formats also increased in visual similarity post-2006. By measuring whether viewers notice such shifts and how that awareness influences their choices, future work could provide an audience-centered perspective that complements the current supply-side analysis.

In conclusion, this research underscores the dynamic and ever-evolving nature of cultural industries, illustrating how external pressures like competition and policy shifts can influence even

128 the creative flourishes that surround a film. The Korean film industry's post-2006 experience serves as a testament to both the challenges and the adaptive spirit of creative sectors. While increased competition led to a higher degree of visual similarity, this does not signal an end to creativity—rather, it highlights the industry's capacity to learn and adjust. Over time, we can remain optimistic that film distributors will continue to find innovative ways to marry market appeal with artistic innovation. Just as South Korean cinema evolved to become a global powerhouse in the wake of policy changes, its distribution and marketing approaches can likewise progress toward new forms of expression. Ultimately, the push and pull between global market forces and local creative styles can spark fresh ideas, inspiring film industries not just in Korea but around the world to reinvent their visual styles. By recognizing these trends and learning from them, stakeholders can ensure that even in competitive environments, the spark of creative innovation remains alive, paving the way for film posters (and the films they promote) to continue captivating audiences in new and exciting ways.

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**K-POP**

**NATION BRANDING**

**CULTURAL HYBRIDIZATION**

**MUSIC VIDEOS**

**SOCIETAL PRESSURE**

[ 5 ]

# **The Korean Idol Industry: Nation Branding and Cultural Hybridization**

Tabitha Adler

**K-pop has become the driving force of the Korean Wave and is now an important element of Korean nation branding. Its idols, however, not only represent the country but must also conform to societal expectations. Based on a case study of the K-pop group Big Bang, this article shows that these expectations slow the cultural hybridization process and hinder the creative work of actors in the music industry. A variety of examples of cultural hybridization in music videos are provided. Nonetheless, bans from networks, removal from the central distribution system YouTube, and personal resignation by artists restrict the genre and hinder its full potential.**

## Introduction

More than 40,000 fans from 84 countries gathered at the Deutsche Bank Park in Frankfurt am Main (Germany) for the first European K-pop festival in May 2022. The involvement of the South Korean (hereafter Korean) TV and radio network SBS, as well as the Korea Tourism Organization and the Consulate General of South Korea, was not the only indication of the importance of K-pop as a branding tool for both the Korean government and the economy. During the opening show, the Korean Ambassador called K-pop a “cultural mediator” between Korea and Europe, while he praised the genre for bringing cultures together. K-pop is the “new growth engine” (Jin 2016, 27) of the *Korean Wave*, which describes the export and globalization of Korean cultural products. The popularity of these products internationally is used to promote Korea as a young and trendy nation, through which the cultural sector has become one of the main elements of Korean nation branding strategies. However, if K-pop is used as a nation branding tool, how does it affect the idols in the industry and their music? Critics often describe K-pop as a copy of American music. If that is the case, how can the genre promote *Korean-ness*, or is K-pop more than American pop music and is it able to create something new through cultural hybridization? This chapter analyzes the hybridization process of K-pop based on a case study of the male K-pop group Big Bang, focusing on their music videos as cultural products, the genre’s role as a nation branding tool, and the effect these policy expectations have on the creative process and, therefore, on the genre’s cultural hybridization, which is essential for its transnational appeal.

As a group that has been active since 2006, Big Bang and its members G-Dragon, T.O.P., Taeyang, and Daesung, as well as former member Seungri, qualify as a suitable object for this case study through their impact on the genre, the idol industry as a whole, and their international success. Furthermore, the

members, especially G-Dragon and T.O.P., were involved early on in the music production and creative processes for their releases, which was not only counter to the trend of Korean pop music in the 1990s and early 2000s, but also paved the way for future self-produced groups like 2NE1, BTS, and Stray Kids. In fact, idols like BTS's Namjoon and Jungkook have named the group and Big Bang-leader G-Dragon as their role models and inspiration to enter the industry themselves (Koreaboo 2018). The group received the award of "Artist of the Year" at the *Mnet Asian Music Awards* four times (2008, 2012, 2015, and 2025), with leader G-Dragon being the only solo artist ever to win the title (2013).<sup>1</sup> G-Dragon, who is lauded as the "King of K-pop" (Peng 2017) has gained international attention in the fashion and music industry over the years and was one of the first Korean idols to collaborate with American artists like Flo Rida, Missy Elliot, and Diplo. With the release of their single "Still Life" in April 2022, after a four-year break, the group proved that they still influence the Korean and international music industry. "Still Life" reached the top ten in the *Billboard Global 200* and placed first in the *World Digital Song Sales* (Benjamin et al. 2022) and the Korean *Gaon Charts* (Gaon Chart 2022), even though the group did not promote the single. Big Bang can therefore be seen as an outstanding example of the Korean idol industry.

This analysis focuses on music videos of singles as products of cultural hybridization. My understanding of cultural hybridization in this context is based on Homi Bhabha's theory of the *third space*. K-pop music videos are widely available through social media, and are "the most capital-intensive object in the K-pop value chain" (Laurie 2019, 217). This makes them meaningful to the industry in two ways. On the one hand, as Fuhr (2016, 87) notes, digital singles are one of the main sales strategies in the K-pop industry. On the other hand, the distribution of music videos

1 Others who have received the award include: TVXQ (2006), Super Junior (2007), 2PM (2009), 2NE1 (2010), Girls Generation (2011), EXO (2014), and BTS (2016–2022).

136 through social media has led to the discovery of new songs through websites such as YouTube, making them an important part of the distribution strategy of K-pop companies (Jin 2020, 54–55). Ingyu Oh and Hyo-jung Lee (2013, 42–43) point out that “K-pop is a new genre for social media and YouTube in particular,” which allows the Korean music industry to avoid traditional Western music distribution and promotional channels (*ibid.*, 55). Ultimately, K-pop music videos combine the marketing strategies of the Korean idol industry and digitization, including new digital infrastructures, as well as the visual, aesthetic, and musical form of the genre. Therefore, analyzing the contents of these videos as products of creative processes and distribution can provide us with insight into the K-pop criteria that the industry must meet to conform with their role as a nation branding tool, while at the same time being a cultural product within a profit-oriented industry.

To achieve this, I will first give an overview of the historical cultural background in Korea and the role of K-pop as a nation branding tool before mapping out the development of K-pop from the early 1990s onward. I then provide an analysis of Big Bang’s music videos as products of cultural hybridization, with a focus on Western influences through hip hop, English-mixing, and popular culture, which are ultimately combined with Korean elements such as gender performance and cultural references. For this, I analyzed 75 music videos, including 31 videos from the group and 44 from their solo releases and subunits. Furthermore, I looked at appearances on reality TV shows and news articles about the group.

## **K-Pop’s Cultural History and Role in Korean Nation Branding**

To understand the Korean cultural industry and its position in the public sphere, it is important to understand what Yim describes as “a problem of cultural identity” in Korea because “traditional

culture has been eroded and furthermore separated from contemporary history” (2002, 38). During the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910) Korea was influenced by a Sinocentric worldview, which included Confucian values as well as music performances featuring Chinese stringed instruments and flutes (B. Kim 2015, 154) before a period when Korea’s culture was influenced by Japanese colonization (1910–1945). With the spread of Western culture through American soldiers in the second half of the twentieth century came bans on Western and Japanese music by the authoritarian government (Yim 2002, 38–39). This was meant to protect Korea from foreign cultural influences. The 1988 Olympics, however, are considered a milestone for initiating a shift in the Korean public mindset and pushing the democratic government towards a more open approach to their own cultural identity and international perspectives (ibid., 46). The following were two major events in the 1990s that led to a new focus on Korean cultural products: the success of the Korean movie *Sopyonje* and a report from the *Presidential Advisory Board on Science and Technology*, which calculated that Hyundai had to sell 1.5 million cars to achieve the same profit as the Hollywood movie *Jurassic Park*. Following these events, the government began to play a crucial role in the promotion, funding, and success of Korean cultural products from the 1990s onward (Shim 2006, 32).

Simultaneously, the Korean music industry began changing in the 1990s. On one hand, musician Seo Taiji introduced a style of music that could be categorized as a genre mix. He and his group Seo Taiji and Boys combined dance music, rap, and dance (Morelli 2001, 250), which have remained the main characteristics of K-pop to this day (H. L. Lee et al. 2013, 534). On the other hand, Lee Soo-man debuted the first K-pop group H.O.T. with his company SM Entertainment (hereafter SM) in 1996, which was based on the Japanese idol system. He surveyed teenage girls to find the perfect group based on what they liked in a boy group and built H.O.T. based on these results (Shim 2006, 37–38). Other companies followed closely, which led to the formation of

138 several groups in the 1990s. Today, the K-pop industry is known for extensive training periods in which so-called *trainees* receive vocal, rap, and dance coaching, as well as language classes. The duration of these periods can differ from a few months to several years, where the trainees are molded into a specific brand image that the groups follow, such as perfectly synchronized dancing and polite behavior for SM-idols, or a more individualistic approach in terms of stage presence, fashion, and appearance, embodied by groups from the company YG Entertainment (hereafter YG), to which Big Bang belonged (Shin and L. Kim 2013, 266).<sup>2</sup>

Over the years, the strategies and extent of political support for cultural industries in Korea varied between governments with differing political orientations. Nevertheless, the industry has become an important soft power tool for the country (Song 2020, 132). The extent to which idols and actors are essential for Korea's brand image can be seen in the comment of a marketing manager Sung interviewed, who commented on the role Korean stars play in the image of Korea as a "lively and dynamic nation. ... Hallyu stars already have the image, as they are lively, young and trendy; it is very much effective to use them in delivering such an image through video" (Sung 2015, 40). One way the government uses Hallyu stars to associate the state with this trendiness can be seen in the practice of inviting Korean drama stars to official state visits during the early 2000s (Shim 2006, 30) and K-pop idols such as EXO today. Another practice involves the use of idols in tourism campaigns and as cultural ambassadors. Thus, Big Bang has been showcased along with popular Korean actors in an interactive web drama called "Haru," which was released in 2010 by the *Korean Tourism Organization*, to appeal to Taiwanese

2 All members of Big Bang have left YG in recent years and signed with different labels for their solo careers. Seungri left in 2019 as a result of the Burning Sun Scandal, Taeyang signed in 2022 with YG's affiliate *The Black Label*, Daesung and T.O.P left in the same year. Finally, in 2023 G-Dragon officially announced that he was leaving YG after 20 years, making him the last Big Bang member to leave the entertainment company.

and Japanese audiences (Sung 2015, 43). Furthermore, in 2016 the group was announced as an honorary ambassador of *Creative Korea* with the goal “to play a significant role in raising global awareness” (Yonhap News Agency 2016).

In addition, the country’s cultural and political background led to an understanding of globalization and culture that Fuhr (2016, 150) calls a Darwinist perspective, in which “many Koreans define culture in terms of competition and development.” It is important to note that this perspective is not only politically and economically motivated, but also affects K-pop idols and the public’s reception. This is partly due to Korea’s unique rapid economic and societal changes, leading to the phenomenon Chang describes as “compressed modernity.” While Korea’s economic and political structure has transformed into a turbo-capitalistic democracy, the social order has remained family-centered and has reinforced traditional values (Chang 2010, 1). In this environment, cultural identity and influence are closely connected to an understanding of political legitimacy and power. Researchers have used the term “cosmopolitan striving” to describe the feeling of validation that comes from recognition by foreign countries. Ingyu Oh and Hyo-jung Lee (2014, 82) compare the effects of cosmopolitan striving on the recognition of K-pop idols with the support of those who achieved victory in international sports competitions, while Jang and Youngsun Kim (2013, 100) describe it as one of the crucial elements of Korean society that enables the trainee system of the idol industry to function. The achievements of individuals are perceived as a national success (ibid., 96). On the flip side, this means that failure also becomes of public interest as well. Therefore, K-pop not only acts as a genre in the Korean nation branding strategy. The faces of individual idols and groups represent the country and create an image of cultural identity.

## Cultural Hybridization in K-Pop

As shown above, K-pop is heavily influenced by Western music genres and the Japanese idol system. Following Bhabha's concept of the *third space*, cultural hybridization means the combination of one or more foreign cultures with the local one and the creation of a third and new space (Bhabha 2004, 5). According to Song, K-pop groups could achieve consistent success through cultural hybridization (Song 2020, 143) to avoid being perceived as an "outdated copy of an American original" (Kloet and Kooijman 2016, 125). Furthermore, Ritzer (2011, 154) defines this process of cultural hybridization as "the mixing of cultures and the integration of the global and the local leading to unique combinations," to which Pieterse (1996, 1392) adds that "cultural mixing [contains] politics of integration without the need to give up identity." Consequently, K-pop would need to achieve a combination of Western and other foreign influences with Korean cultural and personal identity to create something new. As a group heavily involved in the production and creative processes of their music and videos, Big Bang manages to achieve cultural hybridization in various contexts.

### K-Hip Hop and Soft Masculinity

Big Bang is known for its hip hop focus, which applies to most groups from YG Entertainment. Every song of the group's 31 singles contains at least one rap part, which also applies to the sub-units *GD & TOP* (four) and *GD & Taeyang* (one). However, a comment by JYP Entertainment founder J. Y. Park (hereafter JYP) at the survival show *WIN: WHO IS NEXT*<sup>3</sup> shows the importance of merging African-American music with the artist's style and identity:

3 In 2013 YG Entertainment aired a survival show to find the next Big Bang among their trainees. The group who won the competition debuted under the name "Winner" at YG.

If we look at the history of Korean music, American hip hop, American soul—what we call black music. There were many musicians who loved and performed them, Seo Taiji and Boys, DEUX, and I was among them too. But what all those popular groups all have in common is that they weren't simply good at black music. They added something different. You were very good at American music, but what have you added on to it? (Mnet K-POP 2013, 28:10–28:37)

During a talk at the University of Texas, Tricia Rose noted that originality and innovation in US hip hop are based not on “telling stories from a single position, but a collective narrative” (Rose 2013, 4:00–4:04). In addition, Perry claims that hip hop “is black American music,” despite hybridity within the genre and the influence of other communities and cultures (2004, 10). Terkourafi (2010, 10) adds “five elements—non literality, hyperbole, embellished language, an outlet for the emotions and the notion of a contest—[that] have arguably been inherited from African-American sounding practices into hip hop.” JYP, like other Korean artists, recognizes hip hop as black American music, aiming to localize it in Korea by adding personal elements and therefore creating hybridity.

However, with the commercialization of American hip hop, the genre has changed (Perry 2004, 3), and elements like “the commodification of black female bodies and the grotesque marketing of racist images of black male violence [among others] threaten to completely overwhelm the public face of hip hop” (ibid., 7). Rose claims that, with the commercialization of the genre, hip hop shifted to what she calls the “gangster-pimp-ho trinity” (2013, 12:08). Therefore, many images and content in today's rap conform to one of the three sides to claim authenticity. Furthermore, hip hop makes use of codes of masculinity based on dominance, which Rose sees as based on racism, with the codes of authenticity reproducing African-American stereotypes of violence, hypersexuality, and criminality (ibid., 14:04–14:47). Before proceeding with my analysis, it is important to note that

142 hip hop and rap contains a wide variety of content and are not homogeneous. In her analysis of political rap, Bonnette (2015, 79) for example finds that “gangsta” rap objectifies women, while political rap critically discusses feminist elements like violence against women, reproductive rights, and the objectification of women (ibid., 82). This complexity of genre falls in line with Altman’s (1999, 84) suggestion “to treat genre as a complex *situation*, a concatenated series of events regularly repeated according to a recognizable pattern.” When discussing remakes of movies Verevis (2006, 129–30) added that the remake is not simply a copy of the source text but borrows from it while adding new cultural and situational context. Neither the original African-American hip hop nor the Korean “remake” fits into a fixed category, and both depend on given situations. Nevertheless, the characteristics of “gangsta” rap are prominent in contemporary commercialized hip hop and provide a basis for my analysis of Big Bang’s music.

GD & TOP’s “Knock Out,” a collaboration with American producer Diplo, is an example of the gangster-pimp-ho trinity and codes of dominant masculinity in commercialized hip hop. G-Dragon and T.O.P. present themselves as rappers through the lyrics, where they rap about their influence and success while a group of female dancers underscore their dominance. One shot shows T.O.P. in front of a white wall before he gestures to call in the dancers, who wear *Playboy* costumes and begin to dance behind him (Dorian Grey 2021, 1:10; see figure 1). In another sequence, G-Dragon sits on a couch and caresses a woman who is lying over his lap (ibid., 2:10). Through the objectification of these women, the two place themselves in a position of power. Furthermore, in a different section, they are posed in front of a tank with the *Playboy* logo. While G-Dragon and T.O.P. dance in front of the war machine, the gun barrel sways from left to right (ibid., 2:19). Chuyun Oh describes a similar objectification and dehumanization of female dancers as well as codes of dominant masculinity in “One of a Kind” (2014a, 122). She finds, however, that

“despite the adoption of rap music along with masculine gestures and misogynist aspects, G-Dragon localizes hip hop by selectively including or excluding certain elements” (ibid.), while using elements like cross-dressing and a high-pitched voice to position hip hop “in a highly cute, bright, and mischievous context” (ibid., 123).

Similar modes can be found in “Knock Out.” Both rappers wear make-up, but G-Dragon adds elements like highlighter on his cheeks (Dorian Grey 2021, 0:07), rhinestones (ibid., 0:26), or one blue and one purple eyebrow while wearing a sheer blouse and red statement necklace (ibid., 1:37). Furthermore, the ambiguity of the video can be seen while the two are dancing in front of the tank. While both mimic motions of shooting a gun, G-Dragon alternates his movements between wide gestures with outstretched arms and keeping his legs tight together and arms close to his body to move from his waist. His hands are balled into fists, reminiscent of the movements of girl groups (ibid., 2:15–2:24). This mode of switching between masculine and feminine presentation leads to an androgynous appearance, which does not conform to the conventional modes of dominance that are often seen in hip hop. Furthermore, in another shot, the duo sits in leather chairs from the German luxury brand *MCM*. While T.O.P. reads a book and pets a dog made of leather, G-Dragon plays and cuddles with a stuffed animal (see figure 2). This shows a more playful, almost childlike side, which T.O.P. underscores with the line: “I may like toys more than girls but laugh at me and you’ll get hurt, I get meaner” (ibid., 0:57–1:00). Later G-Dragon adds: “But at night I’m so lonely, only my scandals are waiting for me. The girls like the other guy better, my pride is dented. My Gaho [his dog] is more popular than me” (ibid., 2:01–2:08). This shows a self-irony and humor that stands in contrast to the image of masculinity and authenticity through dominance, while G-Dragon, in particular, presents himself through “soft masculinity” (Jung 2010), which Jeehyun Jenny Lee, Rachel Kar Yee Lee, and Park (2020, 5914) describe “as the domain of Korean culture and Korean men.”



[Fig. 1] T.O.P. with dancers in "Knock Out" (1:13)



[Fig. 2] T.O.P. and G-Dragon in "Knock Out" (3:03)

Laurie (2019, 221) additionally points out that the androgynous appearance of idols is a central part of Korean branding. It is important to note, however, that Korea's soft masculinity does not replace or demolish patriarchal structures. Instead, they are re-employed through hyper femininity, in which women must be more feminine to keep up the patriarchal Confucian hierarchy (C. Oh 2014b, 58). Therefore, "Knock Out" is an example of a hybrid music video, which combines modes of African-American hip hop with Korean soft masculinity and humorous self-mockery.

Similar codes can be found in videos like “Crayon,” “Zutter,” “michiGO,” and “Bae Bae.”

By contrast, Big Bang’s “Haru Haru” is an example of the use of storytelling to create a hybrid cultural product instead of relying on modes of styling, self-mockery, and dancing. The first scene shows a street that seems to exist in an ambiguous place with English posters (YG ENTERTAINMENT 2008, 0:35) and street signs (*ibid.*, 0:33), as well as Korean writing at a store (*ibid.*, 0:24). When G-Dragon comes around the corner, he sees T.O.P. and the actress Park Min-young, who seem close and flirtatious. When she leaves, G-Dragon confronts T.O.P. The two begin to rap towards each other, mimicking a rap battle while the other members, Taeyang, Daesung, and Seungri, try to break them apart. Finally, the fight escalates when G-Dragon hits T.O.P. (*ibid.*, 1:27), initiating “hand-to-hand combat.” Their confrontations repeat throughout the video, which suggests the following plot: T.O.P. and G-Dragon fight verbally and physically over a girl. In this scenario, Park would be a “ho,” who cheats on her boyfriend with his best friend while the two men fight over her, asserting modes of authenticity and masculinity.

However, G-Dragon is repeatedly shown breaking down and crying as his eyeliner smudges progressively (*ibid.*, 1:53). His emotions are not exclusively displayed as anger and aggression, but instead there is space for his sadness and tears, which stands in contrast to the image of authenticity through violence. Ultimately, Park is shown in the hospital with the other members surrounding her before Taeyang finally calls G-Dragon. The latter immediately rushes to the hospital, but, when he arrives, it is too late. Park has passed away. This leads to another emotional breakdown from G-Dragon as he recalls his happy memories with Park. The story therefore shifts from a toxic depiction of masculinity and modes of commercialized American hip hop to a drama about friendship, heartbreak, and death. It is revealed that Park asked T.O.P. to play her boyfriend so that G-Dragon would come to hate her and not miss her once she passed away. This

146 storytelling conforms to a style of hip hop that has developed in Korea, where the focus lies on “poetic-musical associations” that are more meaningful to the Korean audience (Um 2013, 57). “Haru Haru” shows that cultural hybridization can be reached through different modes, with storytelling being one of them. Another example of this process is Big Bang’s “Lies,” which is considered their breakthrough single and the marker of their unique sound, for which they combined dance music, rap, and ballads, which the group continued to do in “Haru Haru.”

### Western and Korean Cultural References

The combination of its own work with modes of authenticity from African-American hip hop is not the only process of hybridization Big Bang displays. Considering language, the combined use of English and Korean has become a defining aspect of K-pop, which Fuhr (2016, 6) calls “English-mixing.” Furthermore, Jin and Ryoo (2014, 122) name three areas in which the use of English has become crucial: the names of the idols and groups, song titles, and lyrics. This can be seen with Big Bang as well, who have used English in 62 out of 64 songs. The only exceptions have been Daesung’s Japanese releases “D-Day” and “あ・げ・ちよ!”. The latter is the only song without an English title on YouTube and therefore cannot be found easily for non-Japanese speakers. The other songs, however, use English as a lingua franca to connect to non-Korean-speaking fans (J. S. Lee 2004, 434). In “Fxxk It” Big Bang uses a form of linguistic hybridization that allows the hook of the song to carry a double meaning. The Korean line “era moreugetda,”<sup>4</sup> which has been translated as “Fuck it,” is an exclamation similar to “whatever.” The music video uses “Fxxk It” in its subtitle (BIG BANG 2016, 1:06), but to English speakers the hook sounds like the phrase “and I wanna get down.” This means that the hook not only has two meanings but can be sung along to by both Korean and English-speaking fans. This technique of

4 Hangeul: “에라 모르겠다”

English-mixing as a hybridization process can be seen in the work of other YG artists as well, as can be seen in Blackpink's "Whistle" and Mino's "Body." 147

Furthermore, Big Bang's songs contain references to both Western and Korean cultural content and inspirations. G-Dragon and T.O.P. use Da Vinci's "The Last Supper" as a visual code to emphasize the content of their solo songs. In G-Dragon's "Coup d'Etat," the rapper is positioned at the center of a table, surrounded by blindfolded women who form a replica of the painting as they point their cameras and microphones at G-Dragon (BIG BANG 2013, 2:07; see figure 3). He therefore positions himself in Jesus's place, who not only instigated a religious revolution but was surrounded by followers and questioned contemporary morality and social structures. This, however, is not the only connection the music video draws to figures of protest. The song begins with the words "the revolution will not be televised, the revolution is in your mind, the revolution is here" (ibid., 0:08–0:16), which is a sample of the Gil Scott-Heron poem "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised." Scott-Heron was an African-American musician and poet, who wrote the poem during the civil rights movement as a critique of American media and drugs, calling out people's dependency. G-Dragon uses these cultural symbols to underline his revolution, his "Coup d'Etat," where he stands against the media and public to revolutionize the Korean music industry. He must endure their critique and even hate, which he leaves behind in the form of his dried skin (ibid., 2:51). G-Dragon uses symbols and codes from Western culture and history in "Coup d'Etat" to visualize and underscore his cultural revolution and to protest societal boundaries and media backlash, which makes this another example of successful hybridization.

T.O.P. on the other hand uses "The Last Supper" in "Turn It Up" to reference and visualize his interest in art. Similarly, "Doom Dada" references Salvador Dalí's works through visual replicas and names the African-American artist Basquiat (see figure 4).



[Fig. 3] G-Dragon in “Coup d’Etat” (2:09)



[Fig. 4] T.O.P. as Dali in “Doom Dada” (2:53)

In “Zutter” the rapper references Da Vinci, Francis Bacon, and Calder, which are names and images a transnational audience is likely to recognize. Western culture can therefore serve as a hook and connection to a wider audience. Through his re-creation and interpretation, T.O.P. supports hybridization processes and transforms existing works into something new.

Especially in the *MADE Series*, which was the last album release of the group, Big Bang used multiple codes, locations, and

references to Korean culture. In “We Like 2 Party” the group is filmed during a trip to Jeju Island where the members enjoy their time together, get drunk, and visit a karaoke bar. This video not only shows the group on a more personal level but also has the potential to serve as a promotional video for tourism in Jeju and Korea in general. However, the Korean TV network *KBS* banned the video due to its mentioning of brand names and the depiction of the drunk band members (Cheung 2015). “Bae Bae” is another song that shows elements of Korean history but was banned from TV networks due to the video’s suggestive sexual content. The members each represent a phase in life: G-Dragon enacts puberty, Taeyang meets a partner, T.O.P. shows intercourse with images implying sex, Daesung lives with his partner, and finally Seungri represents older age. In the final part of the video, the group is on the moon along with women dressed in traditional *hanboks*, while the group celebrates and enjoys their afterlife. The videos “Fantastic Baby” and Taeyang’s “Ringa Linga,” on the other hand, include elements of traditional lion and shamanic dances. These are examples of how Big Bang includes Korean references in their music videos. It is notable however, that it seems their music has started to include more Korean references and images in the later years of their career, which could be a sign that Korean traditional elements might become more popular in K-pop. Groups like Stray Kids (“God’s Menu” and “Thunderous”), Blackpink (“Pink Venom”), or EXO’s Kai (“Peaches”) have shown traditional clothing in music videos in recent years. However, with the fast pace of the industry, it cannot be determined whether this will be a lasting change or a passing trend.

In summary it can be said that Big Bang, with a special focus on the rappers G-Dragon and T.O.P., reaches hybridization in the sense of Bhabha’s *third space* through different meaningful processes. The modes that I have shown are the characteristic codes of authenticity in American hip hop, which are combined with Korean soft masculinity. This can be achieved through visual codes and text, as well as storytelling. Furthermore, the usage

150 of Western cultural elements can be combined with a message or personal interest to recreate, recontextualize, or emphasize specific meanings or contents. The use of this predominantly Western content is a way to create a transnational appeal and recognition. A useful area of future research would be to extend this analysis to explore the influence of other geographical and cultural regions. Finally, I gave an example of music videos that use Korean cultural elements and references in two different ways. As noted, however, two of them have been banned from Korean TV broadcasts due to sexual content and drinking. In the following section, I will give an overview of how these bans, the role of Big Bang as a nation branding tool, and the expectations that come with this are interconnected and what impact this has on the group.

## **The Role of K-Pop as a Nation Branding Tool**

As I have shown before, K-pop has become an important tool of Korea's soft power, which according to Azizah and Dwiyanti (2021, 15) leads not only to the idols being role models in terms of appearance but also concerning their morals. This is closely connected to "cosmopolitan striving" and means the group or individual will receive backlash from the audience if they fail to meet its expectations. G-Dragon has mentioned his involvement in scandals in "Knock Out," while he sings in "Coup d'Etat" about revolutionizing the industry and going against society's expectations. Another song that features these attacks is Big Bang's "Monster." However, idols must regain the public's trust. One possibility to do this is through television shows like *Healing Camp*. After G-Dragon had been charged with marijuana use and Daesang had caused a fatal car accident, the two had to attend the show. There a therapy session was recreated to publicly "heal" both the artists and the public" (Cho 2017, 2309). Daesung had to explain in detail how the accident happened and how remorseful he felt. This can be seen in his "Healing Point: Is it [ok] for me to laugh like last time again?" (engsubkpopshow2 2012,

2:42). G-Dragon on the other hand explains: “I am a bit different from Daesung. The incident ... was my fault. I am looking for forgiveness for my faults and as Big Bang’s leader who is preparing for Big Bang’s new album I want to promote with a clearer heart” (ibid., 2:45–3:01). This means the artist must not only repent but actively work on bettering themselves, while G-Dragon draws a direct connection between his remorse and album promotions. Furthermore, they need to let the audience participate to prove their sincerity and understanding that their behavior affects not only them but their fans and the public as well.

The *Burning Sun Scandal* from 2019, however, proves that misbehavior and illegal activities by a group, as well as an individual, can damage the country’s reputation and soft power. The scandal involved Big Bang’s Seungri, as well as other idols like Highlight’s Yong Jun-hyung and CNBLUE’s Lee Jong-hyun. Named after Seungri’s club, this scandal involved prostitution, hidden sex cameras, and drug abuse, and led to Seungri’s departure from the group, as well as a prison sentence. The case attracted international attention and newspapers like the *Los Angeles Times* ran a story headlined “K-pop’s innocent image is shattered by the ‘Burning Sun’ scandal” (Brown 2019). The *Soft Power Index* of the *USC Center of Public Diplomacy* quotes the *Burning Sun scandal* as a reason for the country’s downranking in 2019 and critiques Korea’s dependency on its entertainment industry (McClory 2019). Ultimately, this close connection between the idol industry and nation branding policy leads to a form of nationalism that involves the country’s representation based on K-pop idols and groups. However, this nationalism also leads to regulations for the idols and the cultural products because they have to conform to societal expectations (Fuhr 2016, 10). Idols are used to increase the country’s soft power, promote the cultural industry, as well as the country’s reputation, which gives them legitimacy and support from the Korean public, but involves obligations and expectations in turn.

152 But how does that affect K-pop as a genre and the creative work? Several Big Bang songs have been banned from broadcast and some have not been uploaded to Big Bang's or YG's official YouTube channel. Instead, fans have been uploading videos that were only available with the purchase of an album, like "Knock Out." This is surprising since YouTube plays a major role in Korean music distribution. Furthermore, Big Bang has their own *YouTube Originals* series called *Run, BIG BANG Scout!* which proves that YG has a valuable connection to YouTube and there must have been a reason for the missing uploads. For instance, one video that has not been uploaded is closely related to T.O.P. and a marijuana scandal: G-Dragon's "Bullshit."

T.O.P. was involved in a marijuana scandal during his enlistment in 2017, which caused him to withdraw from the public. In 2022 he stated in an interview with *Prestige*:

"This is the first time I've spoken about this publicly, but I did try to commit suicide about five years ago," says Choi, looking away, his voice lowering. "I realized later how much hurt and painful memories I gave to the people around me, my family and fans out there."

"Actually, I was going to seriously stop making music and stop being a musician. But during the bad times, the rough times, my motivation to keep going was the music. I wrote more than 100 songs over the past five years. It's been my motivation, like wanting to fill up a bookshelf with my work. It's been my passion. I realized how precious it is to pay back what I've received," he says. "I feel that I'm reborn." (Erickson 2022)

T.O.P. is only one example of idols and Hallyu stars who are not able to satisfy the high expectations of the public and break under this pressure. Elving-Hwang notes that "the number of K-pop idols who have committed suicide in recent years ... reflects undoubtedly the unrelenting pressures to literally perform aesthetic and moral perfection" (2018, 195). However, T.O.P. cites

writing music as his motivation, which makes his passion the only reason that he wants to continue being a musician and making music. 153

The rapper connects the psychological pressure and its effect on his mental health with Korean society, which can be seen in a live stream from 2020. While seemingly intoxicated after drinking, T.O.P. announced that he would never want to make a comeback in Korea again and called people “so evil” (Lin 2020). *Kpopmap*, a K-pop news website, collected reactions from Korean social media users who claimed it was good news that he would not come back and should instead show regret for his actions. Furthermore, the article notes “from the perspective of Western fans, a marijuana incident is hardly anything that would require an attitude of reflection, let alone have any significant impact on an artist’s career” (ibid.). This reaction shows the contrast between the morals and expectations of Korean and Western fans. While Korean fans often call for apologies and boycott idols for reasons like drug use or dating history, Western fans might defend them in these cases. On the other hand, Western fans are quicker to “cancel” groups over issues like *colorism* and *cultural appropriation*. Even more, Big Bang shows how different the modes of legitimization are for American and Korean artists. While Korean artists like T.O.P. and G-Dragon might partially act out modes of criminality and violence in their music videos, they must always go back to the Korean expectations of morality. This can be seen in Psy’s collaboration with Snoop Dogg called “Hang-over.” The music video features G-Dragon and 2NE1’s CL, who are YG artists like Psy, along with Psy and Snoop Dogg. While the criminal record of a foreign artist seems not to impact the legitimization of the artist’s work, this shifts in the context of Korean artists who represent the country.

T.O.P.’s marijuana scandal, however, not only affected the rapper and his mental health, but it also had a direct impact on G-Dragon’s musical release schedule. The release of G-Dragon’s EP “Kwon Ji Yong” was planned soon after the reports about

154 his bandmate's drug offense. However, the planned lead single "Bullshit" was switched out for the ballad "Untitled, 2014" shortly before the official release. "Untitled, 2014" is the only single G-Dragon has released that does not include a rap part. It is about a past love, asking them for forgiveness while admitting his wrongdoings. The simple music video shows his slim figure in a sheer shirt in front of a bright background. "Bullshit" on the other hand is a rap song that employs elements of G-Dragon's rap persona and combines numerous hybrid elements. The song begins with "bow-wow-wow yepi-yo-yepi-ye" (Hoshi Chuan 2017, 0:48–0:54), which is a sample of Dr. Dre's "Dre Day" featuring Snoop Dogg, before he asks "God, who let the dogs out?" about Baha Men's "Who Let The Dogs Out." The line "get ya' crayon crayon" (ibid., 1:29) on the other hand is a quote from his song "Crayon." Visually, the video shows the American rapper Taylor the Creator, whose voice is not featured in the song. Furthermore, sequences between sexualized female dancers and two fighting men, as well as fighting dogs, are quickly cut and alternated. G-Dragon removes himself from that setting and wears—along with make-up, nail polish, and his mullet—items with the branding of his fashion brand *Peaceminusone*. In some scenes, he is positioned in a dog crate with a collar around his neck, which not only borrows from BDSM imagery but removes him from the position of dominant masculinity as well. In addition, the song contains Spanish phrases and words like "samba, rumba, cha-cha" and "qué pasa," which leads to Spanish-English-Korean mixing. Finally, during the last chorus, Chinese flutes can be heard, which adds a historical element to the song.

In summary, it can be said that this music video is an excellent example of cultural hybridization. But it seems that due to T.O.P.'s hospitalization after an overdose, G-Dragon decided not to further provoke the Korean public with a provocative music video and song that contains swearing. Instead, he decided to show a soft and more socially conformist side of himself, with a song in which he asks forgiveness for his unforgivable behavior. This case

therefore not only shows how idols must live up to the public's expectations, but also that they must publicly apologize for their wrongdoings and show genuine regret. If they fail to conform, the public's pressure might push them to leave the industry, which negatively affects the creative process and the artist's potential. Even worse, in some cases they might be pushed even further. At the beginning of 2023, G-Dragon uploaded a video on his personal YouTube account, where he announced plans to meet his fans that year and teased an album he was working on (OfficialG-DRAGON 2023). In October of 2023, however, he found himself in a new drug scandal after police revealed they had opened investigations on him and *Parasite* actor Lee Sun-kyun. For weeks G-Dragon was in Korean headlines before he volunteered for drug testing and was eventually found not guilty. Videos of his visit to the police station show the extent of media interest in this scandal, with a crowd of reporters awaiting his arrival (KOREA NOW 2023). But, while G-Dragon was cleared of the accusations, Lee Sun-kyun's investigations continued and he lost numerous projects while being subjected to strong criticism from the public. This led to the actor's suicide in December of 2023 and brought global attention to the pressure Korean celebrities must endure (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 2023).

Lastly, these scandals can not only affect the country's soft power and brand image but might also lead to decisions within the industry that hinder the hybridization process and limit the industry's potential. Lee and Son (2021, 2939) emphasize the importance for future groups to be involved in creative processes for them to be able to grow into global artists. The "Bullshit" video was only released with the album, and not published on YouTube, which means that it was cut off from K-pop's most influential distribution method. Ultimately, the video was uploaded onto YouTube through an unauthorized account, but with 375,000 views it has only reached a fraction of the 141 million views of "Untitled, 2014."

## Conclusion

In summary, this chapter has shown how Big Bang, more specifically G-Dragon and T.O.P., have created different approaches and hybridized cultural content in the musical video format. I have given an overview of some of the most important strategies used to create a cultural product that deploys something new and therefore exists in the *third space*. These strategies include the combination of modes of authenticity in commercialized American hip hop in combination with the Korean understanding of masculinity in idols, the use of English-mixing, and references to Western and Korean culture. Ultimately, the Korean public's expectation has a direct impact on the idols, which can be seen with Big Bang. However, its expectations of idols and their role as a nation branding tool hinder the creative process that is needed to achieve legitimacy in the context of the Western music industry. Future research should focus on non-Western influences, like the use of Latin American Reggaeton, the growing popularity of Afro Beats, and visual elements from South Asian cultures, as well as the effect these expectations have on groups that are not, or are less, involved in the creative process and therefore rely on the production team of their company. Even more, it may be asked whether the strategies of entertainment companies like SM and YG have changed and their idols are more involved after the success of self-produced groups like Big Bang and now BTS. Lastly, it is important to compare these findings with girl groups that have been involved in their music production; like 2NE1, (G)-idle, and Mamamoo, because they face different challenges in a male-dominated industry. This is especially the case in a country with more traditional societal values like Korea. These include the image of *hyper-girlish femininity* as a response to *soft masculinity* and the deployment of the male gaze.

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**KOREAN DRAMAS**

**STORYTELLING**

**ONLINE PLATFORMS**

**CAREER WOMEN**

[ 6 ]

# **From TV to Online Platform Storytelling: Career Women in Korean Dramas**

**Casandra-Angela Chistinean and Yonson Ahn**

**The emergence of online streaming platforms, such as Netflix and TVING, has offered new opportunities for more diverse and critical storytelling in Korean dramas. With the promotion of socially relevant topics described as a key factor in the success of K-dramas on the globalized market, this paper will compare the depiction of social discourses on career women in Korean TV broadcasting and online streaming platforms. Using film analysis as the method, the paper will compare three dramas from TV broadcasting and three dramas from online platforms to examine whether the latter offer a more diverse and critical portrayal of these discourses compared to the former.**

164 **The objective is to shed light on the changes in storytelling made possible through online streaming platforms.**

## **Introduction**

The creation and distribution of original Korean content through online streaming platforms such as Netflix and TVING not only point to the emergence of a new map of cultural production, facilitated by the consumption and creation of cultural products through digital technologies, but also indicate to changes in the traditional dynamics of creation, production, and distribution of cultural content. In other words, digital platforms enable access to international audiences, facilitate distribution and visibility, and allow for a wider variety and depth of storytelling. In the case of South Korea, the latter was previously restricted in public TV broadcasting due to the regulations imposed by the Korea Communication Standards Commission (KCSC n.d., Art. 5) and due to the monopoly of public TV channels on director and screenwriter contracts. The digital transformation and the entry of streaming platforms, which under KSCS regulations benefit from more freedom of topic depiction, have created new discursive spaces enabling a wider variety of Korean directors and screenwriters to engage in innovative storytelling that is available to a broader audience.

Since the financial crisis in 1997,<sup>1</sup> both the Korean government and its conglomerates have placed a consistent emphasis on globalizing its cultural products. To achieve this, the country has established a comprehensive network of industries and policies that aim to promote the success of its cultural exports.

1 The financial crisis in Korea in 1997 was a severe economic downturn caused by financial panic and currency devaluation, leading the country to seek a bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to stabilize its economy. The IMF provided a bailout package totaling \$57 billion USD to stabilize the country's economy.

Alongside this, Korea has also prioritized capacity building and the creation of exportable content (Chen 2016, 33–38). In the process of establishing this network, however, Korea has created a rigid hierarchy that has put the creation and export of dramas firmly under the control of the KCSC<sup>2</sup> and public broadcasting. Concerning television dramas, one of its major cultural exports, content has predominantly been created, and contracts with directors and drama writers have largely been signed, with the country's largest public broadcasting networks, namely SBS, MBC, and KBS. (Kwon and J. Kim 2013). Their dominance in the field, the well-established production and distribution structures, as well as the restrictions enforced by the KCSC regarding the topics suitable for the public, have shaped the types of stories that were produced, and have in many cases reduced the amount of critical or ambiguous topics that could be consumed by local or international audiences because their export needed to be molded by a specific recipe of success to guarantee high local and international reception (Y. Oh 2018, 38–72).

The first major factor to influence the dynamics of drama production and distribution came into play in 2009 when a series of laws and revisions to the Broadcasting Act led to a deregulation of the market allowing conglomerates to own shares of broadcasting companies (KSC n.d., Art. 8 and 9) and to the licensing of four new cable television networks. The change was unprecedented since its establishment and enabled a new set of actors to influence the content and form of Korea dramas. The emerging online platforms similarly benefited from these changes, as these new conglomerates also invested in online productions and created online platforms like TVING.<sup>3</sup> The second

- 2 The KCSC is an institution that is part of the Korean government and answers directly to it. Furthermore, it is used as a control tool for broadcasting and internet to make sure that their content adheres to the Broadcasting Act.
- 3 TVING is owned by CJ E&M, one of the major entertainment and mass media companies in Korea, owner of TVN, and one of the biggest and most successful cable networks to benefit from 2009's law revisions.

166 major factor that changed storytelling in Korean dramas was the KCSC content allowance for cable and online platform dramas, which are more permissive than those of public broadcasters. This opened up new avenues for the type of stories and dramas that could be filmed. These platforms employed new techniques to attract their audiences by foregoing their limited access to top directors, writers, and actors by and selecting stories that were more complex, diverse, and socially critical than those offered by the public channels (Kang 2023, 176–79). What is more, with Netflix distributing and creating Korean content for an international market, the focus on this form of storytelling as a means of international success became stronger (H. Ju 2020).

In this sense the 27th edition of the Busan Film Festival in 2022, which focused on the sustainability of Korean content in the global and digitized market, has underlined the essential role of original stories in successful global reception. Within the festival, industry experts, including Hyejung Hwang, content chief of TVING, and Keo Lee, content director for Netflix, have highlighted the importance of authentic and original stories that reflect social realities and human experiences with which the audience can empathize. Additionally, both Netflix and TVING have announced plans to increase the production of exclusive content that meets these criteria (BIFF 2022a; K. Lee and Hwang 2022; Noh 2022; J. Cho and Lee 2023). What is more, many other content creators, directors, and writers have taken advantage of the creative freedom, noting their wishes to escape content restraints within Korean television broadcasting and the increased opportunities to reach a more diverse audience (BIFF 2022b; Yoon 2022; J. Lee 2022; MacDonald 2020).

By investigating six selected Korean dramas on TV and digital platforms, this study sets out to establish whether the transition to digital streaming distribution of Korean drama series has created a new space of artistic freedom and greater opportunities in storytelling focused on career women (defined as women in leadership positions in the public or private sectors). The current

work on the representation of career women in these Korean dramas is a test case that aims to explore the developments and changes caused by digital transformation. Korea has one of the biggest gender wage gaps in the OECD countries (OECD 2020, 31), which places the status of career women at the forefront of current social and political discourse. Such issues have become especially relevant in light of President Suk Yeol Yoon's regressive attitude on the matter (Rashid 2022; Draudt 2022). Reports of discrimination in the workforce and limited career opportunities available to women (OECD 2019) make this topic ideal for testing the innovations in storytelling offered by digital platforms. This paper therefore investigates how these series portray societal discourses related to career women in both broadcast and online formats, to find out how the changes in storytelling enabled by online platforms' original content have affected their depiction.<sup>4</sup> Three television and three Netflix and TVING original dramas have been selected for comparison to answer the question: How are career women represented in Korean dramas and has their representation in dramas on digital platforms offered a more in-depth and diversified depiction?

To this end, the first part of the paper will address the social discourses and frames reflecting the social norms, values, and beliefs defining career women in Korean society, as framed by social constructionism (Van Gorp 2007, 60–78). Social constructionism helps reveal how society uses shared beliefs and norms to construct the concept of career women. These frames, shaped by Confucian traditions, colonial history, and rapid economic development, influence societal views and interpretations.

The second part will apply the method of film analysis and the theory of audience engagement (Smith 1995). Smith's theory, focusing on recognition, alignment, and allegiance, will be used to examine how characters in the dramas are depicted and received

4 Defined here as women in middle-management or leadership positions in the public or private sectors (further detailed in Chapter 1.2).

168 by audiences. This framework will analyze how both television and online dramas portray societal discourses on women's careers, highlighting the impact of storytelling changes enabled by online platforms' original content.

These two steps will be applied to three TV and three online dramas: *I Do, I Do*, produced by MBC in 2012, *Because this is my first Life* and *Search: WWW*, produced by TVN in 2017 and 2019, *Juvenile Justice*, produced by Netflix in 2022, *Remarriage and Desire*, produced by Netflix in 2022, and *Work Later, Drink Now* seasons 1 and 2, produced by TVING in 2021 and 2022.

## 1. Defining Career Women in a South Korean Context

Before discussing the depiction of career women in Korean dramas, it is first necessary to define them and analyze the social frames that influence their depiction. In this paper, they are defined as women<sup>5</sup> holding leadership positions in the public or private sectors. Leadership, in this case, implies that they have moved up the career ladder, are above clerical work, and have attained an administrative or managerial position. Job experience is similarly a factor considering that Korean women's career advancement is limited and heavily impeded by marriage and childbirth due to social expectations, restrictive and discriminatory labor policies, and company or institutional policies (OECD 2020, 31–38). Even though the number of women participating in the workforce has increased in Korea (55.6% in 2022) with the goals of achieving personal success, self-realization, and a stable future (M. S. Kim 2020), Korea reported the second lowest percentage (16.3%) of female workers in public and private management positions among the 36 OECD countries (33.7%) (OECD 2022). Of the employed women, approximately 25%

5 In this case cisgender women, because other gender identities have not yet been depicted in Korean television or platform dramas.

retired from the workforce after getting married or when pregnant (Sung 2019, 98–110; K. Kim 2017, 145–72; Joo 2018, 27–34). The average marriage age for women in Korea in 2022 was 31 (KOSIS 2023), while the average pregnancy age was 32 (WEF 2022).

Based on the above data, the characters in the selected dramas are considered career women if they hold a position in the public or private sectors and have had at least five years of work experience in that role (OECD 2017). As most Korean graduates start working immediately due to high unemployment rates, this work experience is crucial for career progression. The number of married women leaving employment has steadily decreased since 2015. The reason cited for leaving is primarily pregnancy and the demands of the mothering role. Additionally, since women tend to leave the workforce when they marry or get pregnant, a woman who is 30 or older is more likely to meet the criteria of a career woman. Furthermore, having more than five years of work experience and being over the average age of marriage (31.3 in 2023) suggests that the woman has prioritized building her career (WEF 2022, 217). To qualify for managerial work in the Korean job market, a woman must have a higher education degree, at least at the undergraduate level, because it is a requirement in both public and private sectors (OECD 2020, 31). The dramas selected were based on the characters fitting the above definition of career women.

In the six selected dramas, the characters meet these criteria and are employed in various positions. In the TV dramas, Hwang Ji-Ahn is a chief designer, Bae Ta-mi is a content manager, and Song Ga-Kyeong is the CEO of an IT company. Yoon Ji-Ho is a writer for TV series, and Woo Su-ji is middle management in an IT company. In the online platform dramas, Shim Eun-seok is a judge in the juvenile justice division, Seo Hye-seung is a former university lecturer who returns to her professional path, Choi Yoo-seon is a CEO, Ahn So-hee is a broadcasting writer, and Kang Ji-goo is a former teacher and YouTube origami artist. These characters exemplify the professional achievements and challenges of

170 career women in Korea, providing a lens through which to explore the broader societal narratives at play.

Additionally, frames are a useful analytical tool that helps us uncover how society uses commonly held beliefs, norms, and values to create a complex understanding of social constructs such as the career women defined above. They give meanings to these constructs, shaping the way different groups or societies perceive reality (Van Gorp 2007, 60–78). In South Korea, they are shaped by Confucian traditions, colonial history, the Korean War, the Cold War, and the rapid economic development during its authoritarian regimes. This has created a unique narrative that influences how South Korean society views and interprets their reality. Career women in South Korea cannot be understood outside the context of conflicting frames identified as “aborted modernity,” (Cho, “Mother,” 2001, 166–67) the public vs. domestic sphere, and oppositional women’s identities as housewives or career women, as well as nationalism and militarization.

Extensive scholarly discourse on the topic of career women transcends national boundaries, providing a crucial context for analyzing their portrayal in Korean dramas. Notable works such as *Prime-Time Feminism*, which explores the representation of women in television during the 1980s and 1990s, highlight how media portrayals influence and reflect feminist issues and societal expectations (Dow 1996). Similarly, Douglas examines the cultural and media landscape of the 1960s and 1970s, focusing on how media representations have shaped and been shaped by the feminist movement (Douglas 1994). Furthermore, Mennel delves into the representation of women in contemporary European cinema, exploring how these portrayals intersect with issues of labor, migration, and globalization (Mennel 2019). These works analyze how media representations of women in professional roles reflect and shape societal attitudes towards gender and work. This research enables an understanding of both the distinctive aspects of Korean media and the universal challenges faced by women in the workforce. This broader perspective

enriches the analysis by contextualizing Korean dramas within global media trends and feminist discourses.

Although there have been studies examining the impact of television dramas and online dramas on audience perception (S. Oh and Na 2021; H. Ju 2020; Baldacchino and E. Park 2021, 285–309; S.G. Kim and Hong 2014; H. Kim and M. Kim 2008), few have explored the depiction of women in Korean television dramas until 2012, focusing on quantitative data of screen time or changes in character profession and economic background (H. Lee and J. Kim 2011; J. Lee and S. Park 2014), and none were based on the development of a theoretical framework structured around social frames and the application of film analysis on both television and online dramas portraying career women. The analysis developed here investigates how these series portray societal discourses related to women's careers in both forms of drama to establish how the changes in storytelling enabled by online platforms' original content have affected their depiction.

Korea's rapid economic development, especially under the authoritarian government of Park Chung-Hee (1961–1979), has been described as the "miracle of the Han," a miracle of modernization and developmental success (Pratt 2006, 278). This pace of economic development has led to what Cho calls "aborted modernity." This term is used to define the rift between South Korea's rapid economic development and its slow social development due to the inadequacies of its social classes, which have enforced unequal and patriarchal structures (Cho, "Mother," 2001): a rift that is palpable even to this day due to neoliberal policies, deregulations in labor laws, and slow reforms in gender equality (Jung and J. Cho 2020). While women's rights organizations such as the Korean Women Workers Association (KWWA, 한국여성노동자회), the Korean Women's Associations United (KWAU, 한국여성단체연합), academic and student movements, as well as protests have historically influenced gender equality policies and labor regulations, the level of development of South Korea's civic and social rights was far slower

172 than the economic one (S. Kim 2002, 53–73). The higher its economic success and the more consumer culture developed, the more its conservative politics enforced and promoted the liberal model of economic development, stifling social reform under the guise of anti-communism and the protection of national security (Nelson 2000, 1–30). Women's rights, especially in the workplace, have also fallen within this category.

What is more, with the outbreak of the Asian financial crisis in 1997 and the following years of economic stagnation and the resulting IMF bailout, the existing laws protecting the workforce and women have been weakened considerably, actively leading to: discrimination in the form of lay-offs (because women earn less than men and protecting the highest income in the household is a priority (Janelli and Yim 2001), lack of state-guaranteed job security in case of pregnancy (Patterson and Walcutt 2013), only 90 days of paid maternity leave (Replicon 2020), difficulty in continuing and advancing in the career practiced before marriage (OECD 2019), reduced number of social services and infrastructure for childcare of working mothers (A. Kim 2019), unequal job recruitment and training, a male-centric work culture that excludes women from socializing and interacting with male coworkers (Jun 2018; Moon 2005), and in the same manner, a highly social and hierarchical work culture where exclusion means lack of advancement (Jung and J. Cho 2020; OECD 2022).

Korean women in the workforce also have to carefully navigate two dichotomous spheres, the public and domestic, to follow their career paths. While this separation between domestic and public spaces is universal, the manifestations of this separation and its roots vary from one society to another. In Korea, the roots of the rift between the public and the domestic can be traced to Confucianism and its intricate and strongly enforced traditions and norms, the fast pace of industrial modernization in post-war times, the military culture that emerged due to the separation of the two Koreas and the resulting dictatorial regimes, and the monopolization of power by a patriarchal economic and political

elite (E. Y. Kim 1998, 168–73). Korean welfare provisions have suffered greatly under the lack of diversity thus created in the political sphere (Soh 2021, 42–63), especially in areas concerning labor and workers' rights and gender equality, as Korean politics have followed the US model of market self-regulation in providing services that many welfare states guarantee as basic rights (J. Kim 2014, 71–105).

In pre-modern Korean society, domestic spaces were traditionally managed by the mothers or wives of the *yangban* (the nobility), following strict Confucian traditions placing the responsibilities of men in the outside sphere and women in the inside sphere. Women could assert their influence and control over the domestic sphere primarily as the mothers of the husbands or as their wives. This influence not only enforced their familial and social status but also granted them a level of independence, accomplishment, and control over their existence in pre-modern Korean society (Deuchler 2003, 142–70). The breakdown of traditional family models and domestic spaces, however, led to the marginalization and disempowerment of women in the public sector as work and family are mutually exclusive under the Confucian ideology (Byun and Won 2020, 599). As a result, women were often confined to the stereotype of the Korean housewife, with a primary focus on consumption and status reproduction, child-rearing, and supporting the male breadwinner (Cho, "Mother," 2001, 180–83). The separation of these two spheres created different patterns and ways of socialization for men and women, making socializing in the workplace difficult and bridging gender gaps even more so (Janelli and Yim 2001, 119–49).

Nationalism, anti-communism, and militarization are also influential frames that shape how career women are defined by society and what opportunities they are offered in the workforce. Moon explains that these three influences of militarization on the creation of the modern Korean state also include the allocation of specific positions to men and women, which was influential in creating the new economy: men as the protectors of the country

174 and the family, as the pillars of the new economy that now protect the country both through military training and work, leaving women as the pragmatic managers of the home, supporting the men in their endeavors, mostly as housewives and mothers (Moon 2005, 2–4).

The identity and perception of career women are strongly influenced by the oppositional frame of the housewife, who is seen as a supportive wife and homemaker without a job. Cho develops a three-generation model to explain the friction between women's identities in Korea: the grandmother's generation, defined by sacrifice and motherhood; the mother's generation, defined by rapid economic growth and obsession with the husband's success; and the daughter's generation, caught between equality in education and the lack of equal opportunities in the job market (Cho, "Mother," 2001, 180–83).

At the same time, women in Korea are not simply passive recipients of structural and social discrimination. Even though they face the challenges mentioned above, women's movements have been a constant force in both higher education and the civic and political landscape (Jones 2006), and women have actively participated in the labor market, engaged in changing the status quo, and in fighting for equal rights (Shin 2021). Women's enrolment rate at four-year universities in post-war Korea rose to reach parity (49.7 % of total university students were female) in 2022 (KOSIS 2022). The participation of these highly educated women in the labor market has increased in the pursuit of professional achievement and 66.1 % of female university graduates participated in the job market in 2021, compared to 69.5 % of their male counterparts (KOSIS 2023). The new generation of women born between 1980 and 1995 known globally as "generation Y" (Finn and Donovan 2013) or more commonly as "millennials" are challenging pre-existing norms, being strongly influenced by globalization, pressured by the economic disadvantages created by their predecessors and focused on personal achievement (Howe and Strauss 2000). In the Korean context (K. Kim 2017),

the term coined to define the Korean millennials is “Sampo generation” (English: “three giving-up generation”). It describes a generation that has given up three things: courtship, marriage, and children, because of the current precarious economic and social realities (SY. Park 2019; A. Kim 2019; Cho, “Sampo Generation,” 2016). This fourth generation, beyond Cho’s model, is using education to break through systematic gender inequality and obtain independence, navigating between these conflicting identities, and breaking traditional norms by showing low interest in marriage and childbirth, thus protesting against economic and social gender inequality.

## **2. Depiction of Career Women in Television and Online Platform Dramas**

The following paper has employed a method of film analysis rooted in the approaches of social and cultural scientists like Tudor, Denzin, Sutherland, Head, Peltzer, and others (Tudor 2015; Peltzer and Keppler 2015; Sutherland and Feltey 2010; Flicker and Zehenthofer 2018, 399–419; Head 1954; Denzin 2004). This method is framed by Smith’s theory of character engagement, which emphasizes recognition, alignment, and allegiance in audience reception (Smith 1995). The theoretical foundation is that films and TV series reflect social constructs framed by the norms, values, and beliefs of a specific culture or society (Peltzer and Keppler 2015). Successful audience reception hinges on these recognizable constructs, as production depends on viewer engagement (Flicker and Zehenthofer 2018, 399–419; Hamenstädt 2016). Sutherland posits that identifying patterns in films or TV series reveals how a society defines and frames constructs (Sutherland and Feltey 2010, 11).

Smith’s three levels of character engagement highlight the importance of emotional responses for audience reception of dramas. The first level, recognition, ensures that a character is identifiable and distinct. The second level, alignment, involves

176 narrative or visual methods that help the audience understand a character's motivations. The third level, allegiance, involves the audience's moral assessment of a character's motivations (Smith 1995, 73–228).

This paper's analysis encompasses two levels: identifying the historical, social, and cultural contexts (frames) that shape the dramas, and examining the visual style and storytelling of the series. Visual style refers to the visual interpretation, presentation of characters, *mise-en-scène*, costume, makeup, lighting, editing, and setting, while the screenplay includes the plot, dialogue, characters, and their interactions.

The selection of the three TV and the three online series followed several criteria that are based firstly on the definition of career women provided above, secondly on the structure, production, and content, as all dramas have different writers, directors, and producers,<sup>6</sup> and lastly on the reception of the series. All six dramas have performed above average in viewership ratings and rankings (AGB Nielsen 2017; AGB Nielsen 2022; Netflix March 2022; Netflix August 2022). This aspect was important for the case selection, as reception is equated with viewer acceptance or support of the topic and characters depicted.

### **2.1. Dramas and the Analysis of the Depicted Characters**

The selected dramas and their characters provide a useful context for a multifaceted exploration of the lives of career-oriented women in contemporary South Korea, each narrative providing a unique lens through which to examine the intersections of gender, career, and societal expectations. The first three are TV dramas produced by private and public broadcasters, the last three are dramas produced for online platforms.

6 To avoid any similarities in the depiction of the characters based on the technique and style of an individual.

*I Do, I Do* (RR: *Aidu Aidu*, Korean: 아이두 아이두),<sup>7</sup> directed by Kang Dae-sun and written by Jo Jung-hwa, aired from May to July 2012 on MBC. The series follows Hwang Ji-Ahn, a successful chief shoe designer in her late thirties who is determined to become the CEO of her company. A dedicated and hardworking professional, Ji-Ahn becomes pregnant after a one-night stand and resolves to balance her career ambitions with motherhood, despite societal and corporate pressures to conform. She faces significant pressure from her family and colleagues to marry and abandon her career aspirations, as her success has enhanced her family's reputation, but she has failed to fulfill the traditional filial duty of becoming a wife and mother. Confident in her capabilities and independence, Ji-Ahn refuses to choose between her child and her career. She vigorously advocates for the recognition of her work and challenges discriminatory office policies, leveraging public opinion as a tool for change. Ultimately, she decides to explore a relationship with her child's father to see if they can form a compatible partnership, defying familial expectations in the process.

Because *This Is My First Life* (RR: *Ibeon Saengeun Cheoemira*, Korean: 이번 생은 처음이라),<sup>8</sup> directed by Park Joon-hwa and written by Yoon Nan-joong, aired from October to November 2017 on TVN. The series portrays the struggles of young South Koreans in their thirties, focusing on two main protagonists, Yoon Ji-Ho and Woo Su-Ji. Yoon Ji-Ho, a 30-year-old drama writer, has faced significant challenges, including unemployment and homelessness, after quitting her job due to sexual harassment. Coming from a conservative family that did not support her education, Ji-Ho is determined to succeed as an independent writer, resisting traditional expectations of marriage based on love rather than convenience. In contrast, Woo Su-Ji, from a disadvantaged background, strives for financial independence

7 Abbreviated hereafter to *IDID*.

8 Abbreviated hereafter to *BTMFL*.

178 and dreams of becoming a CEO. Despite facing discrimination and being deemed an unsuitable marriage partner due to her social background and responsibilities towards her mother, Su-Ji is resolute in proving that potential is determined by capability rather than social status or gender. She adopts a cold and detached demeanor at work, making significant sacrifices to advance in her career, while actively confronting sexual harassment and discriminatory practices within her workplace. Together, Ji-Ho and Su-Ji's narratives highlight the complex dynamics of gender, career, and societal expectations in contemporary South Korea.

*Search: WWW* (RR: *Geomsaekereul Ibryeokhaseyo*, Korean: 검색어를 입력하세요: *WWW*),<sup>9</sup> directed by Jung Ji-hyun and Kwon Young-il, written by Kwon Do-eun, aired from June to July 2019 on TVN. The drama centers on three women working at South Korea's leading search engine companies, Unicon and Barro, with particular focus on Bae Ta-Mi and Song Ga-Kyeong. Both women, successful and in their forties, co-created Unicon, the nation's top content search engine. Ta-Mi, whose primary goal is professional advancement, leaves Unicon for its competitor Barro, aiming to transform it into the most accurate and impartial search engine in South Korea. Detached from traditional family structures, she prioritizes her career over marriage and children, choosing relationships that align with her professional aspirations. Ta-Mi fights for the integrity of the company she helped build, challenging established business hierarchies. In contrast, Ga-Kyeong, compelled into a marriage of convenience by her family, has sacrificed her personal dreams and integrity to fulfill her filial duties, enduring constant humiliation from her in-laws. Ultimately, she seeks liberation from family pressures, focusing on her career and independence. Ga-Kyeong rediscovers her goals and ideals, choosing to defy societal and familial expectations to regain her autonomy. Through their stories, the drama explores themes

9 Abbreviated hereafter to *SWWW*.

of career ambition, personal integrity, and the struggle against societal norms.

The first online drama selected is currently two seasons long and titled *Work Later, Drink Now* (RR: *Sulkkundosiyeojadeul*, Korean: 술꾼도시여자들S),<sup>10</sup> based on the Webtoon *Drinker City Women*, directed by Kim Jung-sik and written by Wi So-young. This drama was produced by TVING, with season 1 (12 episodes) being released on the 22nd October 2021 and Season 2 (12 episodes) being released on the 9th December 2022, and narrates the lives of three women—Ahn So-hee, Kang Ji-goo, and a third protagonist—on their quest for self-discovery, love, and happiness, emphasizing their attitudes toward life and work. Ahn So-hee, a hardworking and ambitious broadcast professional, confronts organizational injustice and sexual harassment by switching jobs and stands firm in her vision and originality, even when it means opposing her superiors. She assumes the responsibility of team leader in difficult situations and values a relationship with a colleague who respects her goals and her deep connections with friends. Kang Ji-goo, an origami YouTuber and former high school teacher, abandons the conventional career path to pursue a profession aligned with her interests and capabilities. She maintains a composed demeanor, espouses progressive and open views, defends socially stigmatized individuals, and challenges norms and institutions. Ji-goo is a free spirit, eschewing convention and rigidity to ensure her profession authentically reflects her life stage. She distances herself from her family's strict expectations, choosing instead to invest in her two best friends. The drama emphasizes friendship as a chosen family, characterized by understanding, mutual respect, support, and affection, contrasting with traditional family structures.

*Remarriage and Desires* (RR: *Beullaeg-ui Sinbu*, Korean: 블랙의 신부),<sup>11</sup> directed by Kim Jeong-min, written by Lee Geun-yeong

10 Abbreviated hereafter to *WLDN*.

11 Abbreviated hereafter to *RD*.

180 and produced by Netflix, was released on the 15th July 2022. The 8-episode drama centers on Seo Hye-seung, a former middle-class housewife who, after losing everything, seizes an opportunity for revenge when she reunites with the woman responsible for her downfall at Rex, a marriage information company catering to the upper class. Aided by Choi Yoo-seon, the CEO of the company, Seo Hye-seung transforms herself from a traditional middle-class housewife into a confident and independent university teacher seeking justice and revenge. She emerges as the victim of a failed marriage and patriarchal society but fights to achieve independence and find meaning in her career. Seo Hye-seung considers remarriage only after gaining independence and bringing those who harmed her and her daughter to justice, recognizing a life partner in a man who shares her experiences and supports her ambitions. Choi Yoo-seon, a successful businesswoman, has a lifelong ambition of creating her own company through unorthodox means, viewing marriage as a business opportunity and prioritizing her independence and business goals over personal relationships. She manipulates the system to advance professionally and gain power, remaining in a strategic marriage with her husband, who becomes a non-issue when he falls into a coma, although she continues to use his connections to grow her company. Choi Yoo-seon demonstrates no interest in emotional connections, focusing solely on her business ambitions.

*Juvenile Justice* (RR: *Sonyeon Simpan*, Korean: 소년 심판),<sup>12</sup> directed by Hong Jong-chan, written by Kim Min-seok, and produced by Netflix, was released on the 25th February 2022. The 10-episode series portrays Shim Eun-seok, an unorthodox yet esteemed judge known for her harsh sentencing of juveniles, who takes up a position in the juvenile court of Yeonhwa District. Confronting complex cases, she must balance her strict rulings and belief in justice with uncovering the ultimate truth and

12 Abbreviated hereafter to *JJ*.

improving society. Shim Eun-seok, a highly-skilled, educated, and respected prosecutor, often confused for a man due to her accomplishments, is accustomed to systematic gender discrimination as a minority in the legal field. Displaying a willingness to take risks and think outside the box to solve difficult cases, she openly criticizes judicial institutions to advocate for systemic change. Prioritizing her career over marriage and family, she leaves her husband and his family after they blame her career for her son's murder. Perceived as an outsider and a difficult colleague, she nonetheless prevents recidivism and seeks justice for crime victims, taking every measure to ensure that her rulings are objective and fair. Despite initial isolation, she gradually becomes more empathetic and open, finding new meaning in her work and seeking justice for her son's murder.

## **2.2. Similarities between Television and Online Platform Dramas**

Both TV and online dramas reflect social discourses present in current South Korean academic research, politics, and social and economic developments with regard to gender and women's roles in society. The following characteristics can be identified in all six dramas:

### **Self-fulfillment: Career and Independence**

In Korean dramas, the women who prioritize their careers over traditional roles in marriage and motherhood do so as a means of achieving personal fulfillment and professional advancement. These women are not choosing their careers out of a sense of rebellion or a desire to challenge gender roles; rather, they are seeking to find meaning and satisfaction in their work lives. It is important to note that while traditional Korean society tends to create a binary distinction between these two pursuits, the women themselves are not perpetuating this narrative. Rather, it is the structural limitations and societal norms that make it

182 difficult for them to balance both their personal and professional lives.

The lack of institutional support and infrastructure for working women often forces them to choose between pursuing their careers and creating a family. For instance, Yoon Ji-Ho from *BTMFL* prioritizes her career as a drama writer over traditional marriage expectations, marrying her landlord to stay in Seoul and pursue her professional aspirations. Similarly, Bae Ta-Mi in *SWWW* demonstrates remarkable perseverance in the competitive tech industry, striving for success at the cost of traditional family roles.

This “aborted modernity” leaves women in a difficult position, as they must prioritize their self-fulfillment over societal expectations. Despite these challenges, the women in Korean dramas exhibit remarkable perseverance, competence, and commitment in their male-dominated workplaces. Kang Ji-goo from *WLDN* exemplifies this by leaving her traditional career path as a teacher to pursue her passion as an origami YouTuber, challenging norms and pursuing personal fulfillment.

While their success may not necessarily be supported by equal opportunities, their competence ensures that their work is valued by their employers regardless of their gender. This, in turn, grants them some flexibility to challenge discriminatory policies and practices. Ahn So-hee in *WLDN* takes risks to confront organizational injustices and sexual harassment, showcasing resilience and dedication in her broadcasting career. The lack of institutional support and infrastructure for working women often forces them to choose between pursuing their careers or creating a family. They invest significant amounts of time and effort to advance their careers, working hard to overcome gender discrimination and navigate through male-centered office politics. Their proficiency and dedication are key factors that allow them to achieve success and gain independence in the face of adversity, achievements that are all the more impressive as they challenge conventional gender roles. Despite the

structural challenges encountered in the workplace, they exemplify women's potential to excel in professional settings, based on ability and merit alone.

While their success may not necessarily be supported by equal opportunities, their competence ensures that their work is valued by their employers regardless of their gender. This, in turn, grants them some flexibility to challenge discriminatory policies and practices.

The portrayal of women who prioritize their careers in Korean dramas offers a glimpse into the struggles and successes of working women in a society that often fails to provide adequate support for their personal and professional lives. Through their perseverance and dedication, these characters demonstrate that it is possible to excel in male-dominated workplaces and challenge traditional gender roles, even in the face of structural limitations.

#### Defying Traditional Social Expectations

Some of the characters, like Shim Eun-seok in *JJ* and Hwang Ji-Ahn in *IDID* are either confronted with societal and familial expectations to conform to traditional gender roles that emphasize filial duty and the improvement of one's social status through marriage, others like Song Ga-Kyeong in *SWWW* and Kang Ji-goo in *WLDN* are expected to succeed in a prestigious field that will elevate their family's status but still fulfill their parents' expectations of marrying well and having children. These expectations are reinforced by patriarchal structures and Confucianist cultures, creating a challenging environment for women to pursue their ambitions. Despite families investing in their daughter's education, it is often viewed as a means to secure a successful partner and improve one's social and financial position, rather than as a path to personal choice, fulfillment, or career advancement.

184 In this context, the definition of success for women is still predominantly tied to their social and marital status, leading to conflicting aspirations between raising a family and career development. The characters thus find themselves in a frustrating and disappointing situation when their education and career goals are not supported by their parents, who still hold onto traditional expectations. To navigate these challenges, these women have developed a complex strategy that involves complying with patriarchal expectations while simultaneously subverting them. This can be conceptualized as a “patriarchal bargain” (Kandiyoti 1988) whereby women show confrontation as a strategy but also attempt to perform their expected gender role to avoid any tension by making a compromise between their roles in the family and at work (Ahn 2014, 82). The ambiguity produced around culturally prescribed gender roles in storylines presents not only challenges to gendered roles but also to making a “patriarchal bargain.” This can be conceptualized as “situated ambiguity” (Elsaesser 2011, 247–48) to navigate through and deal strategically with different perspectives of audiences in terms of gender, age, race/ethnicity, and educational background.

The pursuit of financial stability is central to their strategy for achieving independence, allowing them to gain freedom from societal norms and parental expectations. However, these women often find themselves in conflict with their parents, who may be disappointed with their divergence from traditional roles. These conflicts are often left unresolved, leading to a significant impact on the parent-child relationship and the expectations that career women hold for society as a whole. In some cases, these conflicts may lead to the breaking of all contact with their parents, and creating alternative family-like relationships with close friends or communities.

#### Defying Structural Discrimination and Fighting for Equality

The characters depicted prioritize their careers and face significant obstacles in their pursuit of leadership positions. They

are often regarded as misfits within company structures due to their gender and must navigate a system that discriminates against them as they aspire to advance and succeed in the workplace. For example, Bae Ta-Mi from *SWWW* prioritizes her career at Unicon and later Barro, fighting for professional advancement despite the political pressures and scandals she faces. However, their aspirations inadvertently put them in a position of defiance towards established hierarchies and structures, making them unpopular with coworkers and staff. These challenges are often referred to as the “glass ceiling,” as they represent invisible barriers to the promotion of women to higher positions in the workplace (Jung and Cho 2020, 19–20). To achieve their goals, they may choose to be perceived as cold, detached, and disconnected from the office collective. For example, Woo Su-Ji in *BTMFL* is ambitious and hardworking. Her work colleagues describe her as cold because she is goal-oriented, she does not act cute around male senior colleagues, and she tries to politely avoid contact with them if not obligated to. She is perceived as shrewd and inaccessible and is the subject of gossip because she is physically attractive. She is therefore considered superficial by her female co-workers and is often subjected to sexist and inappropriate remarks by her male coworkers, who constantly try to push her to be more “ladylike” and submissive in her manner. She tries her best to seem cold and distant to reduce contact with them. Her attitude toward co-workers including female co-workers reveals the “queen bee” phenomenon, whereby a woman pursues individual success in male-dominated work settings by distancing herself from female junior co-workers (Derks, van Laar, and Ellemers 2016). Woo Su-Ji works overtime to maintain her value to the company by being a productive employee instead of a popular one that can count on favors to stay within the collective. She has succeeded against all odds to enter the corporate world to provide for her mother.

Due to the lack of precedent and insufficient regulations to protect their positions, the career women depicted in these

186 dramas often find themselves in difficult situations. They are perceived by their work colleagues as disruptive and selfish for putting their ambitions before those of the team. For instance, Shim Eun-seok in *JJ* is portrayed as a strong-willed woman who is not afraid to stand up for what she believes in, even when it means going against powerful interests. She is promoted as one of only twenty judges in South Korea who work in the juvenile system with high recommendations but is still described as difficult and even impossible to work with, due to her unwillingness to compromise and her critique of authority.

Sexual harassment is also a concern, and regulations often fail to change social misconceptions and inappropriate behavior. This lack of institutional and collective support for their grievances can discourage women who undergo mistreatment. For instance, Yoon Ji-ho in *BTMFL* and Seo Hye-seung in *RD* end up leaving their positions because of the lack of support from their colleagues and superiors. Additionally, their lack of social integration at the workplace can disadvantage them in pursuing their case against their attackers, as they may struggle to obtain any form of support or credibility. Ahn So-hee in *WLDN* faces similar challenges in her broadcasting career, where she must deal with organizational injustice and sexual harassment without sufficient support from her colleagues. These moments can become breaking points for career women who must decide whether to continue in an unsafe and unfair environment or quit and start anew, often sacrificing years of work. The women often find lack of mentoring and networking in the gendered organizational culture.

Despite the numerous challenges they face, the characters remain committed to advancing their careers and achieving gender equality in the workplace. They continue to strive towards excellence in their work and serve as pioneers for other women in their industry. Their dedication and perseverance are a testament to their ability to overcome the obstacles in their path, and their example serves as an inspiration for others to follow in their footsteps.

The characters face a society that stereotypes them as being uninterested in marriage and children because they are focused on their careers. In South Korea, where traditional structures and family expectations often lead women to give up their careers when they get married and have children, this assumption is rooted in reality. A closer look at the lives and dreams of these women, however, reveals a more complex picture. While they reject the traditional definition of marriage and social upward mobility expected by their parents, they are not necessarily opposed to finding a partner to share their lives with. They seek individuals who share their values and principles, are understanding and supportive of their goals, and are willing to accept them as they are, rather than just tolerating their differences. Instead of focusing on financial capability, as the traditional stereotype would suggest, they prioritize finding a partner who sees them as equal and supports their personal and professional growth. In this way, they redefine the idea of a romantic relationship as a partnership where both partners can reach self-fulfillment and support each other equally. Although they disapprove of their parents' expectations for social prestige, marriage, and childbirth, they often have to navigate their disapproval and disappointment, either by reducing or completely ending contact, like Yoon Ji-ho in *BTMFL* and Kang Ji-goo in *WLDN*, finding excuses to continue working or entering a marriage that conforms to their own expectations regardless of the parent's wishes, like Hwang Ji-Ahn in *IDID*. Despite these challenges, career women are not emotionally shut down or opposed to romantic feelings. Instead, they are very selective about whom they allow into their lives and define romantic relationships as an important aspect of their lives.

### 2.3. Differences between Television and Online Platform Dramas

To answer the question if online dramas have contributed to the diversification and in-depth depiction of career women, it is important to look at the differences between television and online platform depiction and consider how—or if—the latter has contributed to innovative storytelling on this topic. This is primarily due to Netflix and TVING's strategies of prioritizing socially relevant and critical topics in their storytelling as a means to distinguish themselves from public broadcasting, to gain higher viewership, to grow and maintain their international success, and to meet audiences' demands for diversity and realistic storytelling.

#### Higher Complexity and Variety of Female Characters

The shift in online platform dramas towards realism and broader societal critiques has resulted in stories with a greater diversity and complexity of characters. This leads to what Smith has described as the second and third levels of audience engagement. In contrast to TV dramas, the focus of storytelling here is to promote audience alignment and allegiance through the depiction of fleshed out characters that the audience can identify with. While online dramas continue to feature mainly single or divorced women who are dedicated to their careers and strive to achieve their goals regardless of socio-economic hurdles, they are also characterized by a greater range of motivations, attitudes, and aspirations. In contrast to television dramas, the characters in these online productions exhibit diverse backgrounds and experiences, and a wider variety of reasons for their choices, expressing a more diverse set of desires for their futures. While all of them reach a level of self-fulfillment through their jobs, this is not their only defining characteristic.

In the case of the three female leads in *WLDN*, self-fulfillment and happiness are the driving forces behind all their decisions.

They change careers multiple times and navigate outdated office policies, but they only truly fight for their careers and positions once they find their true vocation. Kang Ji-goo leaves her position as a history teacher when her student commits suicide and she realizes she is part of a faulty system in which academic excellence is overvalued and human dignity is undervalued. She not only rebels against the system and the expectations of her family but also embraces her wish for an unstructured, free, and artistic life. Although she rejects society and her birth family, she is committed to her friends and attentive to their personalities and needs. She understands the importance of human companionship and bonds but follows principles when choosing who she interacts with. Depending on their character, the three characters in *WLDN* are often perceived and branded as “oddballs” and “crazy,” they prefer to remain true to their identities, their joy for life, and their values than to compromise and submit to social or workplace expectations. In *RD*, Seo Hye-seung realizes her mistake of giving up her career and her aspirations when her marriage fails. She first decides to go back to work to provide for her daughter, but later discovers that she has found a new sense of self-worth in becoming independent and having a career in a field she likes. She is depicted as a weak character in the beginning, a housewife overwhelmed by the failure of her marriage and the judgment of society, who slowly evolves to become strong and independent by finding new opportunities and meaning in her life. Despite her newly discovered independence and her choice to follow a career, she is proud of being a mother and equally cultivates both these identities, since for her, the one does not exclude the other. Shim Eun-seok in *JJ* is unrelenting and constant in the pursuit of her career and is defined by a strong sense of duty and certainty of her vocation. Her career remains the cornerstone of her life and her professional drive and the stability offered by the confidence she has in her work helps her to overcome the loss of her child. While it is a constant in her evolution as a character, her relation to it is not, her job as a prosecutor started as a professional

190 ambition, later became an emotional crutch for her to heal after the loss of her child, and finally transformed into an ambition to become a better person and a better professional. She is a cold and ambitious woman, intolerant of rules she considers pointless, overly harsh in her sentencing, and quick to push people away. Her passion for her work, however, is not one-dimensional. It helps her grow as a person because her unrelenting quest for justice also applies to being critical of herself and becoming a better person and a better judge.

With the increase in the diversity of characters, the portrayal of career women in dramas becomes more nuanced and allows for a wider range of viewers to identify and engage with the characters depicted and the issues presented. This diversification allows the characterization of career women to escape the perils of one-dimensionality and stereotyping and to become a complex representation of current societal discourses, thus creating more fleshed-out and realistic characters, with which a broader audience can identify and empathize.

#### Changes in Visual Characterization: From Stereotyping Femininity to Individuality

In keeping with the creation of the complex and multifaceted characters mentioned above, online platform dramas differ from TV dramas in their visual representation of these characters. In this case, the main visual elements that stand out and significantly impact the portrayal and development of career women characters are costume design, makeup, and the type of shots used to display the characters. These tools are used intentionally so that they can enhance the character's depth and complexity and at the same time emphasize her professional identity, and contribute to the overall narrative.

The TV dramas employed visual cues and shooting styles to convey an image of the ideal career woman who fits in with Korean beauty standards and stereotypes by following the

latest fashions, both in clothing and makeup, presenting them as elegant and feminine white-collar office workers in their professional settings and as fashionable and modern women in their spare time. The only glimpses of imperfection or comfort are shown in scenes where they are alone, in the privacy of their home. The focus is thereby not on the individuality of the characters and their evolution, but on an idealized message, that a woman can be successful by being beautiful and strong and that she can have both a career and happiness in love. In contrast, online platform dramas create layered and complex individuals whose character traits are also reflected visually, the focus being their evolution.

One such example is Shim Eun-seok in *JJ*. She is dressed in modern, business clothing, toeing the line between femininity (high heels and silk blouses) and masculinity (pantsuits). She exclusively wears pantsuits and freely and comfortably moves around in her work clothes, so much so that she wears them even on the occasions where she works late, whether at home or her apartment. She wears no makeup but is careful with her professional appearance; her choice of clothes and the ease with which she moves in them signal her self-confidence and pride in her achievements. The combination of male and female garments signals her disregard for gender stereotypes and underlines the character trait of individuality.

Shim Eun-seok is filmed in close-up and low-angle shots that emphasize her dynamic gestures and her confrontational nature. She is most often depicted in professional settings, such as her office, the court, or the buildings of the legislature, and is filmed in cold or neutral colors and neon lighting, as most of her solo scenes show her working and investigating at night. In confrontations with senior judges and criminals, each shot emphasizes her face and her height, she is dressed in her suit or her judge robes, and close-ups of her eyes and face allow for her words to gain more gravitas. The focus on her mannerisms also serves as an insight into her perseverance and confidence.

The focus of the storytelling in the online platform dramas differs from that of the TV dramas. The latter all have romance as the central plotline, while the issues of gender equality and career are constructed around it. Despite not necessarily being interested in marriage in traditional terms, the TV drama characters either aspire to find a partner, or the story evolves to include a romance between a female and a male lead character. The online platform dramas, however, are mainly concerned with presenting the complex realities their female characters are faced with. The focus is on the life of female professionals, their struggles, opportunities, and their goals. Romance is not completely excluded, but it is secondary to the main plot. For instance, even though some female characters like Ahn So-Hee in *WLDN* or Seo Hye-seung in *RD* are interested in romance, this aspect is not central to the storyline.

In *WLDN*, the three main characters find meaning in following their career goals and sharing their lives with like-minded people, while enjoying their company outside of work. They are committed to their “chosen families” and reject the expectations, structures, and values of the traditional family. Since their junior year in college, Ahn So-hee, Kang Ji-goo, and Han Ji-yeon have formed an unbreakable bond. They share all aspects of their lives and have weathered difficult times such as the loss of family members, separation, breakups, and other life changes. Their bond has grown stronger through these challenges, and they have created their own “family” based on mutual support, understanding, and friendship, prioritizing these bonds over romance and their biological families. This is especially true for Kang Ji-goo, who broke all contact with her family when they refused to understand her life and career choices, and who is uninterested in the prospect of marriage. Her commitment to their friendship is especially powerful because she was rejected by her parents. Her story reflects the generational conflict between traditional

family structures, individual freedom, and the need for support and understanding.

Although the story in *RD* is structured around marriage, the overarching theme is its degradation in a patriarchal society. In this context, it becomes either a sentence of injustice and unhappiness for the women who are subjugated by it, or a tool for women wanting to use social position and financial power gained by it to control the men around them. Romance becomes a façade for these machinations, and the female characters are either interested in escaping this system or using it to gain power. At its core, *RD* is a cautionary tale of the impossibility of romantic love in a hierarchical, corrupt, and unjust society.

In *JJ* Shim Eun-seok is exclusively invested in her career and her quest for justice, her work is her vocation and the only constant in her life. She has separated from her family and divorced her husband after the loss of her child. When talking to him after the divorce, she explains that it was his lack of support for her career and the fact that he did not stop his family from blaming her job for her child's death that led her to cut them off completely. She further explains that love can only exist between equals and that consequently their marriage was meant to fail. As a mother, she mourns the loss of her child, and his death signifies the end of her wishes for love and family. She is proud of her professional achievements because they symbolize independence and self-improvement, and she is intolerant of people who try to hold her back and diminish her accomplishments. Her character is rooted in the belief in professionalism and justice, and while she is uninterested in human connection, she later comes to cherish and respect the camaraderie forming between her and her colleagues.

## Conclusion

The advent of digital platforms such as Netflix and TVING has transformed the landscape of South Korea's drama industry,

194 offering directors and screenwriters unprecedented avenues for creativity and distribution. This shift comes in the wake of the 1997 financial crisis, which prompted South Korea to aggressively globalize its cultural exports. However, this push also entrenched a monopoly among state broadcasters like SBS, MBC, and KBS, exerting significant control over content creation and exportation. These broadcasters adhered to stringent guidelines enforced by the Korea Communications Standards Commission (KCSC), often favoring safe and commercially viable themes while limiting exploration of more critical or ambiguous narratives. This was driven by the need to adhere to a specific recipe of success in order to ensure high reception both domestically and globally.

Significant changes in the production and distribution landscape occurred in 2009 when deregulation laws allowed conglomerates to own shares of broadcasting companies. This unprecedented move enabled new players to influence the content and form of Korean dramas. Cable channels and new emerging online platforms like Netflix and TVING, benefiting from the greater freedom of expression granted by the KCSC, led to changes in the Korean drama industry. This was partly because of their need to circumvent the public broadcasting monopoly on top directors, writers, and actors and partly because of the high ratings enjoyed by their first productions with more complex and gritty storytelling, which signaled a demand by the audience for different types of stories. As a result, they compensated for their lack of star power by presenting complex and realistic dramas covering a wide variety of topics. The significance of these changes was highlighted at the 27th edition of the Busan Film Festival in 2022, emphasizing the importance of original stories that reflect social realities and human experiences to ensure sustainable success in the global and digitized market. Industry experts, including representatives from TVING and Netflix, underscored the value of authentic storytelling that fosters audience empathy. Both streaming platforms announced plans to increase the production of exclusive content meeting these criteria.

The comparison between the three television dramas and the three online dramas has shown that South Korean TV and online dramas both reflect the social discourses surrounding gender and career women in their storytelling, but that online dramas have a more complex, nuanced, and critical approach to the topic, thus proving that socially relevant stories are promoted by online platforms.

This transformation is especially evident in the portrayal of career women across both traditional TV and online dramas. While both mediums depict women navigating professional challenges and societal expectations, online platforms have emerged as presenting more nuanced and critical narratives. They prioritize character development over traditional romantic subplots and feature a broader spectrum of female protagonists in unconventional leadership roles. These new developments have contributed to a more refined understanding of women's lives and their experiences in contemporary South Korean society and have changed the way stories are told in Korean dramas, by focusing on a more diversified and nuanced depiction of social realities and creating a more inclusive discursive space that allows for a higher level of audience engagement, empathy, and identification.

The career women depicted in the online dramas perform the socially prescribed gender script on the one hand, while concurrently representing a more progressive image and stronger character of career women than those portrayed in TV dramas on the other. Streamed drama series present major female characters in various leadership roles, positions that have not previously been considered conventional. In dramas, there are hardly any cases showing women balancing their careers and roles as primary caregivers in the family. Women are often depicted as having to choose between a career and marriage/motherhood, whereas men are not represented as facing this dichotomized choice. The streaming dramas have not completely changed the image and portrayal of career women. They have,

196 however, contributed to further promoting a more complex and diversified image of a new generation of working women who have moved away from traditional roles. The characters they play are strong-minded and assertive, highly motivated to succeed in their chosen profession.

The findings contribute to the broader scholarly discourse on “working girls,” a term referring to women depicted in professional or occupational roles. By analyzing the portrayal of career women in South Korean dramas across traditional TV and online platforms, this research aligns with existing literature that explores how media representations influence societal perceptions and aspirations of women in professional roles. These developments resonate with studies that examine how media representations reflect and shape feminist issues, and explore the cultural impact of media portrayals on women’s roles and identities (Dow 1996; Douglas 1994). By situating South Korean dramas within this scholarly framework, this study highlights their role in advancing discussions on gender representation and societal change both locally and globally, illustrating the evolving dynamics of “working girls” in contemporary media landscapes.

The implications of these narrative shifts extend beyond entertainment. Online dramas, with their global reach and interactive engagement through social media, have the potential to influence societal attitudes towards gender roles and career aspirations. Some studies suggest that media representations can shape public perceptions and aspirations (Valkenburg and Peter 2013; Hetsroni and Lowenstein 2014), not unlike the “Scully effect” observed in Western media, where a character from the popular TV series *The X Files* inspired women to pursue STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) careers. Korean streaming dramas could potentially inspire a new generation of women to challenge traditional gender norms and pursue ambitious career paths (Ifeanyi 2018).

Future scholarly inquiry could delve deeper into several avenues to better understand these dynamics. Research could explore audience reception and engagement metrics for online dramas, examining how viewers interpret and respond to the nuanced portrayals of career women. This could involve qualitative studies to analyze viewer comments and discussions on social media platforms, providing insights into how these narratives resonate with diverse audiences. Moreover, studies could analyze societal attitudes and perceptions over time, examining whether exposure to empowering portrayals of women in online dramas correlates with shifts in societal norms and expectations. This would contribute to a deeper understanding of the potential social impact of digital media on cultural narratives and gender equality efforts in South Korea.

It remains an open question whether the digital transformation of cultural products will influence individual audiences to interact and align with the representation of career women characters featured in streaming dramas and further reshape perceptions and images of career women in the wider Korean society. What also remains to be seen is whether the young female audiences themselves are inspired to become the next generation of career women, and how the positive and engaged reaction of the audiences will, in turn, affect the next cycle of decisions about cultural production. This, combined with their social media capabilities, could create feedback loops that could further influence the type of stories and topics that are depicted and could potentially further innovate the creative process of Korean dramas.

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NIGERIAN DIGITAL INNOVATION AND NEW  
TRANSNATIONAL DYNAMICS IN AFRICA

**LANGUAGING**

**LINGALA**

**LANGUAGE USE IN SOCIAL MEDIA**

**NIGERIA**

**ENGLISH**

[ 7 ]

# **Nigerian Influences in Kinshasa: Changing Patterns of Language Use Among (Young) Congolese Digital Media Users**

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**This chapter offers a first glimpse into communicative practices in the Congolese capital of Kinshasa that show influences from Nigerian popular culture, and sheds light on young Lingala-speaking residents of the capital and their changing patterns of language use specifically in digital media. These linguistic influences manifest themselves either as direct lexical material or when commenting on the film (“Nollywood”) and Afrobeats/Afropop industry. The Congolese music industry, known for its high potential for innovation, has been heavily influenced by Nigerian musicians over the past fifteen years, and Congolese musicians have collaborated with Nigerian artists. Young**

**Lingala speakers in particular are increasingly using English as an everyday language in their repertoire, though, it seems, even more often in online exchanges than in offline communication, potentially to be understood as a “Nigerian phenomenon.” The paper investigates how Nigerian influences in the interactions of young Congolese can be historicized and understood as a continuation of “global flows” that have impacted urban culture in Congo.**

### **1. Introduction: Language use in the Congo and current transformations**

Upon arrival in Kinshasa, Sub-Saharan Africa’s second-largest city after Lagos, with an estimated population of 16 to 18 million and one of the most vibrant urban spaces on the African continent, visitors expecting a purely Francophone environment are often surprised to encounter cab drivers shouting “Hello, you come here!” to street vendors addressing the traveler as “How are you, mister/madam?” and to young people joking on the street corner, with a young woman addressing a young man in a language that is a mixture of Lingala and English: “Big king, *nalova you fortinal!*” (Strong man, I love you very much!). English seems to be on the rise in Kinshasa, as well as in other major Congolese cities such as Lubumbashi, Kolwezi, Likasi, Goma, and Kisangani. However, it is not only in interactions in public spaces that a shift from French to English can be observed, but especially in online interactions through social media platforms such as WhatsApp, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook. Moreover, the English used in these interactions is by no means “standard” English, but is influenced by American movie stars, British English textbooks, East African entrepreneurs commuting between Nairobi and

This contributes to the diversification of language(s) and the current sociocultural changes in the country. Like English, Lingala is steadily spreading (to Angola, Uganda, the Central African Republic, etc.) and the two languages are in mutual contact at various levels. Generally speaking, the Democratic Republic of Congo (hereafter abbreviated as DR Congo) is a linguistically and culturally diverse country. The Ethnologue (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2023) estimates that more than 200 indigenous languages are spoken throughout the national territory, belonging to three different language phyla—a large majority of Bantu languages and some Ubangian languages (belonging to the Niger-Congo phylum), one Eastern Sudanic language, one Western Nilotic language, and many Central Sudanic languages (all belonging to the Nilo-Saharan family), with Arabic being used in the northeastern corner (as Afro-Asiatic language). In addition, there is one official language, French (Indo-European), and four widely spoken national languages used in the media, primary education, the church, and as a regional lingua franca, namely Lingala (which is the focus of this paper), Kikongo, Cilubà, and Swahili (all Bantu languages). This leads to highly dynamic contexts of multilingualism and polylingual speakers.

Yet despite its obvious global connections based on trade, exile emigration, student mobility, and diasporic links to communities

1 It should be noted that the southeast of the country, i.e., the former province of Katanga, is practically largely English-speaking in the cities, as could be ascertained during a research trip to Lubumbashi and the Congolese-Zambian border areas in June 2022. This has to do with trade links across the Kasumbalesa border and Congolese investors in Zambia's capital, Lusaka, but also with the corridor across Zambia to South Africa, from which large quantities of luxury goods originate. Similarly, the eastern parts of the country are experiencing an upsurge in English influence, due in part to links with the East African Community and trade networks from Uganda and Rwanda, but also in part to English-speaking armed groups in the region since 1994.

210 in Brussels, Paris, Montreal, Guangzhou, Washington, and Tokyo, the Congolese capital of Kinshasa has retained a high degree of “local flavor,” or, borrowing Mufwene’s (2010) term, has remained a “global village,” where neighborhoods have often retained their local networks and socioeconomic structures and are organized in a village-like manner—and where residents of certain neighborhoods may spend much of their lives in the same neighborhood. This has contributed to more ideologically motivated and fine-grained internal fragmentation, both the retention of specific language practices in small-scale communities (e.g., retention of their indigenous languages in some neighborhoods), and emerging registers and particular styles in others (e.g., language practices of youth that differ from others in other neighborhoods). While English is increasingly heard in much of Kinshasa, it is more widely spoken in the city center, in Gombe, and in the areas around the central market, Zando. International business and diplomatic networks, in part due to the permanent presence of a large UN contingent since the 2000s, are now conducted entirely in English, and Kinshasa’s American school, Tasok, is thriving and very popular.

Kasanga (2012, 48) observes that “spurred by the irrepressible globalization wind and the influx of foreign multinationals and fortune-seekers, the prestige of English has increased significantly. One result is its high visibility in the French-dominated linguistic landscape, mainly in advertising.” Although Nigerian influences are only part of this anglicization phenomenon, they represent an important factor because of their entrenchment in popular culture and the consumption by many Congolese of Nigerian Afrobeats/Afropop music, dubbed or subtitled television series, and literary productions such as novels and comics. This development has been reinforced by Nigerian migrants who have come to Kinshasa since the early 2000s, either as market traders, buyers of precious stones, or artists (musicians, craftsmen, etc.). Some of them have settled in Kinshasa and have learned Lingala but often little or no French.

Some are also active in Congolese soap opera productions, due to the success of Nigerian series in Congo.

Thus, after a brief historical contextualization of “transregional flows” between West and Central Africa (Section 2), this paper focuses on several sociolinguistic changes and new contact-induced settings in Kinshasa (from a linguistic-anthropological perspective, based on online data collected through digital linguistic ethnography and fieldwork in Kinshasa 2022): (1) the increasing anglicization in everyday interactions and linguistic landscapes—here based on young people’s interactions in social media with a focus on the role of Lingala-English contact settings (in Section 3.1); (2) the borrowing of lexemes from Nigerian languages into Lingala through television series, films, but especially through music and literature (Section 3.2); (3) the indexical role of Nigerian toponyms and anthroponyms in the Lingala-based youth language Langila in Kinshasa (in Section 3.3). Preliminarily and tentatively, these developments are placed within a tradition of cyclical “global flows” in the DR Congo, with a historical wave of fashion-oriented *sapeurs* (members of what later became known as *La Sape* movement) in the 1920s to 1940s influenced by cultural and linguistic innovations from Europe (Gondola 1999), then by so-called *Bills* or *Buffalo Bills* as a Wild West movement in the 1960s, primarily associated with Western productions and Wild West imagery (see, among others, Gondola 2016), and finally by religious Pentecostal influences and movements from the early 1980s onward from the US and West Africa.

In the broadest sense, this essay intends to illustrate how technological innovation in Africa is linked to new forms of “transcreational” language use and how consumers of social media content pick up linguistic input that artists, entrepreneurs, and influencers disseminate through their social media channels.<sup>2</sup>

2 At this point, it should be noted that “transcreation” is used in this paper as a loose approach to contact patterns, creative language use, and transfer,

212 At the same time, new and innovative patterns of language use in Kinshasa, with their reference to Nigerian media content creators, show a certain continuity in Kinshasa, demonstrating that West Africa(n languages) and the Congo have long been linked historically (since the days of early colonial labor migration). Language, as argued in this essay, is a key commodity in these transnational dynamics from West to Central Africa, through which (as a medium) new flows of innovative practices are distributed and shared. English as a “new” language in Kinshasa conveys indexicalities of cosmopolitanism, fashion, innovation, and more, and sells well. Similarly, “Nigerianisms” in the interactions of young Congolese online users serve as signs with high indexical value, indexing an online user’s connectedness and up-to-date knowledge of mediascapes. At the same time, language itself appears to have a strong influence on practices of cultural entrepreneurship as a resource of and template for “transcreations,” that is, for transporting creative designs from Nigeria to Congo (e.g., via musical styles and lyrics) and possibly from Congo back to Nigeria. Youth language practices do not stop at national borders; these trends also cross and transcend colonial boundaries such as the imperial Anglo-French divide. This chapter therefore examines the changing patterns of language used by young Congolese in online spaces in terms of their relationship to Nigerian influences of entrepreneurs and content creators, as well as contemporary media flows.

rather than as a well-defined direction prevalent in translation studies (to take just one example). Nevertheless, it appears to be a useful concept for the Nigerian-Congolese context.

## 2. Transregional Flows Over Time: Nigerian Linguacultural “Imports” Yesterday and Today

Although largely unknown, the presence of Nigerians and West Africans in Congo dates back to the late nineteenth century, when the État Indépendant du Congo (E.I.C., Free State of Congo), a precursor to the Belgian Congo, was established. Early ethnographers and travelogues on the private estate of King Leopold II in the late nineteenth century mention Hausa, who were originally from West Africa<sup>3</sup> and were often used for cheap labor such as transporting goods, heavy labor in Atlantic ports, or building the railroad from Matadi to present-day Kinshasa. Also in the military sphere, “obtaining recruits for the army had been a major problem; indeed, until 1902 most soldiers were Hausa” (Yates 1980, 267). Édouard Dupont, then Directeur du Musée Royal d’Histoire Naturelle de Bruxelles, traveled to the Congo in 1887 as part of an expedition. In his ethnographic report *Lettres sur le Congo* (1889), he recounts how, shortly after arriving in Léopoldville (now Kinshasa), he recruited a Hausa “boy” (i.e., a colonial servant), of whom he also makes a detailed pencil drawing:

J’emporte quatorze charges et serai accompagné des Haoussas, des Zoulous et du cuisinier Cabinda, en tout vingt-et-un noirs. Depuis Léopoldville, je me suis aperçu qu’un petit Haoussa, nommé Laojo, s’était fort attaché à ma personne. Alors que dans le trajet d’aller, il m’avait paru frondeur et ne chercher qu’à bien vivre .... Robuste et solidement membré, il

- 3 The fact that the presence of Hausa speakers in the E.I.C. does not equate to “Nigeria” or “Nigerians” remains undisputed, as the colonial basis of the current national boundaries had not been fully implemented at that time. Moreover, Hausa is known to be spoken outside the Nigerian borders. This only serves to outline the mobility of West African individuals in the early colonial period.

me faisait traverser les rivières sur ses épaules et me rendait toutes sortes de petits services.

(I carry fourteen loads and will be accompanied by Hausas, Zulus, and the cook Cabinda, in all twenty-one Blacks. Since Leopoldville, I have noticed that a small Hausa named Laojo has become very attached to me. Whereas on the way to the camp, he had seemed to me to be rebellious and only wanted to live well .... Robust and solidly built, he made me cross the rivers on his shoulders and did me all sorts of little services.)  
(Dupont 1889, 303–304, my translation)

This young Hausa had apparently approached him, but without speaking a word of any European language. His descriptions, however, assume that the young man and many others spoke the local languages, at that time mainly *le kikongo commerciale* or *le kikongo véhiculaire*, also because Lingala as such did not yet exist. Instead, it was reported that in the areas of the Lower Congo in the diverse contact scenarios, the so-called “Kru-Boy English” was in use due to the converging and merging of Central African and West African influences, resulting in “an uninflected mixture of English and French, and *fiote*, described as ‘a kind of Congolese esperanto’ or pidgin Kikongo” (Yates 1980, 270).<sup>4</sup>

Examples like Dupont’s are recurrent, and caravans composed of recruits, indentured laborers, or even descendants of slaves from different parts of the continent were no exception, with Hausa-speaking people playing an important role, even if many other early West African “migrants” go unmentioned in these colonial accounts. Early linguistic and cultural contacts at the turn of the nineteenth century are therefore very likely, for instance when it comes to shaping everyday cultural practices and objects (as in Dupont’s example of Hausa lexemes for the Hausa bearer’s donkey), from the days of the founding in 1881/1882

4 Samarín (2013) also discusses hypothetical West African influences on the emergence of the Kikongo-based contact language.

of Léopoldville, where the fishing villages of “Kintamo” and “Kinshassa” (after Stanley 1885, chapters 17 and 18) were located. Philipps (1889, 463) refers to the multicultural and multilingual context of the early trading posts in the Congo in the late 1880s with a strong presence of West Africans as follows:

Among the blacks employed by traders may be found types of all tribes as far as Cape Lopez .... The strongest and best workers are the “Kroo-boys” (from the coast of Kroo, near Cape Palmas), whence they derive their name. All of these blacks speak some English, and some few of them a little French. ... The smiths, masons and brickworkers come from the English colony, on the Gold Coast. In the employ of the Congo Independent State are also natives of Zanzibar, Haoussa and some from the head-waters of the Niger.

Contemporary influences from West Africa thus look back on a long history of contact-induced language change in the region, affecting various languages, but especially Lingala, the language that developed along the upper Congo River beginning in the late 1880s. In addition to the French, Flemish, and Portuguese influence on early Lingala, “the languages spoken by the workers hired on the West African coasts included Hausa, Bambara, Ewe, Igbo, and Yoruba, as well as English-, French- and Portuguese-based pidgins and creoles” (Meeuwis 2019, <3>) and also played a major role in its development. English as spoken by West African workers, however, is considered to have had a major influence in this process. Much lexical material in Lingala is derived from English, for instance words such as *bulangeti* (blanket), *buku* (book), *mbeto* (bed), *miliki* (milk), and many more, often tied to English-speaking Protestant missionaries and their work mainly in eastern parts of the country. More recently, many technical, financial, legal, and medical terms have been borrowed from English (rather than French), such as *bluetooth*, *charge*, *mobile money*, *upload*, *software/hardware*, and many others (in line with similar trends in other languages). In Lingala-based youth registers (exclusive speech styles used by young and often

216 streetwise youngsters) this development is even more prominent (see for instance Nassenstein and Hollington 2016), and has led to creative Lingala borrowings such as *kotaké* 'to take, to steal' (< take), *kodayé* 'to die' (< die), *kolova* 'to love' (< love), *dringe* 'intoxicated state' (< drink), *dancing* 'nightclub,' and many more.<sup>5</sup> English also plays an important role in young people's narrative strategies, storytelling, and humorous anecdotes viewed from the perspective of conversation analysis. In all of these examples, English is interwoven and embedded with "local practices" as described by Pennycook (2010), and it has been recontextualized to some degree and also still reflects the usage patterns of the contexts in which it was acquired (as in Nigerian music).

But it is not only (the popularization of) English that has contributed to sociolinguistic and sociocultural changes in Kinshasa. First and foremost, Lingala as a contact language has absorbed transregional influences, and speakers have popularized certain cultural terms since the introduction of Nigerian telenovelas on Congolese television in the late 1990s and early 2000s (for instance, the habituation of Congolese to lexemes from Nigerian languages such as Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa). These are recurrent terms for specific roles in these series, but also everyday terms for cultural objects and practices, and can also be traced at the interactional level as discourse strategies or conversational sequences (for instance, how turn-taking is organized, how and where presence is used as a communicative strategy, where so-called repair strategies are used, etc.). Some of these linguistic influences are believed to be related to dubs/synchronizations of early and "classic" Nigerian productions such as *The Village Headmaster* (1968/1988), *New Masquerade* (from the 1980s), and *Candle Light* (1990s), often mentioned and cited by interview partners as

5 While some of these words appear to be innovative and of recent origin, numerous of them were also found in the youth language in Kinshasa as early as the 1960s (referred to as Indoubil or Hindubill). This shows a clear continuity in the perceived attractiveness of foreign words, especially English, in the language use of young people in Kinshasa.

one of the earliest productions, as well as movies such as *Maman Joy* (originally *Madam Joy*, dubbed in 2016), see also Pype (2013).<sup>6</sup> The beginning of Nigerian influences on and in popular music culture is difficult to pinpoint, but is believed to have occurred in late 2007 or early 2008 with the popularization of Nigerian popular music by artists such as P-Square, Timaya, J. Martins.

The arrival, spread, and consumption of Nigerian popular culture in Kinshasa have undoubtedly shaped and influenced language use in the capital. Especially the “distribution” of English as a commodity in the production of popular culture can be understood as a transregional flow. This applies to soap operas and movies (which are synchronized and broadcast on television or uploaded to online video portals, or screened live by “cinema narrators,” a rare occurrence in Kinshasa), but also to the music industry. While several factors have contributed to the spread and “distribution” of English as a language and English-speaking media in popular culture, Kasanga (2012) cites the Nigerian video industry as one potential source of Anglicisms in Lingala-speaking surroundings:

Another potential source of English input that would enhance the spread of English is the availability (Katsuva 2003) and popularity (Marshfield and van Oosterhout 2007) of Nigerian video films. The average Congolese urbanite watches these movies at cinemas, whereas the privileged few can either watch them on selected satellite TV networks or through DVD rental. Unfortunately, a major hindrance for being a source of English input is the fact that films are “commented upon” and dialogues are “partly translated” (Fuita and Lumisa 2009, 107), in French as voice-overs. (Kasanga 2012, 51)

6 All these film productions play a significant role in changing the linguistic practices of speakers in Kinshasa. However, due to its limited scope, no content analysis of these films or telenovelas can be done in this paper. An analysis of language use in Congolese dubs of Nigerian telenovelas will therefore be provided elsewhere.

218 Few scholars have shed light on the interconnections between Congolese and Nigerian popular culture and media. The video industry of the past 30 years in particular seems to have played a significant role in these “transformations” and “flows,” but has been studied by few scholars (among them Katsuva 2003; Fuita and Lumisa 2009).

An economically influential sector in popular culture (as of today) has been the recent joint history of the Nigerian and Congolese music industries in the last fifteen years. This can be seen as a logical follow-up step to the era of the first video productions and one of the effects of the ground being laid—linguistically and culturally—for musical imports from Nigeria. Musical exports of Congolese rumba and soukous from Congo had already been disseminated in Nigeria for several decades since the 1960s. One example of Congolese-Nigerian co-productions is the single *Enemy solo* (meaning *real enemy* or *bad-smelling enemy* depending upon the tonality) by Awilo Longomba and P-Square (2015).<sup>7</sup> One blogger explained the title as follows: “Enemy Solo in Lingala means ‘Enemy Bad Smell’ which simply refers to enemies of progress, or as Nigerian will call it ‘Bad Belle’ people” (pancocojams 2015, quoted in Powell 2018). The lyrics are mainly in Lingala, and after an Afrobeats intro, Awilo Longomba’s characteristic melodic soukous melody dominates the song, interspersed with English lyrics and solo parts by Peter and Paul Okoye (P-Square). The song and video clip, like many of

7 Awilo Longomba comes from a musical family. His father Vicky Longomba was a founding member of the popular rumba band Tout Puissant OK Jazz (TP OK Jazz), which was also popular in Nigeria for several decades. His brother Lovy Longomba was a member of the Super Mazembe Orchestra in Kenya from the 1970s to the 1980s, and two of his nephews were successful for several years in Kenya as a rap duo under the name Longombas. In the DR Congo, Awilo never achieved the fame and popularity he did abroad. This may be one reason why he spent a lot of time in West Africa and chose to reside in London, known as one of the major Congolese “music export products.” The Nigerian projects helped him gain greater popularity in Kinshasa as Nigerian music became popular and spread.

Awilo Longomba's other songs, was realized in Nigeria, where he collaborated with several artists. On social media, the popularity of the collaborative pieces is reflected in the number of clicks and active exchanges among online users about the meaning and composition of the co-produced songs. One user explained to others in a YouTube comment the benefits of such music for both countries, in terms of "learning" rhythms, "up-scaling" the music industries, and also as a preview of possible creative speech in the future (*je m'appelle chop money*):

Added value: For DRCongolese: the songs scale up RDC music/image to P-Square fans [sic; meaning 'fans']. For Nigerians: It brings more P-SQUARE in DRC and probably was critical moment for Paul and Peter to learn and understand RDC rythm. Most probable the next P-SQUARRE corus will include some DRC rythm (*je m'appele chop money....*). (User Roots Bondowe 2015, quoted in Powell 2018)

Other online users, here in Lingala, are less enthusiastic about multilingual collaboration and the role of Congolese artists in these projects, accusing them of being less innovative and rather of "copying" the Nigerian counterparts:

baninga banigerien baza kosala makambu ya minene surtout n'a ba province n'a bango. kasi bino bo salaka musala ya mabe yango wana bozakokufa ba pauvre. Mpe ba pièce mingi bozalaka bo copie ka ba nigerien

(Nigerian friends do their big things especially in their provinces. But you work badly, and because of that you die poor. And in many pieces you only copy Nigerians). (User G. Ndele, Facebook, 2020, my translation)<sup>8</sup>

8 Novelty, originality, and innovation seem to stand out as central criteria of relevance among speakers in this case, as the quote shows, as also pointed out in the introduction to this edited work. I am grateful to the editors for this hint.

220 These music videos are frequently liked, shared, commented on, or turned into viral dance contests on digital media by young Congolese on Instagram and TikTok. However, it is not only the consumers' comments on the featured songs, but also the multilingual and creative composition of the comments, WhatsApp exchanges, and Facebook posts themselves where people mix French, Lingala, and variants of English ("standard" and NPE, sometimes Jamaican), as in "*Naija Boy his speaking Lingala. Tokoos, masta!*" (Nigerian/Naija-speaking guy speaking Lingala. Nice, man!) (R Lofo, YouTube, 2020, quoted in Powell 2018). Moreover, lay translators discussing and translating the multilingual composition of songs offer their (folk) etymological knowledge in the comment column and beyond. This reflects very clearly how Congolese mediascapes are influenced by an increasingly English-centric production and an English-affirmative audience, and also how aware users are of changing language use as a result of these (and other) cultural productions. Blogger pancocojams, for example, explains foreign elements that appear in Awilo Longomba's songs to Nigerians and English-speaking Congolese by responding to other users' YouTube comments and analyzing them (folk) linguistically:

Original comment: "Awilo, the OG. Love this jam! J'adore"

→ Reply by pancocojams: "'OG' here is an African American Vernacular English (Hip Hop) term that means 'Original Gangsta.' In the context of this comment, 'OG' refers to Awilo Longomba's longevity as a performer of hit songs."

Original comment: "If i dey wish me bad i wish u good ooo."

→ Reply by pancocojams: "This is a Nigerian Pidgin English form of one of the lines from this song. The 'ooo' at the end emphasizes what was said."

Overall, the influence of foreign or global popular culture in Congo and its impact on Lingala as the predominant language in the Congolese capital is, as a historical phenomenon, by no

means a case restricted to Nigerian influences. Rather, it must be seen as a cyclical event, in the tradition of *La Sape* fashionistas between the 1920s and 1970s (influenced by modifications of French *haute couture*), who left their mark on Lingala and the language of the capital, Kinshasa, in the tradition of the Wild West fashion of the *Bills* in the 1950s and 1960s (oriented to US-Italian film productions), which also influenced the language from the capital, and also in the wake of the “Pentecostal movements” (so-called *églises de réveil*) from the 1980s onward (from the US, but also from Nigeria), which triggered lexical and discursive changes in the patterns of language use as a highly influential sociocultural movement. All of these twentieth and twenty-first-century developments can be seen as early or recent “transcreative waves” with high potential for diffusion and distribution, highlighting especially the creative character that serves not as a clear “translation” from Nigerian languages and Nigerian popular culture to Congolese lifeworlds but rather as an “experiment to create ‘unheard of solutions,’ which includes the coining of new terms and neologisms” (Katan 2021, n.p., referring to Gaballo 2012, 104). However, the long-lasting linguacultural import from West Africa to Central Africa is not only a matter of cultural production and media industry, but also one of fashionable language use among young people as key actors, as will be shown in the following sections.

### **3. Indexical References to Nigeria in Youth’s Online Interactions**

Linguistic landscapes in urban spaces such as billboards, posters, banners with announcements, and lettering on cab buses, motorcycles, and house walls are also places that reflect an increasing use of English. A few years ago, Kasanga (2010) described this as a “paradoxical” situation with a strong presence of English in the public sphere (what he calls “streetwise English”), but hardly noticed in the interactions of speakers in cities and in

222 domestic transactions. This has changed to a great extent, both in “offline” conversations at the roadside and especially in online exchanges on social media. A central hypothesis of this paper is that young media users’ interactions on YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, etc., where English is regularly used, have led to a change in language attitudes towards English (which is increasingly perceived as the language of “modernity,” “cosmopolitan identity,” etc., see also Kasanga 2010) and also to its wider prevalence in daily life interactions in the city.

These media linguistic practices are in the focus in the following subsections. Lingala has been influenced by increasing anglicization in public linguistic landscapes and online media, which led to Lingala-English languaging practices that are referred to by their users as Lingal’anglais (3.1). The language has been influenced by lexical borrowing and enrichment from Nigerian languages, especially from television and movie productions (3.2.),<sup>9</sup> and has led to the appearance of Nigerian terms and concepts in the manipulative language register Langila (3.3.), a so-called youth language practice. All three of these concise case studies focus on the changing patterns of language use in relation to these “global flows” that are mainly reflected in social media.

9 The ideologies of Congolese speakers towards different varieties of English evident in Nigerian media, e.g. more standard-oriented varieties vs. Naija (or Nigerian Pidgin English; NPE), will not be discussed in detail in this section due to the limited scope of the paper. Nevertheless, many French and Lingala speakers in particular have a problem understanding NPE; however, when adapting specific greetings and lexemes, it becomes clear that NPE influences can also be found in some of the borrowings (and language practices) that arise from popular telenovelas and music in Kinshasa, especially when young online users engage in written interactions, e.g., using *dem* for *they*; *chop* for *food*; *sweet* for *delicious*, or in spoken interactions sometimes *na(t) so?* for *Isn’t it?*

### 3.1 English vs. French in Francophone Spaces: Lingal'anglais in the Making

In various contexts in urban Africa, so-called “*linguaging*” practices have been observed among multilingual speakers. The so-called “*translinguaging turn*” in sociolinguistics in the study of multilingual interactions has drawn scholarly attention beyond the commonly known “*codeswitching*” to a more dynamic understanding of the multilingual repertoires of urban dwellers who have numerous languages at their disposal.<sup>10</sup> Kinshasa, as the largest Francophone city in the world, has seen an increasing use of English in public discourse in addition to French and Lingala. Since 2008–2009 this change has been seen primarily, but not exclusively, among young people in linguistic practices related to rap and hip-hop music, but also Nigerian music. More recently, English has also entered other sectors of society, now no longer limited to youth, and is related to economic developments (international investors and the mining industry, but also advertising), political changes, and cultural developments (the role of the film industry, joint music productions, see Section 2). The linguistic practices observed in social media language combine French-Lingala resources and English “*snippets*” that

10 The well-studied “*codeswitching*” or sometimes “*codemixing*” approach to multilingual language use, which has only been able to display one part of the communicative picture, lacks a more holistic view of multilingual language use, postulating very clear boundaries between distinct languages or between different structural mechanisms of code-switching (such as “*insertional*,” “*lexical*” or “*discourse marker*” switching, see Muysken 2007). Compared to the well-researched codeswitching that has dominated the study of language contact processes for several decades, and which is based on the idea of separable “*codes*” rather than a multilingual individual’s holistic communicative repertoire without clearly demarcated boundaries, i.e. the departing idea of *translinguaging*, this new approach represents a significant departure from conventional and traditional models of multilingual interaction—and is therefore particularly useful in contexts such as the one studied in this paper. However, given the limited scope of this discussion in this paper, interested readers may wish to consult Pennycook (2016) for an overview of (trans)linguaging and a sound critique of codeswitching.

224 media users have acquired either from the media, from roadside billboards, from international music, or, less likely, from English as a school subject, and this translanguaging use has different names. In sociolinguistic interviews before 2016, it was often referred to as “*les mots English*” [English words], after which the new term Lingal’anglais was coined by Facebook users in 2016 as an alias for the contemporary mix of both languages in the city. In the following years, the new branding of these practices as Lingal’anglais spread from Facebook to WhatsApp and from there to the music industry. Congolese rappers, in particular, used more and more English words in their lyrics (see below), after which other rumba/soukous musicians began to use the same translanguaging practice of Lingala-French-English in their lyrics.

On the street, many English terms are used by street children, cab drivers, and itinerant street vendors. Common examples are *bro* (close friend), *chillin’* (to relax, to take it easy), *hustler* (somebody who is streetwise), *king* (role model, fashion model), and *swagg* (fashionable, fashion, style), all of which have been in use among youths for a few years now.<sup>11</sup> Phrases like “*Nazochatté. Chatté ezá na anglais, il faut ozalaka cool, il faut ozalá na swagg, donstop man*” (I am chatting. ‘To chat’ is English, you have to be cool, you must have swag, do not give up/stop, man/friend!), an excerpt from a WhatsApp conversation from 2021, are therefore often exchanged in WhatsApp group conversation or YouTube comments. When tracing the history of English in Kinshasa as well as its use in

11 This is by no means a development limited to Kinshasa. Young speakers in predominantly urban areas of Francophone Africa increasingly use English lexemes and grammatical morphemes in their daily interactions. Examples from the Francophone youth language Nouchi (Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire) and the Burundian youth language Kirundi Slang from Bujumbura have shown that young people tend to adopt influences from English alongside other languages as representations of their urban identities, forming “global repertoires” (Nassenstein and Hollington 2016) in Francophone environments where French is the official language, while basics of English are often not acquired until secondary school. The Congolese case, however, is different because of its connection with Nigeria in popular culture.

mobile communication, WhatsApp users in their twenties were contacted, all of whom had worked with the project for several months. One interlocutor, when asked about the timing of the emergence of this linguistic practice, responded with a voice memo that provided rough clues as to when the importance of English as a language increased among youth and musicians:

The influence of introducing English words into young people's language really comes from American hip-hop and Nigerian music adapted to Congolese music, which has encouraged young people to mention English words. Like swag, stand, that sort of thing. And then young people could start introducing English words into this [youth] language. Example: Everyone in Kinshasa can say *nazá swag*, I'm well-dressed ... it [started] from 2006, I specify, but the first hip-hop words had already been introduced from 1998–1999, 2001, with Lexus Legal who was already making records that he rapped in English, in the live shows, he put words in English, money, peace of Africa, justice, those were the words he mentioned. Now it's happening with almost all young people, those who mention English words. (O. C., WhatsApp interview/voice memos, 2021, my translation from French)

Another speaker illustrated the use of *Lingal'anglais* in the following way (excerpted from a WhatsApp conversation on voice memos), when asked if English words retain their semantics or undergo a change in meaning. He explains that the English adjective *smart* takes on the new meaning of "Casanova-like" or "womanizer-like," unlike the English original:

*Yaya, lokóla libosó nazwí ezá eh... ndéngé nakoloba "nazá smart," donc "smart" wâná ezá comme si yaya mókó atrouvaka azá dangereux pô na básí, donc "nazá smart," donc mélange óyo eséngí difference.*

[Older brother, like I first got [your message], it is hm ... I will say "I am smart," thus that "smart" [means] if one guy finds out he is "dangerous for the girls," so the mix "I am smart"

requires a difference [i.e., a new meaning.] (F. O., WhatsApp interview/voice memos, 2021, my translation)

In the music productions of Congolese hip-hop artists between 2010 and 2016, such as Two Swagg, DeeJay S Nzoko, Big Brown, and G6 Souljaz, Lingal'anglais was frequently used, and was increasingly employed in various social media such as WhatsApp, Twitter, and in YouTube comments. Common examples of inserted English lyrics in Congolese hip-hop are in the song *Monduki* (Gun) by Steven No feat. DeeJay S (2014). Rappers use multilingual resources to show their affiliation with the international hip-hop scene and demonstrate the fluid nature of their rap lyrics by using a wide multilingual repertoire, consisting mainly of Lingala and French.

*Tóyâ na Kin tóvandísá bándima bísó*  
*I go in the line, beat me machi!*  
*You lie, bro, masta, tíká korêvé nigga.*  
*Tótyá na sé whoop-whoop, ngá, my nigga, standin-up,*  
*tíká maga, nigga, yóká, bozá eloko té!*  
*tíká maga, nigga, yóká, bozá eloko té!*  
*Trop de mérite ezá n'angó bokísi té,*  
*Steven No, DeeJay S, nóko ...*

(We came to Kinshasa, we settled, they accepted us  
 I follow the rules, shoot me!  
 You lie, brother, buddy, stop dreaming.  
 Let's do it low, whoop-whoop, me, I rose,  
 Leave it, man, listen, you (pl.) are nothing!  
 Leave it, man, listen, you (pl.) are nothing!  
 Too many rewards is no magic,  
 Steven No, DeeJay S, uncle ...)

(Steven No feat. DeeJay S, 2014, my translation) <sup>12</sup>

12 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHdseokGSnw> (0'14"-0'39") (last accessed March 29, 2023). Rap lyrics are retained without omitting offensive

However, it also shows that the variant of English used in the lyrics is an “imperfect” one that includes new words such as *machi* for gun or firearm that do not appear in the dominant Englishes used for hip-hop music, and that also extensively uses emblematic forms of address such as *bro* (< brother) and *masta* (originally derived from the English *master* and then conventionalized as young people’s term of address), when in fact only fragments of the language are used. A young woman on WhatsApp, when asked about the correctness of English as used in social media, responded as follows: “*Mais yóká ba-nigériens, ba-jamaïcain atá anglais na bangó ezá mwâ not good not good, kosála ba-faute ezá n’angó rien, donc ... don giv’a damn, lobá káka, lová káka. Ozôcomprendre?*” (But listen even to the Nigerians, the Jamaicans, their English is a little bit not good, not good, making mistakes is nothing ... don’t give a damn, just speak, just love. Do you get it?). The aesthetic value of English, the “branding” of texts with a fashionable taste in language, is therefore clearly oriented towards non-standard English and copies language known from the popular culture industry, such as Jamaican reggae and dancehall or Nigerian Afrobeats and Afropop.

The fluid use of the three languages Lingala (as the local Bantu language spoken in Kinshasa), French, and English is best explained by the sociolinguistic approach of translanguaging, building upon a “trans-semiotic system with many meaning-making signs, primarily linguistic ones that combine to make up a person’s semiotic repertoire” (García and Wei 2014, 42). While the use of multilingual resources among speakers has traditionally often been explained as forms of the aforementioned codeswitching or codemixing, in recent years more fluid approaches have revolutionized contemporary understandings of the composition of a person’s linguistic repertoire (and its context of use). The emergence of Lingal’anglais can be understood as part of the

terms in the original. In the translation, however, these terms and slurs were ignored.

228 “trans-super-poly-metro” movement (Pennycook 2016) in current sociolinguistics. The mixed patterns of English and Lingala in Congolese musicians’ lyrics have been termed “crossing” by Kasanga (2019), a term introduced in sociolinguistics by Rampton (1995) in studies on British youths and their in-group mocking strategies and mutual imitations of accents. Kasanga (2019), however, focuses mainly on phenomena that occurred in Congolese music between the 1950s and 1980s. While English functioned as an “attention-getter” (Kasanga 2019, 93) in these earlier musical productions of Congolese rumba, languaging processes are less pronounced today. English terms have “infiltrated” (and continue to “infiltrate”) everyday discourse to such an extent that English can no longer be clearly separated from other languages, having become an integral part of online communication in contemporary DR Congo alongside Lingala and French. The example of Lingal’anglais practices discussed here (which remain dynamic and fluid despite the ascribed glottonym) convincingly demonstrates how translanguaging represents a more integrated and seamless use of multiple languages within a single communicative act. It can thus be clearly distinguished from codeswitching, which is understood as switching between (supposedly) different linguistic systems. These dynamic and fluid language practices found and documented in Kinshasa also contribute to and are triggered by broader socio-cultural and technological changes in people’s contemporary communicative practices.<sup>13</sup> With a redefinition of the theoretical approach, the recent and current language formation processes observable in Congolese popular culture and in speakers’ multilingual compositions could be placed in the same vein as the key concept of “transcreation” in the present volume.

13 I am grateful to one reviewer for encouraging me to clarify the (theoretical) advantages of translanguaging over codeswitching in light of the data and case study presented.

### 3.2 Lexical Borrowings and Translanguaged Material from Nigerian Languages

In addition to the increasing importance of English in languaging or translanguaging practices in Kinshasa, several so-called “Nigerianisms” have found their way from Igbo and Yoruba into Lingala, especially through Nigerian video productions (films, series) dubbed into Lingala (see table 1).

“Nigerianism”	Gloss (as used in DR Congo)	Origin/Explanation
<i>oga</i>	boss, chief; respectful term of address	< Naija/NPE <i>my oga (at the top)</i> ‘my boss, my senior’ < Yoruba <i>ògá</i> ‘master, boss’
<i>igwe</i>	boss, chief; respectful term of address	< Igbo <i>igwe (igwekala/ eluigwekala)</i> ‘the sky (is higher than the land),’ royal title and respectful term of address to indigenous authorities
<i>okada</i>	motorcycle taxi	< Yoruba <i>òkadà</i> , derived from the former airline Okada Air and transferred to designate skillful motorcycle taxi drivers (the term has spread to several African countries)
<i>juju</i>	witchcraft, magic; spell	< occurs in 19th century reports on magical practices and beliefs in various locations and communities in West Africa, among them Igbo, Ibibio, Yoruba etc.

[Table 1] Lexical material borrowed from Nigerian languages and used in present-day Lingala.

These are used in daily life and seem to have become more common in social media in recent years. The four terms appear repeatedly in telenovelas and film productions and, as Lingala speakers from Kinshasa explain, are, in their opinion, indexical of “Nigerianness.” They go hand in hand with stereotypical images among Congolese youth of Nigerians, who are said to be deeply rooted and embedded in “traditional” societies, are said to have strong patriarchal and authoritarian family

230 ties, and are passionate witchdoctors or *féticheurs* (traditional healers) (interview excerpts, 2022). These are images conveyed by Nigerian telenovelas and are rarely questioned or challenged but are familiar to the majority of Lingala-speaking residents of Kinshasa.

In some contexts, the terms *igwe* and *oga* in particular have developed new meanings and connotations that can be observed in their use among musicians. The term *igwe* has become a common designation for Congolese musician Werrason (real name Noël Ngiama Makanda), former member of the band Wenge Musica 4x4 and an icon of the fast-paced soukous music of the early 2000s. On many billboards, Werrason is depicted using his self-chosen nickname, Igwe, which also appears repeatedly in his songs (as a respectful but also self-aggrandizing form of address). A second nickname used by Werrason, alternating with Igwe, is *Le Roi de la Forêt* [The King of the Forest]. His leopard-skin attire (which surely refers to former dictator Mobutu Sese Seko) and several of his songs sung in Kikongo accompanied by Yansi drummers combine the titles of respect with the image of a “traditional authority” and his efforts at self-stylization as a preserver of cultural and linguistic heritage. Interestingly, in social media exchanges, Igwe is never referred to as a Nigerian term of respect, but this is considered an established Congolese term and frequently used by Werrason’s and Wenge’s fans (interview excerpts, 2022). It is likely that Werrason adopted the title from Nigerian music in the 1980s or 1990s or when performing in Nigeria.

All of the lexical items discussed above, although few in number (according to the current state of research), exhibit a high degree of emblematicness in discourse, as they not only hint at television and YouTube consumption patterns, but more importantly to knowledge of current media trends and fashions. Recognizing, repeating, and embedding these terms in one’s own language potentially marks the speaker as a “transcreative” user who translates cultural meaning and flavors the Lingala (or French)

language with these current borrowings and linguistic elements. At the same time, however, exclusionary terms such as *wára* draw a clear line between Congolese and non-Congolese (especially West African Muslims) and serve as critical, insulting, or highly generalizing terms in digital language use.

### 3.3 Onomastic References to Nigeria in the Youth Language Langila

Across the African continent, particularly in urban contexts, adolescent speakers modify and manipulate language to the extent that adults, more conventional speakers, and mainstream society no longer grasp the full meaning of what young speakers are saying to one another. In cities like Kinshasa, these emerging language practices are also a means of survival (e.g., for targeted or stigmatized street children speaking Lingala ya Bayankee (Lingala of the Yankees)), or they can be used as a creative and playful means of in-group communication.

Langila, in itself a variation of the glottonym Lingala, is one such under-documented and under-researched register or youth language in use since 2003–2005, first spoken by dancers, choreographers, singers, etc., and “invented” by Congolese musician King Kester Emeneya, lead singer of the band Victoria Eleison. After its emergence, it quickly shifted from an “offline” practice to the digital space and was increasingly used by Congolese from around the world on social media in WhatsApp groups, Facebook chats, YouTube comments, etc. For several years, according to reports from Kinshasa residents, Langila had almost completely disappeared from the streets and had morphed into a “social media style” before its use in offline communication in Kinshasa began to increase again around 2015.<sup>14</sup>

14 Uploading Langila video clips, including comedy performances, to YouTube resulted in a large amount of analyzable data. I was able to download, sort, and annotate more than 19 hours of Langila video between 2012 and 2022.

232 Langila’s creativity is based on a phonosemantic strategy. Speakers replace words (including “slang” words from other sociolects, from French or English) with near-homophones, words that sound similar to their ears. These similar-sounding words are often names that refer to cities, soccer clubs, brand names, countries, famous people, or fashionable everyday objects. Speakers are free to choose new words as long as they are understood with the interlocutor “decoding” the replacement lexeme. This simple but very efficient strategy makes Langila almost completely unintelligible to Lingala speakers.

Langila term	Gloss	Origin/explanation
<i>série-nigérienne</i>	Nigeria	toponym <i>Nigéria</i> , French <i>série nigérienne</i> (telenovela)
<i>lagos</i>	to sleep	Lingala <i>kolála</i> , toponym <i>Lagos</i>
<i>je-je-ocosa</i>	to lie	former Nigerian soccer player Jay-Jay Okocha, Lingala <i>-kósa</i> (to lie)
<i>timaya</i>	team	name of musician Timaya, English <i>team</i>
<i>bukuharam</i>	book, ID, papers	terrorist organization Boko Haram, Lingala <i>búku</i> (book)

[Table 2] Toponomastic and anthroponomastic references to Nigeria(ns) in Langila.

Speakers of other African youth languages employ similar strategies, as reported, for example, by Ndlovu (2022) for S’ncamtho from Zimbabwe, calling this strategy “partial homophony” and “decoy lexicalization.” The repeated use of anthroponyms, toponyms, etc., conveys to Langila and similar practices a notion of “worldliness,” “fashion,” “innovation,” etc., speakers claim (see also Nassenstein 2023 for a lengthy discussion). (A few) Nigerian terms or names that are in some way associated with Nigeria are also among these substitute terms. Table 2 summarizes the lexemes in Langila that use personal names, group names, or place names that have a connection to Nigeria.

The following examples (1–5), excerpted from YouTube videos, are intended to show that there is no semantic link between the

meaning of a word and its association, that is, words using names of people or places in/from Nigeria have a different meaning and only seem to refer to Nigerian personal names or place names at first sight. No morpheme interlinearization is given in these examples (since this is not the focus of interest here); only etymologies of manipulated “partial homophony” in the sense of Ndlovu (2022) are provided (except for those listed in table 2). It is clear that Langila speakers use names for objects, names of countries, cities, and names or nicknames of famous people—all of which sound similar to the terms intended to convey meaning or grammatical function. Thus, in example (2), the name of the former Congolese soccer player *Mwananteba* (who played for the club TP Mazembe a few years ago) replaces the Lingala lexeme *mwána* (child) because speakers perceive that it sounds similar. The expected verb would be *aláli* (he/she has slept) (a+lál+í; 3SG+sleep+PRS), yet, speakers replace the Lingala verb root *lál-* with the toponym *Lagos* because of an obvious phonetic similarity, yielding a form *alagos*. The negator *té* is replaced by *telesi*, whose reference to a person, brand, or place could not be determined. Because of these playful and creative linkages at the intersection of sound and semantics, where speakers are constantly searching for new appropriate “substitutes” to disguise their speech and increase the level of creativity, Langila is not only a youth language practice per se, but also a kind of language game.

- (1) *vietnam adieumerci na série-nigérienne*  
(the old guy went to Nigeria)  
(*vietnam* (old man) < French *vieux*; *dieumerci* (to go) < French *adieu*)
- (2) *mwananteba alagos telesi*  
(the child has not slept)  
(*mwananteba* (child) < Ling. *mwána*; *telesi* (NEG) < Ling. *té*)
- (3) *mercedes na yolo a-je-je-ocosa, mister*  
(your mother lied, man)

(mercedes (mother) < French mère; yolo < Ling. yó  
(POSS.2SG); mister (friend, buddy) < Engl.)

- (4) *timaya na bisobe abetazol bienvenu telesi*  
(our team did not play well)  
(bisobe < Ling. bísó (POSS.1PL), -betazol < Ling.  
-béta (hit, beat); bienvenu < French bien (good))
- (5) *bukuharam na ngaliema ezaire na palestine*  
(my papers/ID is at home)  
(ngaliema (POSS.1SG) < Ling. ngái; ezaire (it is)  
< Ling. ezalí; palestine (home) < French palais (palace))

While it could be argued that the use of names referring to Nigeria is arbitrary, the choice of near-homophones is not entirely random, as speakers have a vast repertoire to choose from and make semantic connections between the replaced term and the substitute, or tend to choose more words that touch on semantic domains they can relate to. Thus, the choice of multiple Nigeria-related terms to replace similar-sounding Lingala words could be due to Langila speakers' exposure to Nigeria-related media influences in their daily lives, such as communication on social media, music, television, and the news.

#### 4. Preliminary Conclusions

This chapter has aimed to show how media use in Congo is linked to new forms of “transcreational” language use, and how social media content consumers adopt changing linguistic styles and are exposed to the proliferation of English as a dominant resource, to “Nigerianisms,” and to discourses characterized by playful or more serious references to Nigeria and Nigerians in Central Africa. Innovative and creative patterns of language used by young speakers in Kinshasa—and in digital media—take up linguistic trends and fashions, including metadiscursive statements and references to Nigerian media worlds. Here, it is important to note that different social media platforms, such as

WhatsApp, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, or Facebook, shape users' transcultural practices to different degrees and in multiple ways. Media users' and speakers' performances differ according to the different platforms and their formats on which content is shared and communicated (Jancovic, Volmar, and Schneider 2019). The multimodal strategies in posts or messages, such as the use of voice notes, reels, written text and emoticons, GIFs, memes, or stickers, convey different messages when combined or intertwined and appeal to specific users, clients, advertisers, or analysts with their user policies or digital philosophies (Gillespie 2010). Fast-changing digital environments, even in Nigeria and the Congolese capital Kinshasa or in connected diasporic communities, influence the creativity and playfulness of media users, both in written and spoken practice (for a review of contemporary media linguistics, see Calude 2024). While Facebook and YouTube as formerly powerful resources among Congolese media users have lost in terms of popular reception, video formats as shared on Instagram (as reels) or as short TikTok videos have gained in popularity and have stimulated and shaped linguistic creativity, fluidity, and playfulness among Lingala speakers—also due to their interconnectedness with influential Nigerian trends on these platforms. Historically, West Africa and Central Africa have been linked through the use of forced labor since the early colonial period. Today, language remains a central commodity in the transnational movements and media flows from Nigeria to the DR Congo, reflected in the language use of Congolese youth. The Congolese capital is, at least to some extent, becoming an increasingly Anglophone space—in part because of Nigerian influences in television, music, and more. As has been shown, language practices often exhibit “transcreations,” that is, creative designs that are transported and translated from Nigeria to Congo. Future studies have yet to investigate whether these flows and influences are reciprocal, that is, whether through the use of social media returning Nigerians based in Congo or Congolese musicians in Nigeria have equally left a footprint in sociocultural and linguistic practices in multilingual Nigeria. Also, in the future,

236 the modalities of “distribution” and “consumption” could be explored more concretely by focusing on the film and telenovela industries.

*This contribution has largely profited from assistants and interview partners in Kinshasa, DR Congo. Data are based on fieldwork conducted with consumers of Nigerian soap operas in Kinshasa, and with speakers of the youth language practice Langila in Kinshasa in March/April 2022, and subsequently online, consisting of interviews, ethnographic data, and analysis of digital communication in social media. Tryphon-Trésor Muziazia made a special effort to conduct interviews. Sincere thanks are due to all Congolese youth who were approached via social media in WhatsApp groups, Facebook groups, and Instagram chats. Young speakers from Kinshasa, with whom I conducted interviews and ethnographic fieldwork first in 2009–2010 and then in March/April 2022 are warmly thanked. Gedeon and Michel were among those who clarified details about contemporary youth language in Kinshasa. The Institut des Musées Nationaux du Congo, Ministère de la Culture, Arts et Patrimoines is thanked for issuing a research permit for the DR Congo (reference number IMNC/DG/1.0/098/022). I thank all CEDITRAA members for their comments and feedback on the data sessions following the fieldwork visits to DR Congo, especially Matthias Krings, and Artemis Saleh and Axel Fanego Palat for their administrative, organizational content-related efforts and help, as well as the editors of this book for their feedback and patience. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for many useful and constructive comments. The research project (Area Studies, CEDITRAA) is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) 2021–2024, based at the Universities of Frankfurt and Mainz [<https://ceditraa.net>].*

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**QUEER**

**NIGERIA**

**SOCIAL MEDIA**

**#ENDSARS**

**PROTOTYPE**

[ 8 ]

# #NaGayDeyReign: Queer Nigerian Youths and the New World Order of Cultural Production

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Over the past five years, queer Nigerian youths have engaged social media and media productions in raising awareness, creating community, and claiming spaces within Nigeria, on the African continent, and on a global scale. Although facing multiple governmental and societal restrictions, queer Nigerian youths are undeterred and continue to *transcreate* media productions through *prototyping*. Processes like increasing visibility on social media, reclaiming narratives, and creating prototypes can be traced along three shifts: the *digital* shift, the *narrative* shift, and the *prototype* shift. The shifts and events, like the #EndSARS movement, that mark queer Nigerian experiences reflect

242 **the advantages and disadvantages of the digital era and respective (social) media platforms. The narratives encountered during my research demonstrate how digital platforms have been navigated to the benefit of queer communities, used to retroactively occupy spaces, and proactively counter hegemonic narratives. In conclusion, queer narratives and aesthetics hold high currency in the new world order of cultural production (Bhutto 2019) and are indispensable to Nigerian media industries.**

*(@THETemmieOvwasa 2023, April 30). The Nigerian music industry: simultaneously benefiting from queer culture, living queer ass lives and being homophobic.  
Temmie Ovwasa*

In 2016, Lindsey B. Green-Simms wrote an article called “The Emergent Queer<sup>1</sup>: Homosexuality and Nigerian Fiction in the

1 Queer, as used throughout this chapter, is not conceptualized in line with queer studies and queer theory per se. As Clarke (2013, 173) has shown, queer African voices have been “twice removed” from queer studies and queer theory, alike: “For a theory that seeks to disrupt power and cultural normativity, Western queer theory is firmly rooted in the West’s historic and popular notions of what it is to be African and Afro-homosexual.” Queer is rather understood in terms of Green-Simms (2022, 6) as “a new visual language, one that speaks in terms less invested in explicit narratives of resistance and domination, but instead enacts visions of interaction, touch, and longing which anticipate African queerness as possibility and belonging (Green-Simms and Imma 2021, 5).” This notion of African queerness bears contradictions and juxtapositions that include queer African media which “often resist projects that make queer African lives

21st Century,” discussing the importance of third generation Nigerian writers, like Chimamanda N. Adichie and Wole Soyinka, in “tackl[ing] themes previously taboo in African literature” (141), taboos like being queer and Nigerian. At the end of Green-Simms’s paper—written right before the discovery of the usefulness of Twitter by queer Nigerians—she notices how “the age of the internet” is changing the engagement with literary storytelling and transferring it partially to online spaces, like *Q-Zine*, a “bilingual French and English online journal for queer African youth” (Green-Simms 2016, 154). She especially highlights questions of accessibility, which literary print products lack in comparison to “the internet as an unfiltered way to reach both local and global audiences and to quickly respond to the changing political climate” (ibid., 154). Green-Simms’s concluding point is summarized by the words of McAllister and Azuah (2013, 3), who introduce a special issue in 2013 as follows:

Until recently African LGBTI writers did not join the conversation, not openly at least. Now the internet is changing that.

habitable, next to life-affirming” ones. “It is precisely this juxtaposition that help[s] to understand how all queer African [media], regardless of why they were made or who made them, invite an understanding of resistance as a messy process that entails both opposing and consenting to forms of power” (Green-Simms 2022, 6–8). Queerness is not defined as a category of difference, but of possibility and belonging and thus kept broad and receptive for processes described in this chapter. The notion of queerness intended here also resonates with Anzaldúa’s (2009, 164) remarks about adjectives, when ascribed by foreign forces intended to “mark down.” “While I advocate putting Chicana, tejana, working-class, dykefeminist poet, writer-theorist in front of my name, I do so for reasons different than those of the dominant culture. Their reasons are to marginalize, confine, and contain. My labeling of myself is so that the Chicana and lesbian and all the other persons in me don’t get erased, omitted, or killed. Naming is how I make my presence known” (Anzaldúa 2009, 164; as cited in Caldera 2020, 39). Therefore, it is not the task of this paper to compress queer Nigerian youths into neat, though marginalizing, confining, and containing categories of difference, but to center self-ascriptions and self-determining language, as the authority in my research environment lies with my research partners and their processes are ongoing matters.

Access is growing quicker in Africa than anywhere else and LGBTI writers who used to struggle in isolation are now interacting online, working together for recognition and equality, and increasingly expressing their creative vision of the world through fiction and poetry. (as cited in Green-Simms 2016, 154)

Within only two years, not only online journals, but social media and streaming platforms have begun to fundamentally shift the conditions of “the conversation.” In this paper, therefore, I focus on the social media platform Twitter and on tweets, more precisely hashtags (Bernard 2019), that queer Nigerian youths have shared over the last five years. Those hashtags correlate with and express certain shifts characterized by momentum within queer Nigerian communities online and offline. The *digital*, *narrative*, and *prototype* shifts are marked as crucial points of reference in how queer Nigerian youths identify, express, act, and place themselves in the broader context of Nigerian society and the (digital) world. They are ultimately reflected in altered storytelling and *transcreated* media productions. (Digital) *transcreation*, as defined in the introduction of the present volume and chapter, is a concept used in translation studies (Camps 2022; Katan 2021), describing processes of translating texts between differing cultural spheres. In consequence, the “original” text and the transcreation might appear as unrelated, while the intention is to transport “messages” palatable for respective differing contexts; which the “original” is not always able to do. Transferred to an analysis of digital media and media production, this concept aptly conveys notions of creative processes, accelerated digital dissemination and distribution alike. It serves to grasp the processes leading to what Bhutto (2019) coins as “the new world order” of cultural production and, in this case, how it plays out in (queer) Nigerian contexts. Both Bhutto (2019) and Ewing (2016; 2019) diagnose a chronic under-representation of Black and Brown multi-dimensional protagonists in media productions from the Global North, which

can lead consumers to reorient themselves towards other genres and media worlds. My (ongoing) research—in Nigerian online and offline spaces over the past five years—has come to prove a similar case for queer Nigerian youths.

Media productions by *transcreators* in the Global South, in other words, products disseminated through “counter-hegemonic media flows” (Ewing 2016) fuel the new world order of cultural production and establish soft power in the Global South. Processes of digital transformation and circulation of media products in digital spaces through (social) media platforms have paved the way for counter-hegemonic media flows and reflect on a growing number of South-South related transcreations. Bhutto (2019), for example, reports how Bollywood productions are not only consumed in India, but “from Brazil to the West Indies,” “from China to France,” to Nigeria, Japan, South Africa, and Peru (37–57). Similarly, Turkish series, *dizi* (110–61), and South Korean K-pop and K-drama (162–80) have traveled between diasporic and southern global media worlds. In conversations with women and taxi drivers in Kinshasa in 2022, I was also told that Mexican and Colombian series, films, and telenovelas are being consumed in the DRC as well, as they are appreciated for their strong female leads—which particularly single mothers had pointed out (Kinshasa, personal communication, April 2022). The media industries mentioned collectively transcreate “cross-overs,” adaptations, and collaborations (for a discussion of *Namaste Wahala* see, for example, Behsudi 2021; for a discussion of *Black Night in South America* see Ewing 2019).

Cultural hubs, like the Nigerian city of Lagos, are no exception. The productions of Nollywood and Afrobeats have become an integral part of blending analog and digital spaces and hyper-connecting to a map of global scapes (Appadurai 1990), accessing counter-hegemonic media flows and disseminating transcreations at a dizzying speed. In the following, I intend to keep up with queer Nigerian youths in shifting gears, while

246 navigating the scapes and flows of a (digital) new world order of cultural production.

For (1) the *digital shift*, emerging hashtags have played a significant role in increasing visibility between queer Nigerian youths and their self-perception as an existing demographic. This shift developed in online spaces and created a first notion of a digital community. During this process queer Nigerians primarily discovered Twitter to be a viable source and tool (Onanuga 2020, 3; Ukonu et al. 2021). Following their discovery, the coherent presence of certain hashtags formed, resulting in (2) the *narrative shift*. This shift plays out in conversations on social media platforms and in analog encounters alike. An incisive event for the narrative shift was the #EndSARS and the following #LekkiTollGateMassacre on the 20 of October 2020, during which the lines of virtuality and reality blurred and the narratives around the events included both spheres (Akerlele-Popoola et al. 2022; Ekoh and George 2021). Subsequently, (3) the *prototype shift* conveys a turning point in proactive self-representation of queer existence in Nigerian society and media. Whether on or behind the screen, really existing subjects or fictional characters, many queer Nigerians have transcreated their experiences, managing to interweave recognizable mediated Nigerianness, Africanness together with queerness, while critiquing major industries' celebrity culture and their (ab)use of queer aesthetics (Hawkins 2016), as critiqued in the opening quote by Temmie Ovwasa and also in their music (Onanuga 2023). Creating new tropes of reference that prototype their experience catapults their transcreations and the constitutions of queer representation observed during my research out of stereotypical and romanticized shapes and into intentional self-representation. Certainly there are exceptions to the rule, that is, Nigerians in the media industries that play with and provoke heterosexist gender roles and/or live unapologetic trans lives, while engaging in branding, to intentionally reach celebrity status, like Bobrisky, for example. Such public figures

do collaborate with brands and other heteronormative public figures, and some do not even associate with being queer and/or trans. Bobrisky and other celebrities use branding as a tool in creating recognizable personas (Abidin 2020; Ekeopara 2019). Branding here is understood as a tool in creating personas within industries, in order to generate recognizable and imitable, as well as marketable characteristics, potentially in competition with other celebrities (Onanuga 2024) or even whole industries (Jedlowski 2011). Interestingly, queer culture is used quite frequently in building and branding personas within the majorly heterosexist industries (Hawkins 2016). Contrastingly, openly queer Nigerian creatives barely have access to and are largely excluded from networks of the media industries. Instead, they employ interpersonal and intrapersonal processes, crucially involving digital spaces and means of production to convert related experiences into prototypes, thus developing relatable and soft power attracting content, rendering them leading forces in the new world order of cultural production.

For this chapter, I draw on the data gathered during my ongoing research in Nigeria with queer and trans womxn and non-binary people in and outside of Nigerian media industries. Queer and trans people in Nigeria, especially in the media industries, constitute a heterogenous group that challenges Nigerian societal norms simply by existing. Nigerian media industries and their most famous faces have drawn soft power to Nigerian media productions (Krings and Simmert 2020), not least by performing aspects of queer culture. Many non-queer Nigerian artists rely heavily on the tool of branding in creating personas, also by using queer aesthetics to enrich their media productions (Hawkins 2016). Contemporaneously, queer Nigerian youths are occupied with the fight for juridically legitimizing their existence without recognition thereof by society or the media industries. To interact with and observe the realities of queer Nigerian youths has proven and continues to result in a voluminous amount of complex research material.

248 For my research, I observe developments on various (social) media platforms. In this chapter, Twitter is employed as the main example, as it was one of the first platforms that was engaged by queer Nigerian youths in the processes of increasing visibility, changing narratives and self-representation in media productions. The tweets selected for the subsequent textual analysis consist of hashtags that went viral on Twitter within queer Nigerian communities and beyond, during the last five years. I analyze the contexts and experiences encompassed by sharing those hashtags. In addition to the analysis of the hashtags, I engage two of my research partners from Lagos, who have identified with the prototype concept, expressing their perspectives on the concept and on the hashtags as well as their influence on the developments within queer Nigerian communities. Following narratives and processes along the common thread of hashtags, that is keywords, picks up on the triumph of this concept, “a form of organizing statements and documents that not long ago was restricted to highly specialized professional circles” and now “characterize[s] the everyday use of [social] media,” since its introduction as a tool on Twitter and Instagram in 2007 and 2010 (Bernard 2019, 1). According to Bernard (2019), hashtags embody the social in “social media” by making the linking of content accessible and participatory (3). Thus, the analysis of hashtags is likewise, an anthropological and highly digital research environment.

## **The Digital Shift**

In September of 2020 Paul Onanuga wrote an article titled “Coming Out and Reaching Out: Linguistic Advocacy on Queer Nigerian Twitter,” analyzing the effects of the emergence and availability of social media platforms like Twitter, a microblogging service available since 2006. Soon after its emergence Twitter became one of the most used social media platforms globally. With 140 million registered users in 2010 already, it now has over 600 million users (Office Timeline 2024). Approximately 40 million

registered social media—including Twitter—users from Nigeria were reported in 2024 (Kemp 2024). The question on how many Twitter users reside in Nigeria has been subject to debates on the platform itself. Calculations range from 3 to 40 million Nigeria-based users, while Nigeria has an estimated population of 213 million.

Queer Nigerians discovered the social media platform in 2018 and at first started using it anonymously to find likeminded queers and to share opinions. Slowly but steadily more experiences of navigating queer lives in Nigeria were shared and knowledge was accumulated on Twitter. This introduced the digital shift for queer Nigerian youths. Conversations prior held in secrecy among other queer confidants after long processes of precariously testing out limits of trust in other (potentially) queer youths now shifted into the comfort of the anonymous World Wide Web and its respective platforms, like Twitter. Paradoxically, the anonymity of profiles on social media created more trust among queer Nigerian youths and encouraged many to come forward and share experiences. It facilitated conversational spaces in the digital realm. The hashtag #WeAreMany reflects the realization of those circumstances and went viral in 2019. It affirms the first conclusive social commentary by queer Nigerian youths and the realization of each other's manifold experiences.

On June 5, 2021, Twitter was temporarily banned in Nigeria, following a 24-hour ban on the former Nigerian president Muhammadu Buhari from Twitter due to threatening comments made towards people in the Southeast of Nigeria, the region where the Biafran war had taken place from 1966 to 1970. "Many of those misbehaving today are too young to be aware of the destruction and loss of lives that occurred during the Nigerian Civil War. Those of us in the field for 30 months, who went through the war, will treat them in the language they understand," states the comment made by the former president. The ban on Twitter was lifted on January 13, 2022, but had already had major financial and economic effects on many Nigerians

250 operating their businesses via Twitter. During the ban, the use of VPNs increased on Nigerian ground as people tried to circumvent the ban and continue using the platform regardless of the ban (Obadare 2022).

Besides general effects on parts of the Nigerian economy, the ban specifically affected queer Nigerian youths, which over time had discovered Twitter to be a valuable tool in terms of safer self-expression, aiding in reclaiming narratives, the building of community, and exercising advocacy. Onanuga (2020) demonstrates the process of examining and testing Twitter as a tool for queer Nigerian youths. While “anti-homosexuality and anti-LGBTQ attitudes persist in Nigeria[n laws]” and societal norms, the digital shift within queer Nigerian communities had significant effects on the experiences and perceptions of queer Nigerians. The acquired digital spaces allowed conversations on queerness that in analog spaces have led and often continue to lead to lethal violence with queer Nigerians on the receiving end. Conversations held via tweets could now provide physical safety for participants and reduce the occurrence of violence to verbal abuse and threats. Queer people, through the filter of social media platforms, gained the opportunity of staying anonymous without that equating staying silent. Contemporaneously, the anonymity of the platform led to Nigerians with anti-queer ideologies engaging in the conversations as well (Ukonu et al. 2021). The threat of verbal and physical violence remains an integral part of the experience, especially for openly registered queer Nigerian users on social media platforms. Having a significant number of followers might selectively or temporarily provide a sense of safety. Ultimately, there is no absolute safe place for queer Nigerians living in Nigeria. During my research, many queer Nigerians living openly in Nigeria mention two main reasons for living openly. First, some of them have been outed without their consent by Nigerian digital tabloids and now have to face the consequences. Second, the will to live an authentic life was stronger than the fear of societal exclusion, juridical

consequences, and physical harm. In this case, celebrities like Bobrisky are no exception to the rule.

## The Narrative Shift

The formerly mentioned hashtag #WeAreMany was used in a tweet cited by Onanuga (2020) and refers to the realization, by queer Nigerian youths, of sharing a common existence, while experiences of it may differ. This hashtag heralded the digital shift for queer Nigerian communities and triggered the subsequent narrative shift. The tweet cited states:

(@iam\_modashe 2019, October 6) The bank executive in the board meeting  
The Playboy flirting with the ladies at the bar  
The quiet fuel attendant punching the numbers  
The security guard at the mall  
The OAP at your favorite radio station,  
filling the airwaves  
the NURTW chairman of your area  
#WeAreMany. (7)

This tweet summarizes the plurality of queer experiences and reflects on the knowledge of those experiences gathered on social media. The experiences of queer Nigerians can differ fundamentally, as experiences shared on Twitter include all societal spheres. The hashtag #WeAreMany also points to the existence of queer Nigerian youths against claims of other members of Nigerian society, convinced that “homosexuality is un-African” or “a Western import” (Church of Nigeria 2009). Such comments mirror a historical and cultural rupture that occurred globally due to the impact of British colonial rule. A colonial morality was imposed and based on that, many societies internalized anti-queer policies (Amadiume 2015; Murray and Roscoe 1998; Oyéwùmí 1997). Queer Nigerian youths are met regularly with similar statements across all social media platforms and in analog spaces, as I witnessed during my research. Based on the knowledge some queer Nigerian youths hold, they counter such comments with the correction that “homophobia is un-African” and “a Western import.” At the same time, allies have become

252 more visible, and their advocacy has increased on social media platforms.

The hashtag reaffirms queer Nigerian experiences and legitimizes them regardless of the societal sphere they occur in. Online, a sense of community has been developed among queer Nigerian youths. At least on social media platforms a sense of “we” has been shaped. Realizing and expressing this indicates the next step, a narrative shift. Although it is also the case that #WeAreMany reflects a more general use of hashtags, which is not exclusive to queer Nigerian communities, as it is used in random contexts globally as well. While it expresses the common realization of queer existence, this hashtag is simultaneously used in non-Nigerian and non-queer contexts.

### **#EndSARS**

This changed drastically when the #EndSARS movement occurred in October 2020 and the use of hashtags became very specific to Nigerian contexts. Social media platforms played a crucial role in the mobilization and uprising of the #EndSARS movement. The use of the #EndSARS hashtag dates back further to 2017 when it first appeared on Twitter and “Nigerians were using it to share their experience on extortion, harassment, torture, illegal arrest and other violating behaviours of SARS’ officials” (Akerlele-Popoola et al. 2022, 3). SARS, the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, a Nigerian Police unit that is tragically known for the atrocities it is supposed to prevent, was heavily protested in October 2020. The hashtag went viral when “according to a tweet, SARS officials shot a young man, left him by the roadside and took his Lexus SUV in Ughelli Delta state, Nigeria, on October 3, 2020” (Ekoh and George 2021, 3).

According to George (2020), the October 3rd video caused an immediate trigger that made the hashtag #EndSARS go viral on social media platforms which then resulted in the massive street protests to call for the dissolution of SARS and to end

police brutality, injustice and maltreatment. Likewise, the arrest of the young man who posted the video fueled the anger of the youths (Gladstone and Specia 2020) and spread the hashtag #EndSARS globally, which, therefore, launched or resulted into the physical demonstration in major cities like Lagos and Abuja. (Akerle-Popoola et al. 2022, 3)

For queer Nigerian communities, who were intrinsically involved in online and offline mobilization for the #EndSARS movement and street protests, that particular hashtag was a double-edged sword. Generally, the hashtag became an outlet for Nigerians who had experienced abuse and violence by the Nigerian police. For queer Nigerian youths specifically, the hashtag turned into a vehicle to increase visibility, build and mobilize communities. Queer Nigerians also used the hashtag to ingrain their perspectives into the movement. Contemporaneously, it was used by the same people speaking out against and protesting police violence to verbally and physically harass queer people within the movement, online and offline. During the course of the #EndSARS movement the hashtags #EndHomophobiaInNigeria and #QueerNigerianLivesMatter were created by queer activists, particularly Matthew Blaise, to highlight a specific notion of violence executed by SARS officers and protesters against SARS alike. In co-sharing those hashtags with the #EndSARS hashtag, queer Nigerian youths were met with verbal and physical violence. Reactions, interactions, and experiences inside the #EndSARS movement differed for the many groups involved. Queerness was definitely both a dividing and uniting factor within the movement. Accounts of the different experiences were narrated across all social media platforms under the #EndSARS hashtag. Accounts range from encouraging, accepting, respectful, but also indifferent, hateful, and violent attitudes towards queer Nigerian youths.

While participants in the #EndSARS movement were occupied with addressing those inner conflicts and attempted to accommodate a common understanding, the Nigerian

254 government and executive forces put a violent end to the street protests. On the evening of October 20, 2020, peaceful protesters gathered at the Lekki Toll Gate on Lagos Island were shot at by the Nigerian military, who had abruptly put out the city lights moments earlier. As the street protests were almost continuously streamed live on Instagram and shared on Twitter, not only could the protests be witnessed live and globally, but also the shootings. Protesters were shot and died while live on social media platforms and a very surreal situation arose, which I was grotesquely able to follow live. Government and military officials denied the events, which were broadcasted live globally on social media platforms and were instantly ingrained into Nigerian public memory as the #LekkiTollGateMassacre. Despite the live testimonies, the state's responses ranged from initially denying the events to eventually trivializing the murder of at least 50 to 80 Nigerians (Princewill 2021).

Since then, the thousands of participants affected by the course of the movement and its violent suppression have been left to deal with the consequences individually. In an attempt to process the violent end of the street protests and the losses caused during them, some creative Nigerian youths have found a way to honor and remember the movement. Jumoke Verissimo and James Yeku (2022) gathered poetic voices and edited an anthology called *Sòròsókè: An #Endsars Anthology*. The anthology maintains space to realize, mourn, remember, and re-empower Nigerian youths through poetry. #SoroSoke was another hashtag and chant during the street protests, a Yorùbá expression meaning "Speak up!" It is likewise a way of confirming realities negated and denied by the state prior to and during the street protests as well as the #LekkiTollGateMassacre.

#EndSARS and #LekkiTollGateMassacre continue to refer to highly sensitive and traumatizing topics within different spheres of Nigerian society. This is no less the case for queer Nigerian youths, who not only face restrictions and violence through the state, but also exclusion by Nigerian society. The physical, mental,

and psychological processes that follow such traumatizing events are still ongoing in different spheres of Nigerian society. In terms of research ethics, these topics need to be treated with the utmost respect and sensitivity.

The events around #EndSARS and #LekkiTollGateMassacre have left gaping wounds in Nigerian society. During those events, queer Nigerian youths used social media platforms to engrave their existence into the documentation of the movement. Pictures, captions, tweets, and hashtags bear witness to queer accounts of experiences in the #EndSARS movements across all social media platforms. Their driving force and queer participation within the movement cannot be written out of history as queer African history used to be written out of historical and colonial accounts of Nigeria and Africa in a wider sense. This realization embodied another crucial state in the narrative shift. Social media platforms proved to be useful tools in re-writing the narrative around queer existence and experience in Nigerian contexts and ensuring its permanency on the World Wide Web. Being visible and connected online has encouraged queer Nigerian youths to become bolder and take up space in the analog and digital world alike.

### **#NaGayDeReign**

Although the #EndSARS street protests came to a brutal end, the hashtags and memories of the movement have been kept alive. The majority of Nigerian youths and particularly queer Nigerian youths have little to no access to institutional resources that would aid in finding ways to process the trauma experienced during #EndSARS. Nevertheless, queer Nigerian youths have found ways to continue the processes that were sparked on social media platforms during the digital shift and the narrative shift.

Coinciding with the build-up and the aftermath of the #EndSARS movement, several queer media productions were released. Temmie Owasa, a queer Nigerian artist and musician, released

256 two openly queer albums in 2021, namely *E be like say dem swear for me!* and *Songs from the Closet*. A third openly queer album followed in 2022, named *Space Fuji*. Also in 2022, *Ifé* (2020), the first lesbian Nollywood film, came out. This film, written, produced, and acted by lesbians, depicted a queer Nigerian love story. This media production stands out against former depictions of queerness in Nollywood as the first in a humanizing as opposed to demonizing representation (Green-Simms 2022). After a virtual Pride event in 2021, organized by QueerCityMedia and Production, the first live Pride event in Lagos took place in 2022. In 2023, the whole month of June was filled with Pride events across Nigeria, ranging from film releases, screenings, conferences, queer DJ sets, comedy shows, ballrooms, parties, and all kinds of queer gatherings, marking a historic turn in Nigeria.

Contemporaneously, queer characters and specifically queer Nigerian characters have gone viral globally through international productions. For example, the Netflix production *Sex Education* (2019–2023) had Ncuti Gatwah, a Rwandan-British actor, starring as Eric Effiong, a gay Nigerian living in the UK. In the third season, Eric travels to Nigeria and experiences the queer scene of Lagos. The depiction and representation of the queer scene of Lagos was well-received by queer Nigerian youths on social media platforms. Many expressed the feeling of being seen and represented accurately. Not only in relation to queer Nigerian experiences, queer characters are represented more frequently in media productions globally, some more successful in representing queer experiences than others. Regardless, queer influences on the new world order of cultural productions are very apparent. Queer narratives have become an integral part of storytelling in the new world order of cultural productions and hold high currency in media industries globally.

Celebrating the increasing visibility and representation, queer Nigerian youths have been met yet again by non-queer Nigerians with complaints about the appearance of queer characters in a

wide range of global and Nigerian media productions. In response to those complaints, queer Nigerian youths have started using the hashtag #NaGayDeyReign. This hashtag translates into “Gay is the new normal” and more literally into “The gays are reigning now.” Its use is reflected in the following tweet:

(@miz\_estaa 2019, October 5) My response to almost everything today has been “na gay dey reign”...In my head Because only twitter people will understand. Everything. Even the most random, unrelated thing: #NaGayDeyReign 🤔

While Onanuga (2020) focused on analyzing the reclaiming of agency over queer Nigerian narratives, I observed the transformation of narratives along certain hashtags, marking stages within the narrative shift, culminating in #NaGayDeyReign. From realizing a common queer existence and expressing it via #WeAreMany, through the transformative experience of #EndSARS that led to the occupation of digital and public spaces, to a permanent self-perception: queer Nigerian youths hold power in the new world order of cultural productions reflected in the narratives of #NaGayDeyReign. Navigating counter-hegemonic media flows (Ewing 2016) and respective scapes (Appadurai 1990) as well as generating resources of soft power reflected in global media representation has ultimately transformed many queer perspectives and lives. This shift has left efforts to uphold anti-queer policies with little (soft) power—at least on social media. During Pride in June 2023, for example, a picture of Fola Francis, an iconic trans woman in the queer scene of Lagos, wearing a T-shirt with the letters *Pride Month*, was photoshopped by a pastor into a T-shirt saying *Pride Demon*. Queer Nigerian youths agreed online to liking the intended insult and thus, Fola Francis immediately capitalized off of it. She ran a gender-neutral clothing line and transcreated the insult on social media into an iconic t-shirt on which the words *Pride Month* fade over multiple repetitions and color transitions into *Pride Demon*. The T-shirts were sold during Pride month and added to the celebration of queerness in Nigeria; although intended to have a quite contrary effect. On

258 December 20 of that same year, Fola Francis tragically drowned during a visit to the beach in Lagos. Her sudden death hit the queer and trans community extremely hard as she was one of the most supportive and inclusive voices. She was the most magnetic host for the vibrant ball room culture of Lagos, Nigeria. Numerous Pride events in 2024 were themed in her memory. Due to the lack of research funding, I was not able to attend and pay my last respects. Even post mortem, it is doubtless that she continues to function as a pioneer in prototyping her experience, as she is represented in the canonized memories of queer Nigerian culture, whether on social media or queer Nigerian media productions, like *14 Years and a Day* (2023) and *He/She, They [web series]* (2024).

## The Prototype Shift

The digital shift not only changed social interactions through social media platforms, but modes of media productions and consumptions have also changed. According to Bhutto (2019) those processes result in a new world order of cultural production, where globally leading soft power is not held through media productions in the Global North anymore, but rather by cultural hubs and media productions in the Global South. Hollywood or more generally Western media productions have been criticized for lacking sufficient representation of the vast majority of people, Black and Brown people (Ewing 2016). Similar criticism has been uttered by queer people of the Global South and in particular queer Nigerian youths who did not see themselves represented in either media worlds—Hollywood or Nollywood. Ewing (2016), who investigated the reception of Nollywood productions in Brazil, has referred to the processes of change in those narratives and those currently fueled by formerly underrepresented narratives, as counter-hegemonic media flows.

Nollywood, as one of the largest cultural producers within the Global South ... counteracts the hegemonic position held

by Western media outside of Nigeria (Krings and Okome 2013). That is, Nigerian videos are much more culturally, ethnically, religiously, and/or nationally “centered” than are those produced by Western media, and they consistently contribute much-needed representation(s) of a plethora of Nigerian images that provide insight into the stories, goals, dreams, and aspirations of Nigerian producers. (Ewing 2016, 2)

While Nollywood films were successful in their depiction and representation of narratives centering matters specific to Nigerian contexts, they did not necessarily succeed in de-colonizing aspects as queerness and spirituality (Green-Simms 2016; Green-Simms and Azuah 2012). Rather, queer Nigerians are stereotyped and demonized in Nollywood films. Although for differing reasons, Brazilian diasporic audiences and queer Nigerian audiences make similar arguments in criticizing Nollywood from de-colonial perspectives. In other words, “the central problem of today’s global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization” (Appadurai 1990, 295). Within media studies, the term homogenization “subspeciates” Americanization or “commoditization.” Counter-hegemonic media flows in the Nigerian context are fueled by queer Nigerian narratives, which aim for de-colonial and queer Nigerian-centered perspectives and consequently for cultural heterogenization. The critiques uttered by Afro-Brazilian and queer Nigerian audiences towards representations in Nollywood films differ in their assessment of de-colonial approaches and their necessity as well as in terms of desired cultural hetero- and homogenization. In between those notions, the Nigerian transcreations consumed by different audiences more or less succeed in satisfying the desired levels of cultural hetero- and homogenization as well as de-colonization. This is reflected, for example, in the discussion about the “Africanness” of queerness (Amadiume 2015; Oye’wùmí 1997; Ukonu et al. 2021). Critique towards the depiction of queerness

260 in Nollywood films parallels discussions around religion and traditional Nigerian knowledge and belief systems, which are likewise demonized in Nollywood films. Christianity is depicted as the only acceptable practice of belief and thus declares heterosexuality as the only acceptable “natural” and “God-given” form of sexuality within a Nigerian society influenced by Christianity (Church of Nigeria 2009). Conservative perspectives recognize Christianity—and Islam respectively—as innate to Nigerian society and consider queerness to be a relict of colonial times brought by the British. Selectively, Christianity is considered a positive and correctional benefit from colonial times regarding former “demonic” traditional knowledge and belief systems. Contradictorily, queer perspectives state Christianity to be the relict of colonial times and through a de-colonial lens view traditional knowledge and belief systems to have been inclusive of queerness, prior to their colonization and the adaption of a sexually and morally binary system (Oyeʋumí 1997). These frictions between sexual, spiritual, and religious perspectives within Nigerian society reflect different levels of colonization and de-colonization at large. These notions of cultural homo- and heterogenization nuance counter-hegemonic media flows. While contradicting each other regularly, cultural media producers silently agree on countering Western and hegemonic narratives that fall prey to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s warning of the dangers of telling a single story, in cases of the Global North, often two-dimensional with flat Black, Brown, and queer characters.

Circulating between poles of hetero- and homogenization, counter-hegemonic media flows are circular phenomena which ebb and flow between analog and digital spaces, rural and urban areas, as well as local and diasporic communities. These flows are global streams of culturally shaped media productions, leading to scapes built in their respective contexts. These contexts are embedded in imagined (or possible) worlds, “that is, the multiple worlds which are constituted by the historically

situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe” (Appadurai 1990; see also Oyeŵùmí 1997, 297). The final agents transcreate counter-hegemonic flows into media products departing from their imagined worlds, eventually reflected in clusters of peer groups—digitally and physically, locally and globally.

### **Celebrities**

The creation of prototypes is a self-identificatory process experienced and carried out by queer Nigerian youths, primarily due to the lack of mentors, models, and examples. The first act—sometimes forced due to the involuntary outing by third parties—is to step out of a private life and into the public sphere: the public coming out. With the digital shift and discovery of digital spaces and their potential, some queer Nigerian youths have made their lives and experiences publicly traceable. On one hand, the display of their lives in the digital and public spheres aids in intercepting stereotypes and uncovering their static and highly subjective conditions. In living queer lives publicly in Nigeria, queer Nigerian youths allow consumers of their respective digital transcreations to observe the infinite possibilities that compose the lives depicted. Negotiating queerness, “Africanness,” or rather “Nigerianness,” ethnic belonging, or spirituality among many other aspects on the canvas of historical and colonial texts forms part of the digital transcreation process (Onanuga 2023). The process of creating prototypes is negotiated in real time and is innate to navigating queer lives in Nigeria. Therefore, expressions of queer lives in Nigeria—offline and online alike—cannot be described as performances. The expressions of sexuality and gender directly contradict established stereotypes, that is, foreign assumptions and attributions by either conservative members of Nigerian society or hegemonic media productions.

On the other hand, most queer Nigerians living their lives in public do not aim for celebrity status and do not make use of the branding tool, that is, eliciting deliberate associations, creating a

262 desire for possessing associated products in the audience, and encouraging imitations of the branded persona's style, behavior, and the consumption of associated brand products (Abidin 2020; Taiwo, Jaiyesimi, and Aondover 2024). While styles and behaviors associated with and stemming from queer culture and aesthetics is heavily used in branding when in need of distinguishable characteristics to stand out from the crowd (Hawkins 2016)—here understood as performed queerness as well as queer baiting—queer Nigerian public figures do not display their lives for imitation, but orientation. Performed queerness by otherwise heteronormatively expressing Nigerians is regarded with disapproval by queer Nigerian youths, as they experience industrial and societal exclusion for doing the same. In most cases, Nigerian celebrities often perform elements of queerness and ambiguously gendered characteristics. Describing respective specifics is a complicated matter with regard to research ethics. By unmistakably outlining said characteristics, one could draw conclusions about celebrities who may not solely be using queer aesthetics, but embodying them, while trying to stay private about their sexuality and gender. I will therefore refrain from doing so in this paper. During my research, queer Nigerians who are involved in the Nigerian media industries and do not live openly, have expressed fears to do so as heteronormative artists would never work with openly queer Nigerians. As my research is ongoing and certain matters are not yet conclusively discussed I will refrain from analyzing specific heteronormative celebrities here, in order to protect my anonymous interlocutors.

However, queer Nigerian artists' modes of production differ significantly. Queer Nigerian creatives are denied access to the wider structures of the media industries as the heteronormative majority in the media industries do not work with most openly queer Nigerians. While being conscious of the limitations that come with a public queer life, queer Nigerians are also aware of the independence that comes with living an openly queer life in Nigeria. Instead of engaging branding as a tool

of creating personas and trying to get access to the media industries via collaborations with heteronormative artists, queer Nigerian youths turn inwards and focus on internal and personal processes as well as within their communities. Thus, most queer creative individuals that transcreate internal and external streams of experiences are in one form or the other “the first to do x” or “the first to be x.” Not only do they have limited access to the Nigerian media industries, but there are mostly no predecessors, mentors, and examples to use as points of reference. There are barely personas or public figures of the past to be romanticized and idolized. While celebrities stick with one proper name and usually a recognizable characteristic in style over time (Adam and Palupi 2022), queer Nigerians use frequently changing proper names with no aspirations for public recognition but rather the need for self-recognition. As queer Nigerian (positive) expressions have been written out of the media industries and Nigeria in a wider sense, queer Nigerians occupy a prototypical space, being the firsts to explore many paths and transcreating and re-writing queer narratives back into Nigerian media worlds and Nigerian society at large. Those processes, characterized by frequent changes, contradict and escape the logic of recognition that is crucial for branding and gaining celebrity status in Nigeria.

### **Emergent Prototypes**

The utterance contextually attached to queer Nigerian prototypes in the form of “the first to do x” or “the first to be x” often reflects a role that is fulfilled involuntarily, but out of necessity. Queer Nigerian prototypes exist under highly unfavorable and hostile conditions. Additionally, there are few to no examples or mentors to show how to navigate a queer existence in a queer body in Nigeria. Current queer Nigerian prototypes, therefore, are the firsts to exemplarily and traceably live this experience openly. Two humans navigating those experiences are Timileyin Kayode Olaide and Matthew Blaise. They are both non-binary and

264 queer humans, living the experience of inhabiting non-binary bodies that are read as masculine navigating life in Nigeria. In conversations held in person, via voice notes and videocalls, both described their perspectives on social media, particularly the role of Twitter, their experiences of living in Nigeria, the #EndSARS movement, and their identification as prototypes.

I don't like to say I'm the first of this and the first of doing that, but however it happens that way. Sadly, there haven't been mentors to help us and we just find ourselves doing the things we want to do or I find myself doing the things I really want to see but I'm not seeing from somebody ... And on the other side, I think first the prototype concept really works for me on how I see my work right and then second being a prototype really works for me on how I see myself as a queer person living in Nigeria, right. So, that is where the god comes up and that's around how I, you know, for example, I'd become independent of my parents when I was 14 and I've been living my life till now making decisions like the god that I am. And, you know, putting things into perspective like with myself and with my hands taking responsibilities for the things I'm unable to do or the things I didn't do well. Yeah so, I think that's the thing. The other way prototype really works for me around myself, is like how it reflects my own self. Me, Timi, and living in Nigeria, West Africa, as a queer body. While the first way to prototype works for me is literally that it does reflect me Timi getting to do stuff or getting to a place as a queer Nigerian. (Kayode, personal communication, 2023)

In being the first to do or be something, there is no example or blueprint for orientation and guidance, and while being the first, they definitely don't work towards being the last. They don't aspire to be idolized, but are rather forced into role modeling for themselves. In doing so, they are conscious of flaws and mistakes and frequently re-evaluate attributes. The goal is not to find distinctive categories, whether natural or cultural. The goal is to keep examining attributes; instead of using them as distinctive

categories, they are consciously developed and worked on by prototypes, showing in their creative and personal life alike. This process is dynamic and not authoritative towards themselves or communities related to queer Nigerian prototypes. The labeling as a prototype is an internal and relational process and the declaration as such always stems from the prototype's selves. In other words, prototypes are the agents of their construction and, with that, of new sources that fuel counter-hegemonic media flows as they embody cultural ruptures and heterogenization. Twitter in particular has become an experimental tool in achieving that.

Twitter gives people space to be whoever they want to be: real, anonymous, a character, cosplay, played persona and reflect on their page into the world. At the same time, social media is real life, transports emotions, ideas, characteristics. ... And social media gives you the power to reach a lot of people with one click. The processes are faster on social media. The power of information cannot be over emphasized. A lot of queer activists realize its potential and some of us use the power to create hashtags that lead to people doing their research. Hashtags create the opportunity to share stories, to do research on stories shared in context with the hashtag and popularize conversations. And during #EndSARS it also led to physical protest. (Matthew, personal communication, 2023)

Kayode and Matthew were both deeply invested in the #EndSARS protests and had to face situations and events that were harmful and painful. Generally, living as queer humans in Lagos, Nigeria and in the aftermath of the #EndSARS protest, both experienced phases in which they needed to retreat, recover, and heal from those circumstances and experiences. With little to no access to therapeutic resources, Kayode and Matthew continue their lives and work regardless. In conversations with Kayode they shared that they went silent and into healing for some months after #EndSARS had ended. Eventually, the unhealed parts of

266 the trauma went dormant and they re-calibrated their focus on what was at hand and did what needed to be done, both personally and work related. As Kayode also pointed out earlier in the conversation cited, they prototype themselves as godly. Their definition of being godly stems from taking responsibility, accountability, and also agency over the creation of their own life. From the age of 14, they have made their own decisions, raising and correcting themselves. Thus, to them being godly means creating their own life. Matthew on the other hand, defines himself as a leader. In their definition of leadership, a leader can be scared, have mental health crises, can struggle with their leadership. The way they have defined and lived their leadership is very personal, detached from gendered “norms.” Being aware of their flaws, their current mental health crisis and their struggles with being a leader and experienced discouragement by people who view their leadership as “weak.”

I’m not bottling up my mental health issues or my struggles. I put them out there on social media and share them. People are not used to seeing leaders showing “weaknesses.” Some people might not agree or even lose respect. I am staying focused on me. Just me, navigating social media and everyday life. I focus on my humanity as a leader. (Matthew, personal communication, 2023)

Both of them can identify with the concept of being prototypes and use names to exemplify the process. Kayode, for example, keeps changing their name on Twitter and uses their bio to insert more permanent names as well. For them this is a way to focus on different attributes related with the respective name and to test them out, eventually claiming them and integrating them into their narrative about themselves. Currently, they are named “Voyageur” on Twitter. In their bio, the first name that appears is “Yeye Boroji of Epe Land,” the name and origin of their grandmother, who introduced them to matters of social justice and movements and continues to be a point of reference to Kayode. Matthew named themselves “Son of the Rainbow AKA

LGBTQ+ CLASS CAPTAIN” on Twitter. A couple of years ago, although still very young, they decided, instead of taking on and internalizing the homophobia they face, they will belong to the rainbow, which is globally associated with queer communities; hence the “Son of the Rainbow.” While “LGBTQ+ CLASS CAPTAIN” was often used to ridicule them and question their outspokenness on queer matters in Nigeria. They claimed this name as their own and used it to express their queer leadership. Both are very aware of the processes involved.

On a meta-level concerning my research, those processes force researchers to re-calibrate their self-perceived authority in the research environment. No definition is objective or permanently valid. Stereotypical expectations are inextricable from the narrowed perspectives researchers are conditioned to inhabit due to their primary socialization. Using self-ascriptions by research partners as metrics, therefore, is an integral part of theorizing prototypes. Prototyping requires recognizing the agency and authority of insider research partners in the research environment, in analog encounters and digital spaces alike. Although having developed and coined the concept of prototypes in the sense laid out in this chapter, I would not use it in my work if it had not resonated with my research partners during exchanges and dialogs with them. As they could identify and work with the concept, I developed it further and added notions identified by my research partners. At the same time, this analysis is by no means exhaustive or conclusive. It requires further research and engagement with my research partners in order to keep track of the ongoing and infinite processes and possibilities of prototyping.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have laid out the usage of social media platforms, in particular Twitter, as a tool in increasing visibility, building community, and reclaiming narratives and spaces by

268 and for queer Nigerian youths. I have observed those processes along three shifts, namely the digital, narrative, and prototype shift. In particular, the creation and use of hashtags, like #WeAreMany, #EndSARS, #QueerNigerianLivesMatter, and #NaGayDeyReign, have been integral to experiences of social media as an experimental tool. While the digital shift accelerated the dissemination of information and empowered queer Nigerian youths to build community and raise awareness, the narrative shift transformed the narratives within queer communities as well as in the wider context of the Nigerian media industries. The narrative shifted from creating community and raising awareness to a consciousness of queer Nigerian agency and soft power in the new world order of cultural production. Queer Nigerian youths have found social media platforms to be viable tools in terms of validating their existence, reclaiming agency over their narratives, and holding positions in local and international discourses on queer and cultural media productions. Instrumentalizing social media platforms, queer Nigerian youths have directly influenced the current counter-hegemonic media flows and are crafting prototypes that might serve future generations of queer Nigerian youths as guides and points of reference.

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**DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING**

**VIRTUAL REALITY**

**HISTORY**

**NEW HISTORICISM**

**DAUGHTERS OF CHIBOK**

[ 9 ]

# **Documentary Filmmaking in Nigeria and the Virtual Reality Age**

**Usaku Robinson Wammanda**

**Virtual reality has provided a more creative approach to cultural productions in many countries. As a tool for documenting actuality, documentary films inform, persuade, coordinate, or influence socialization using aspects of reality. Virtual Reality (VR) is a communication medium that makes virtual experiences feel real and appear unmediated. This research, therefore, interrogates the world of virtual reality vis-à-vis documentary filmmaking in Nigeria. Against the background of one VR documentary film in Nigeria (Daughters of Chibok, 2019), this research posits that virtual reality can be used in documentary filmmaking in Nigeria to communicate aspects of reality to the audience**

**effectively. However, using virtual reality for documentary filmmaking in Nigeria involves subjecting cultural products to a problematic digital transcreation process. This is because what comes out at the end is not necessarily an identical cultural product but a new kind of the same product. This research uses the theory of New Historicism to structure its postulates.**

## **Introduction**

In 2019, the virtual reality (hereinafter VR) documentary *Daughters of Chibok* (2019) became the first African film to win an award at the Venice Film Festival. In his acceptance speech at the 76th Venice International Film Festival, Joel Kachi Benson, the documentary's director, said, "with this VR film, all I wanted to do was to take the world to the women of Chibok."<sup>1</sup> This implies that the filmmaker's aim was to transport his audience into the world of Yana Galang (a Chibok woman) in the quiet agrarian community of Chibok, Borno State, in northeastern Nigeria.

According to Oludimu (2019), "it [is] ... a struggle to hold back tears" when listening to Yana narrate her heart-breaking story as the VR documentary takes you through Yana's home, her farmland, and the Chibok Government Secondary School from which the girls were abducted. The moment one puts on the VR headset, it becomes evident why one can react and feel certain emotions while watching the VR documentary *Daughters of Chibok* (2019). I remember trying to watch the VR documentary

1 In April 2014, 276 female students were abducted from the Government Secondary School, Chibok, in Borno State, Nigeria. Following government negotiations with the terrorists, 107 of them were eventually released. But 112 remain missing. Yana Galang is among the women of Chibok whose daughters were kidnapped (Punch Newspapers 2019).

in a detached sense, but without success. It is impossible to be unsympathetic towards Yana while in her presence as she talks about her experience. This expressive possibility of achieving presence in an event is one of the ways digital technologies are changing cultural productions and creating direct feedback loops between audiences and creators.

Over the years, technological innovations coupled with human inventiveness and concepts have compelled individuals to continuously anticipate more innovative ways of storytelling and interaction with their environment by documentary filmmakers in Nigeria. For example, as stated in the report on the African Documentary Film Fund (ADFF) research, which places Nigeria as one of the critical countries producing a high number of documentaries in Africa (Amin et al. 2014, 5), the suggestion for African documentary cinema to be successful, especially on the international stage, is that several actions must be taken to improve the growth and production of more credible and high-quality documentary films that are up to international standards. Commenting on the development of documentaries in Africa, Jedlowski (2014, 1) asserts that “production sustainability and legitimacy with local audiences are vital if African documentaries are to achieve global recognition.” He opined that these are the two most important factors. In other words, African documentary films require a new kind of visual literacy to make effective interventions in the public sphere in the twenty-first century.

In Nigeria, digital technologies are reshaping the notions of cultural heritage and transforming historical templates into essential sources for producing new modes of audience engagement. Virtual reality is one form of technology stimulating this digital transformation, just as *Daughters of Chibok* (2019) did. VR, as Fred Brooks puts it, allows one to experience “worlds that never were and can never be” (quoted in Biocca and Levy 2013, 6). Two persons from opposite ends of the world can communicate virtually within the same space. That interaction can be as authentic as being present in the same room, conducting a

276 conversation face-to-face regardless of their respective space-time realities. Virtual reality is therefore being used in documentary filmmaking in Nigeria to enhance conceptualization and storytelling in a manner as though the participants were present in the story. For this reason, this research seeks to interrogate the union of virtual reality and documentary filmmaking in Nigeria. In the following section, this research looks at documentary filmmaking within the structural evolution of filmmaking in Nigeria.

## **The Emergence of Documentary Filmmaking in Nigeria**

Film's appearance in Nigeria can be traced back to the exhibition in August 1903 at the Clover Memorial Hall Lagos. As published by The Lagos Standard newspapers, some of the first screenings in the wake of the twentieth century included a documentary clip of a steamer moving through the water and scenes of the coronation of King Edward VII in 1904 (Opubor and Nwuneli 1979, 2). A short documentary about the Alake of Abeokuta (a Yoruba king of western Nigeria) was also shown during his visit to England. This places film's appearance in Nigeria as a result of the early invention of film technology (Haynes 2011, 67). As Opubor and Nwuneli (1979, 2) put it, "the medium of film was itself new in those days, and still technically in its infancy." According to Haynes (2011, 68), the arrival of film in Africa was a "tool of colonialism," visible in the propagandistic activities for which it was eventually used, as evidenced in documentaries from the time, such as *Daybreak in Udi* (1949). Ukadike (2023, 31) has described documentary film in Nigeria at that time as a "potent organ of colonialism." The colonial documentaries were mainly exhibited and distributed across Nigeria through churches, schools, and mobile vans that penetrated the villages where screens were put up to inform the people and elicit their support for the war effort during the Second World War (Larkin 2008; Khapoya 2015; Idachaba 2018).

Despite these features, the Colonial Film Unit (hereinafter CFU), established in October 1939, has been the foundation of documentary filmmaking in Nigeria (Ekwuazi 1991, 13; 2008, 285). The CFU had been established just after the outbreak of World War II, and it welcomed the idea of producing its documentary films in Nigeria, which led to hiring Nigerians in the filmmaking process (Obiaya 2011, 133). By 1950, a Federal Film Unit (hereinafter FFU) was established by the Colonial Administration Record (Obiaya 2011, 135). The FFU, without any intent, had inherited the CFU's framework of producing only documentary films and newsreels. In other words, the same CFU had then become FFU (Shaka 1999, 39; Obiaya 2011, 135). However, this establishment led to recruiting and training more Nigerians in diverse areas of filmmaking, complemented by a Film Training School set up in Accra in 1948 (Shaka 1999, 40).

The FFU had started to be phased out by the late 1950s due to certain factors. Two of these factors were the independence and emergence of feature film outlets besides the documentaries floated by FFU. This meant that audiences and filmmakers now had options other than the documentary. These changes, coupled with the introduction of television in Nigeria in 1959 by the then Western Nigerian Government headed by Chief Obafemi Awolowo, had warranted a new framework for documentary filmmaking in Nigeria. This led to a higher demand for producers and directors; hence, the need to train more Nigerians in filmmaking, the majority of whom eventually became independent feature filmmakers. The ramifications had strengthened the existing monopoly of documentary filmmaking by the FFU or the federal government.

By 1993, the industry was big enough to have held the National Film Festival for the first time. About 50 Yoruba films, 25 English films, five Hausa films, and one Igbo film were screened (Zajc 2009, 70). Of the lot shown, all the submitted documentaries shared a standard unique stamp of government, like the films of an auteur director (Ekwuazi 2008, 28). There was no better

278 evidence than this of the federal government's strong monopoly over documentary filmmaking in Nigeria at the time, which remained in place until the early 2000s, when that monopoly was broken owing to the increased number of independent filmmakers, film festivals, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Ekwuazi has pointed out that the increased number of NGOs, schools, film festivals, and a growing body of documentary filmmakers in Nigeria started adding even more value to the documentary (Ekwuazi 2008, 286).

Contemporary documentaries in Nigeria now display different signatures. This can be attributed to the fact that documentaries today are made by different indigenous filmmakers, institutions, and non-governmental organizations. The twenty-first-century Nigerian documentary filmmaker uses documentary as a tool to observe what is going on in society—an instance demonstrated by some of the notable Nollywood documentaries in the 23-year span between 2000 and 2023, viz: *Uncut Playing with Life* (2000) by Sandra Obiabo, *Bariga Boys* (2009) by Femi Odugbemi *Child & Women Trafficking- The New Slavery* (2002) by Mahmood Ali-Balogun, *Fuelling Poverty* (2012) by Ishaya Bako, *Finding Fela* (2014) by Alex Gibney, *Bigger Than Africa* (2018) by Toyin Ibrahim Adekeye, *Awon Boyz* (2019) by Tolulope Itegbaje, *Skin* (2019) by Beverly Naya, *Sex for Grades* (2019) by Nkiru Mordi, *Marked* (2019) by Nadine Ibrahim, *Journey of an African Colony: The Making of Nigeria* (2019) by BB Sasore, *Daughters of Chibok* (2019) by Kachi Benson, *Nollywood—Film Business African Style* (2020) by Johannes Preuss, *Afrobeats: The Backstory* (2021) by Ayo Shonaiya, *Unmasked: Leadership, Trust and the COVID-19* (2021) by Femi Odugbemi, *Super Eagles '96* (2022) by Yemi Bamiro, *Awaiting Trial* (2022) by Chude Jideonwo, and *Madu* (2024), a Disney original documentary directed by Kachi Benson.

To pull out a few for special mention, Kachi Benson's *Daughters of Chibok* (2019) tackled a campaign about Chibok girls abducted by the *Boko Haram* terrorist group in Borno State; *Beverly Naya's Skin* (2019) explored a societal issue in Nigeria: the practice

of skin bleaching in African culture; BB Sasore's *Journey of an African Colony: The Making of Nigeria* (2019) focused on historical education—each differentiating itself based on the issues it tackles. However, the common inference is that modern documentary filmmaking in Nigeria is towing the line in harnessing the documentary as a handy and effective tool for facilitating intercultural dialogue on actual events in society, among other functions. In the African, Caribbean, and Pacific regions—European Union Culture (ACP-EU)<sup>2</sup> report on the African emerging documentary landscape states (titled “Documentary, a Look from the Inside: ACP EU CULTURE” 2023), it has also been established that there is a growing willingness to revisit and give voice to African history and culture through documentary cinema with a focus on intimate, personal stories that shed light on broader societal issues (4).

## The Documentary: What It Is

Beyond the foundational textual definition of the documentary as “a creativity treatment of actuality” (Grierson 1933, 3), “the presentation of actual facts in a way that makes them credible and vivid to people at the time” (Stott 1986, 14), “[a genre of] films that assert[s] that the state of affairs they present occur[red] in the actual world” (Plantinga 1997, 18 ), and beyond Nichol's (2001, 21) six modes of categorizing documentaries into the expository, the observational, the poetic, the interactive, the reflexive, and the performative; other perspectives have been shared on what the documentary is. In one parlance the documentary is described as an original art form with an emphasis on its power to capture the actuality “out there” and present it to the audience at the time and place of the viewing (Renov 2012, 7 referring to Trinh T. Minh-ha). Bruzzi (2006, 6) defines documentary as “performative

2 The ACP-EU Culture is an initiative funded by the European Union (EU) and implemented by the Secretariat of the Organization of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS).

280 acts whose truth comes into being only at the moment of filming.” For Watson (2021, 20), the documentary is a film that can capture a “certain kind of fact” whose impact solely depends on the generation and reception of the facts captured.

All the foregone definitions (old and new combined), in one way or another, suggest that the filming and presentation of facts and reality are negotiated in the documentary because the presentation and the reality remain distinct but interactive. As Bruzzi (2006, 15) puts it, the documentary is usually deliberated as a “representation mode of filmmaking, forgetting that its core notion is filming as a record.” Thus, the documentary can take actuality, real people, and social problems from the real world and present them without deviating from the facts. This is not to posit that documentaries should be grounded in *cinéma vérité* (since this style of film-making is characterized by realistic, typically documentary filming that avoids artificiality and artistic effects using simple equipment). *Cinéma vérité* suggests that the camera should record events passively and objectively. This is an extreme definition of the documentary.

Extensive debates and studies have revealed the danger of grounding documentary films in such an extremism. *Cinéma vérité* implies that documentary films should not worry about being creative but about being truthful and accurate (Grierson 2023, 250). Grierson himself, who coined the word documentary in 1926 (Watson 2021, 97), proclaims the documentary to be a form of art, not news. Regarding this point of view, Dudley notes that even French film director Jean Vigo, who helped establish poetic realism, described his film, which was grounded in realist concern, as “a document rather than [film] confected for consumption,” for the film lacks vibrancy such as commentary that can be achieved through documentary (Watson 2021, 47).

This does not, however, imply that the documentary should do away with documenting and presenting reality or compete with fiction films regarding performance and art. Johnson (2022, 23)

warns that that would be dangerous. The world still needs the documentary to observe and capture reality and not interfere with the material without an intermediary (Minha-ha 2012, 94). It documents reality; and, if the words “factual” and “reality” are to remain associated with documentary, then as Minha-ha (2012, 92) points out, the technique, though still relevant, should take less precedence than the material. Therefore, the presented materials must be factual and accurate, for it ceases to be documentary if they are invented. Watson (2021, 86) confirms this notion by noting that the impact of a documentary is rooted in the breadth of the material found in the film. In the same sense, Vaughan (1999, 85) argues that if a material’s provenance in a documentary is not credible, its use is mendacious despite being tagged as a documentary.

Against this backdrop, and however we may choose to define documentary, the materials in documentary films must be factual and verifiable. Dul Johnson stresses this prerequisite of using factual and verifiable materials in the documentary. He says, “as a matter of fact [,t]he name of the genre derives from the word ‘document,’ which suggests the existence of something that can be proven verbally or physically” (Johnson 2022, 24). In other words, the audience should be able to corroborate the materials presented. Corresponding to this idea, Joris Ivens ruminates that one minute of untruthfulness within a 20-minute span of a video recording can make the audience undermine the credibility of the whole documentary film (quoted in Ekwuazi 2008, 288). This beckons the underpinning issue of whether (or not) the reality and facts of the actual events put before the camera remain the same after the filmmaker’s intervention in the documentary film-making process.

Nevertheless, the preoccupation of documentary with reality and facts does not translate into capturing absolute reality. According to Johnston (1999, 36), the idea that reality can be captured by the camera or go through the process of film production without reflecting the conditions of a film’s production is an idealist

282 mystification. The production of a documentary goes through the three stages of film production—a process Tcheuyap (2024) describes as “an elaborate construction [with] specific aesthetic procedures.” For this reason, Comolli (1980, 135) asserts that it would be naive to assume that the documentary documents actual events; or presents an objective and impartial image of that reality, since “the represented is seen via a representation which necessarily transforms it.” Regarding this point of view Bruzzi notes that:

Representation is performative, and images discussed as ‘real’ or authentic, just like their copies, only ever speak to the truth of the moment of encounter between reality and its representation. The presentation of reality is never the same as the reality of a moment as it would have transpired had the camera not arrived to capture it; filming is [thus] always an incision, an intrusion. As a result, the ‘truth’ in any piece of film is only ever a representation, the result of a complex negotiation between reality on the one hand and interpretation on the other. (Bruzzi 2020, 6)

Therefore, the documentary will always contain a disambiguation of reality no matter how slight! What is represented at best is not the original meaning of the event but a simulation of it. Thus, a truthful documentary should have minimal or no editing of the materials, such that any disambiguation of reality will not hamper the audience’s point of view in agreeing with its accuracy. Gaines and Renov (1999, 2) concur by noting that the filmmaking process is *par excellence* in that the question and ideology of reality and truthfulness are rhetorical attempts, it should be a question of the filmmaker’s assertiveness because the techniques of filmmaking may produce an improved reality (with the aid of the filmmaker) that the audience interacts with as the truth, or otherwise.

A perfect example is the 10-minute documented clip<sup>3</sup> shared by DJ Switch on her Instagram page on October 20, 2020, during the #Endsars<sup>4</sup> protest (Arise News 2020). This clip remains one of Nigeria’s most crucial pieces of raw footage in the last five years. It is exemplary in its rawness in documenting and presenting an actual event as evidence. However, despite its value as unedited material, its limitations include the fact that the truth that its frames can reveal is restricted to the verisimilitude of an image to the subject matter; the materials cannot be stretched into providing context or explanation for the frames in the clip. This in turn proposes two levels of truths: the truth of the factual image we see and the truth to be extrapolated from them, which in this case is an improved reality of the event. In other words, regardless of its truthfulness, this historical material has no meaning until it is interpreted or given a backstory, since it can sustain several plausible descriptions and narratives. This inference coincides with Bruzzi’s (2006, 23) conclusion that what is up for grabs is the interpretation of an event in a documentary without a description, and this should not be confused with the event; the event itself not being up for grabs. In the same vein, Minh-ha (2012, 95) stresses that in a documentary, “what is presented as evidence remains evidence,” regardless of how it is perceived by the audience. To this end, Williams posits that “it has become an axiom of the documentary that films cannot reveal the truth of events, but only the ideologies and consciousness that construct competing truths—the fictional master narratives by which we make sense of events” (quoted in Bruzzi 2006, 16).

It can be deduced that the inherent difficulties haunting documentary filmmakers are documenting and presenting reality as

3 #WATCH:DJ Switch clip #EndSARS <https://t.co/ezFTAa8Qhp>.

4 End SARS, widely written as #EndSARS, was a decentralized social movement and series of mass protests against police brutality in Nigeria that mainly occurred in 2020. The movement’s slogan called for the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a notorious unit of the Nigerian Police known for its long record of abuse against Nigerian citizens.

284 nearly as possible, reflecting the objective truth in the most credible way possible. In the past, Nichols has vehemently asserted that the evolution of documentary as a form of art is owing to the quest by documentary filmmakers in search of more credible ways to represent reality with the hope that somewhere in a “utopian future” the line between reality and representation will be blurred (Bruzzi 2006, 4). It would appear that Kachi Benson blurred this line with *Daughters of Chibok* (2019) by taking the audience to reality using VR instead of issuing what Renov calls a “truth claim,” as the case is in traditional documentaries (quoted Bruzzi 2006, 5). Kachi Benson had this to say:

I did my first VR film in an IDP camp in Northeast Nigeria. For many people who had not been to an IDP camp before, VR became a way for them to go there. It went well. What it meant for me then was that VR became a tool that I could use to take people places they would probably not go normally. (Kachi Benson, personal communication, April 26, 2023)

Therefore, what else is VR if not the best enablement of filmmaking such as Kachi Benson has employed to gain more ground in closing the gap between reality and presentation, and an improvement on the obvious limitations of 2D documentaries, which undoubtedly is pervasive in the documentary filmmaking practice in Nigeria? The answer lies in a query on the nature of VR.

## Virtual Reality (VR): What It Is

The term *virtual reality* was first used by the founder of the Visual Programming Lab (VPL) in the 1980s, after creating the gloves for a virtual workstation that consisted of two LCD TV displays, wide-angle stereoscopic optics, and a motorcycle helmet (Virtual Reality Society 2017; Robinson 2014). VR is a communication process between humans mediated by computer systems that use interaction, visualization, and other sensory stimuli (immersive) to convey information (Marini et al. 2011). Wilson, Foreman, and Stanton (2009, 213) put it as “a range of computing

technologies that present artificially generated sensory information in a form that people perceive as similar to real-world objects and events.” Fred Brooks described it as the ability to experience “worlds that never were and can never be” with the aid of technology (quoted in Biocca and Levy 2013, 6). It can be deduced that virtual reality (commonly designated as VR) is a new form of interaction facilitated by technology, which can make (virtual) experiences feel real and appear unmediated.

The Sensorama was the frontrunner in creating a more realistic experience for the audience by stimulating their senses. The Sensorama<sup>5</sup> was a machine developed in 1962 by visionary inventor and cinematographer Morton Heilig after writing his prescient essay *Cinema of the Future* (1955), which argued that “... without the active participation of the spectator there can be no transfer of consciousness, no art” (Turi 2014). Heilig wanted to include smell, wind, and stereo sound in his films to create a different viewing experience for the audience. The 1950s was a time when several efforts had been made to improve the viewing experience for the audience. Studios and inventors had installed and applied concepts such as larger screens, 3D features, panoramic screens, CinemaScope, Cinerama, and stereophonic sound. However, unlike Heilig’s, their efforts had focused on delivering the visuals and audio in film. Heilig’s Sensorama was focused on “sensory stimuli,” which led the way toward today’s “virtual reality” experiences (Turi 2014). Therefore, the concept of VR is not new.

VR has been through some waves of almost becoming popular over many decades (Lanier 2017, 286). Heilig says:

When anything new comes along, everyone, like a child discovering the world, thinks that they’ve invented it, but you

5 The Sensorama Simulator is a machine that plays a 3D film along with stereo sound, aromas, and wind in order to create an immersive sensory environment. The stereo sense could trigger blasts of wind and aromas at specific points during the five built-for-purpose short films (Alharthi 2015).

scratch a little, and you find [that] a caveman scratching on a wall is creating virtual reality in a sense. What is new here is that more sophisticated instruments give you the power to do it more easily. Virtual reality is dreams. (quoted in Biocca and Levy 2013, 3)

This statement denotes that being in the space of a time and place one has never been before is central to VR, with experience and immersion enhancing communication, such as when an individual is in the cave where the cavemen used to be. Similarly, in a TED talk, VR filmmaker Chris Milk playfully hypothesizes that “storytelling began with cavemen relaying the tale of a hunt.” With VR, Milk triumphantly declares that we no longer “have to listen to the caveman—we can be the caveman” (Loh 2017). This implies that by using VR, filmmakers can communicate documented aspects of reality in a way that the audience immersively experiences the story. In his television interview with TVC News, maker of the first Nigerian VR documentary, *Daughters of Chibok* (2019), said this:

... Some people do not believe the Chibok girl's story; I chose VR so that I can take them there. And those that saw the film kept on saying we know the story, we have heard about the story, we were part of the story five years ago, and indeed, we have forgotten. We did not know it was still fresh. (TVC 2019)

In other words, the audience of *Daughters of Chibok* (2019) arguably would not have been reminded of the women of Chibok as much as they were if they had not been taken (using VR) to the community where the event had occurred five years ago. In the same way, the researcher of this paper did not pack a bag and get on a bus going to the Chibok community, but has, in effect, been to Chibok. While physically present in Yaba, Lagos, this researcher remembers being in Yana's house and listening to her story. Thus, such an innovative way of achieving presence, regardless of time and space is what the VR co-curator meant when he said, “if

cinema is the art of playing with time, VR is the art of playing both with time and space." This comment was made at the 75th Annual Venice Film Festival (Graver 2018). 287

Against this background, several studies have addressed and expressed concerns about achieving presence using VR. Studies such as Lombard and Ditton (1997) and ISPR (2000) have tried to address what accurately constitutes the sense of presence and the variety of consequences that it produces. The endpoint is different concepts of presence, which all talk about immersion and experience in VR space in one way or another.

Bender and Broderick (2021, 89) posit that the concepts of the former and the latter have persistently been "key themes in the technological development of VR." The International Society for Presence Research (ISPR) defined several concepts of presence and detailed their definitions in an explicit statement.

Presence (a shortened version of the term "telepresence") is a psychological state or subjective perception in which even though part or all of an individual's current experience is generated by and/or filtered through human-made technology, part or all of the individual's perception fails to accurately acknowledge the role of the technology in the experience. Except in the most extreme cases, the individual can indicate correctly that s/he is using the technology, but at 'some level' and to 'some degree,' her/his perceptions overlook that knowledge and objects, events, entities, and environments are perceived as if the technology was not involved in the experience. Experience is defined as a person's observation of and/or interaction with objects, entities, and/or events in her/his environment; perception, the result of perceiving, is defined as a meaningful interpretation of experience. (ISPR 2000).

The foregoing statement suggests that presence is experienced. Presence varies because it is synonymous with the user experiencing it. An individual's presence can differ given different

288 circumstances. However, it is maximized when the line between the technology and the experience is blurred to the individual. This is consistent with the opinion of Lombard and Ditton (1997) that presence is a concept of immersion that builds on the notion of perception and psychological immersion. Thus, presence can be described as the extent to which an event is perceived.

Therefore, it is possible for a presence to be created through VR when an individual's attention is focused on experiencing the (virtual) world around him/her, as influenced by "qualities of ... authenticity and the interactive activity required by the user" without acknowledging the existence of another external world (Bender and Broderick 2021, 89). This means that VR technology can provide the user with an experience that has a remarkable psychological effect of interacting with mediated objects and environments, such as has never been possible before.

According to Wilson, Foreman, and Stanton, "often the user feels, at least to some degree, 'present in the [virtual] world. This feeling of presence is the defining feature of the VR experience. It may be that a sense of presence is engendered at least as much by the activity that occurs in the [virtual] world as its sensory realism'" (Wilson, Foreman, and Stanton 2009, 213). "The user is swallowed by the story and convinced that the environment is real through immersion by the head-mounted VR headset, which replaces the user's field of view with the virtual environment: the real world is invisible; headphones cover the ears; [the] ambient sound is muffled" (Biocca and Levy 2013, 135) in the same manner users watch the VR documentary *Daughters of Chibok* (2019) in Kachin Benson's studios at Yaba, Lagos.

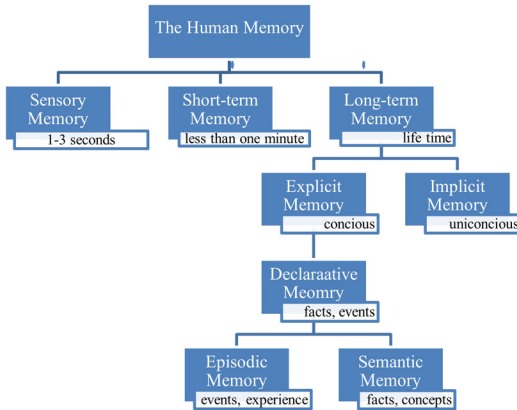
This possibility of experiencing an event that seems natural, authentic, immediate, and real is the reason for which Virtual Reality Experience Therapy (VRET) is in practice (Bender and Broderick, 2021, 81). In VRET, soldiers develop or address their anxiety and fear structure, which is valuable in the real world, but do so from their experience in a virtual environment designed

to create a strong sense of presence. Several studies, such as Rizzo et al. (2010), Norr et al. (2018), Valmaggia et al. (2016), and Loucks et al. (2019), have validated the VRET approach for military anxiety-based treatment of post-traumatic stress disorders as well as a range of other anxiety disorders because “in a [virtual experience setting], the simulated objects and events cannot only be sensed, but the user can interact with them as though they were real,” even though they are not (Wilson, Foreman, and Stanton 2009, 213). This is principally because through virtual experience or VR documentary, the documented or presented reality has gone through a production process described in this volume as “digital transcreation.”

As to the nomenclature, VR in Italian is called a *verisimile* (derivative of the Latin phrase *veri similis*, which means “similar to the true, genuine, actual thing”). Therefore, in this view, what VR does is induce the user with a believable experience to think that what he or she sees is the real thing, even when it is not (Marini et al. 2011, 3). Nonetheless, that is how the user remembers it. The memory is real because when individuals experience something, they become truly engaged, and research suggests that such an engagement, along with the individual’s emotions and interest, play a significant role in effective communication (Biocca and Levy 2013, 133).

## **Using Virtual Reality for Documentary Filmmaking**

There is another reason the user will remember their VR experiences as real. In his essay and TEDx talk, *How VR is Changing the Way We Learn and Communicate*, Anton (2018) explained how the human memory works based on tension potential.



[Figure 1] The human memory

Figure 1 shows the structure of human memory (Brewer and Pani 1983; Anton 2018; Quervain 2024). Long-term memory (which comprises an individual's long lasting memories) is divided into explicit and implicit memory. Unlike implicit memory, explicit memory is what we remember consciously and can always recall. Explicit memory can be further divided into episodic and semantic memories. Episodic memory is the memory of things we have experienced, such as the experience of visiting a museum and physically interacting with a piece of art or visiting a cave site and interacting with writings engraved by ancient cavemen, which we had only learned about through literal text. On the other hand, semantic memory holds our knowledge about the world. This can involve definitions and stories we've learned. As an example, we know what the letters D, O, and G represent because of our semantic memory. Using the museum or cave analogy, our knowledge of the piece of art or cavemen respectively will become an experience lodged in the episodic memory after having visited the museum or cave and interacting with the artwork or writings on the cave walls.

Since VR creates experiences (albeit virtual), our VR experiences become episodic memories because the human brain psychologically perceives those [virtual] experiences as real enough by reacting in a very similar way as it would have for parallel instances that we had actually experienced in real life (Anton 2018). This is why a VR user would feel that he/she has met Yana of *Daughters of Chibok* (2019) and was present when she shared her story. In other words, we remember our virtual experience as an actual experience and not merely as information due to a plausible effect of the neurophysiology arising from the viewer's sense of immersion, presence, and empathy (Friedman, Donenfeld, and Zafran 2009, 333; Riva, Wiederhold, and Mantovani 2019, 83). This aligns with Bender and Broderick's (2021, 138) statement that "the brain and body are 'tricked' by the phantasmic experience of occupying a virtual space that offers our sensorium [the needed] stimuli to compensate for the artifice of the cumbersome VR apparatus."

As such, Kachi Benson was able to achieve his aim of taking the audience to the world of the women of Chibok because, as Krohner (2016) put it, "when we think about how our brains and bodies respond to ... VR experiences as lived and not imagined, we can assume that [the] effects can be long-lasting." This is the remarkable privilege of using VR to tell stories (Wallworth 2016). The audience feels connections and emotions that play a major role in effective communication (Biocca and Levy 2013, 132). Kachi Benson's comment on how storytelling is about connecting with the audience in the best way possible and how VR is a new format to work with in that regard readily comes to mind. He said:

The viewers must connect; the success of a story is largely based on how connected the viewers are to the story. The stronger the connection, you could say, the more successful the story is. This was what I was able to achieve with *Daughters of Chibok*. (Kachi Benson, personal communication, April 26, 2023)

292 That is to say, VR is not as discriminating when considering effective communication as other means of communication are, such as watching a 2D documentary, where the emotional connection could be lost along the way. The inference is that using 360 cameras, VR offers the opportunity for filmmakers to produce a world that exists somewhere and place the audience in this world (far better than cinemas and 2D screens can), and manipulate (for better or worse) the audience to conclude that it is the real thing (Marini et al. 2011, 3). By that means, filmmakers can achieve a stronger level of connection with their audience. Kachi Benson notes that he has made several documentaries with similar goals to that of *Daughters of Chibok* (2019). Yet, because the latter was rendered with VR, the audience could connect better with the story, making the film more successful. Here is what Kachi Benson had to say:

A lot of people have heard the story, but very few people have been there, and very few people know what is happening. I have always wanted to tell a story in Chibok, so when the opportunity presented itself for me to be in Chibok, the question was: how do I want to tell this story? And I chose VR, and I think it was a very good decision because for the first time a lot of people who had access to the experience could go to Chibok and see what it looks like, see the community, see the women, sit with them in their huts, and be with them on the farm. I think that the emotional connection that people developed with the story was stronger than the technology. The technology brought the viewers closer to the story and that, I think, made it more impactful. (Kachi Benson, personal communication, April 26, 2023)

The endpoint is that VR documentaries are fundamentally different because they provide a vibrant medium to tell a real story and allow the audience to interact better with authentic materials and events due to VR's embodiment, which 2D documentaries or books cannot offer (Crecente 2017). I have, however, found a few

studies that assert that it does not necessarily evoke emotional empathy, and these should not be ignored.

One such study is the discussion by Bender and Broderick (2021) of two cases of VR documentary production: *Kiya* (2016) and *Chernobyl* (2016). The former rendered its video in 360 degrees to create a virtual environment that is as close to the real environment of the event as possible; while the latter used characters encountered in Nichol's conventional "documentary—realist" concept and a virtual environment of actual locations filmed with a 360-degree camera, engendering a heightened verisimilitude. With the aim that the VR documentary experience will "do something 'different' and 'better' than 'just,' a conventional documentary" (Bender and Broderick 2021, 150), the conclusion was that the application of VR to the documentaries did not elicit the empathy effect anticipated when compared to the conventional documentary. Still the distinctive point of interest is that these studies did not posit that there was no difference in how stories were perceived in VR when compared to conventional 2D documentary forms. One will recall that this research held that VR experience varies and depends on the extent of the individual users' psychological immersion and perception. Thus, it is safe to acknowledge that a VR documentary filmed with a 360-degree camera, like *Daughters of Chibok* (2019), will provide a non-fixed engagement and compellingly evoke sensory stimuli with guaranteed emotions (empathic or not).

## Theory, Reality, and Virtual Reality

Given this discussion, any event can be perceived in life in a new, immersive way that allows the viewer to achieve presence regardless of the time and space in which the event occurred. VR filmmaking<sup>6</sup> of reality is central to achieving this presence.

6 The process of filming with a 360 camera and stitching the footage in post-production to create 360 footage that the VR user can interact with using the

294 The filmmaker achieves this through digital transcreation, yet again central to the concept. Digital transcreation as a concept is cognizant of other circumstances beyond the theory or reality it seeks to recreate. That is much more than what a written text or event conveys. This inherent consideration given to space-time circumstances associated with but external to a reality or text sits at the heart of the theory of New Historicism. By extension, this theory can be conveniently applied as an upside to the VR documentary filmmaking process.

It was the American critic, Stephen Greenblatt, who propounded New Historicism theory in 1980 with his book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From Moore to Shakespeare*. New Historicism was propounded as a style of literary analysis that challenges the legacy of criticisms arising from prior theories. Unlike these prior theories, New Historicism makes an attempt to produce new cultural products and to reintroduce a historical dimension to literary studies. It emphasizes the importance of considering the historical and cultural context surrounding an event in understanding and achieving cultural production (PHILO-notes 2021).

Greenblatt (1988, 5) describes New Historicism as “the collective of making cultural practices and inquiry into the relations among those practices.” Veaser (2013, XI) submits that “expressive acts” are rooted in cultural practices. This means that the literal and non-literary text on the subject matter of any research should circulate inseparably and permeate one another. For VR documentary filmmaking, the center of inquiry is really not its texts alone, but also includes its history. New Historicism emerged as a kind of cure to the obvious limitation of early literary theories such as Formalism and Structuralism, which focused primarily on the text’s internal structures, ignoring their historical and social context.

VR headset. This is the process used by Nigerian filmmaker Kachi Benson to make the VR documentary *Daughters of Chibok* (2019) (TechCity 2019).

Much as the literary text of any information is significant to the VR documentary filmmaking process, there should be a correspondence between the literary text of the reality and the non-literary text of the reality (the VR space-time environment) for a documentary film to pass as an authentic and truthful representation of fact. In addition, although the literary text is significant, New Historicism argues that other documents should be consulted while analyzing any scholarly text.

## **Implications of VR for Documentary Filmmaking in Nigeria**

With a new generation come fresh mutations. Documentaries are gaining popularity in cinemas and scholarship in the twenty-first century (Bruzzi 2006; Jedlowski 2014; Johnson 2022). While documentaries transmit knowledge through visual stories instead of statistical data (Waugh, Baker, and Winton 2010), VR is focused on communicating through experience. This raises questions about the credibility of the virtual environment users interact with.

Writing about the inherent difficulties of documentary filmmakers and spectators alike regarding documentary representation, Bruzzi (2006, 8) cautioned that “authenticity and evolution” are frequently linked to the increasing sophistication of audio-visual technology. She further states that the documentary’s credibility will only stem from a healthy dialectical relationship between the text, the reality it represents, and the spectator. Bender and Broderick (2021) also notes two constituent themes of realism, those being the degree of the quality of the virtual environment’s materials and the authenticity of the event depicted in the virtual environment (89). What this means for VR documentary production in Nigeria is that to ensure authenticity and achieve the necessary quality required for establishing a material’s virtual environment, the VR documentary film producer in Nigeria:

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1. Will face a wider work scope than his/her counterparts in other 2D forms of documentary filmmaking;
  2. Must be willing to expand his/her scope beyond those of the 2D documentary filmmaking, adopting the concepts of digital transcription and New Historicism by conducting more extensive research into salient contractual practices surrounding the virtual setting being created;
  3. Must have relevant capacity to investigate undocumented portions of historical details that might have gone lost in transition (given that most societies in Nigeria have a history and habit of using oral traditions for passing facts in time from one generation to the other and in space from community to community);
  4. Must surmount the challenge of socio-cultural, ethnic, religious and trado-political biases that accompany such each-one-tell-one hand-me-down lores (given the polyglot nature of Nigerian society);
  5. Must be intelligent enough to foresee criticisms of any failure to balance audience expectations that are as diverse and multilateral as the perspectives surrounding the event he/she investigates; and,
  6. Should be able to engineer access to local and foreign funding, external corroboratory sources, and emerging technologies at a global level to meet world-class expectations, especially given prevalent economic realities.

Nigeria as a hub has a lot of factors that makes it tempting for the VR documentary filmmaker to unintentionally misrepresent the accuracy of circumstances surrounding an event. This under-scores the plausibility of the method used by Kachin Benson for *Daughters of Chibok* (2019) for documentary filmmakers in Nigeria who may adopt VR. In *Daughters of Chibok* (2019), the user only interacts with the real environment with an accurate cultural backdrop that was filmed by the filmmaker using a 360-degree camera. The materials and the virtual experiences were not invented using computer-generated imagery. The environment

and characters are real. This neatly fits into Minha-ha's (2012, 96) concept of "a good documentary," whose subject matter is actual and accurate and whose view the audience can identify and agree with.

The idea is for documentary filmmakers in Nigeria to document and present actuality using an immersive technology (VR) that can solve a crucial communication gap, while realistically disseminating knowledge by depicting events with an immersive reality and experience. This is the chief strength of VR. "It can conjure an intense sense of location and of one's body in that location" (Loh 2017). In Kachi Benson's VR film, the sequence and the transition from one medium to another, except for when Yana takes the viewer to her farmland from her house on a motorbike, is fluid. Still, "the journey is smooth, evoking a slight sensory impression of ... [motion]" (Bender and Broderick 2021,164).

The union of documentary and emerging technologies, such as virtual reality, reshapes documentary practice (Watson 2021, 86). Documentary films, especially those created for educational and campaign purposes in Nigeria, must embrace the idea of learning through the experiences that VR offers. With its focus on experience, VR can be a huge avenue for learning, for example, history. It provides space for better communication. In BB Sasore's *Journey of an African Colony: The Making of Nigeria* (2019), the filmmaker embarks on a journey with the audience to different parts of Nigeria to tell how Nigeria was created. What VR means for that documentary is that the audience (wherever they may be across the globe) gets to travel with the filmmaker, allowing the audience to feel the experience of being with the filmmaker in that same spot where the event unfolded and giving a sense of place wherever the camera goes. As Kachi Benson puts it, "VR can [effectively] contribute to bringing Africa to the world, showcasing our stories to the world" (Kachi Benson, personal communication, April 26, 2023).

298 Ample Nigerian stories need to be told using the VR documentary filmmaking process. However, as with the adaptation of every technology, there are challenges. VR documentary is still in its infancy in Nigeria. The prospects are clear, but conversations about the challenges of using this technology in Nigeria, in most cases, is a haunting image of a hapless documentary filmmaker lost in a forest of VR content creators with better circumstances around the globe. For now, VR is supported and famous in the gaming and real estate industry in Nigeria, but not for filmmaking. During this research, Kachi Benson was the only documentary filmmaker applying VR to his films in Nigeria. There are VR studios that create real estate videos, and others like Judith Okonkwo, who has a VR studio that provides training and access to equipment for potential young VR filmmakers in Nigeria, ameliorating one of the challenges of VR filmmaking in Nigeria (access to equipment).

In detailing his experience and challenges in making *Daughters of Chibok* (2019), Kachi Benson said, "We have to, as much as possible, surpass the challenge of access [both] to the technology and [in terms of] to capital to tell stories using this technology" (Kachi Benson, personal communication, April 26, 2023). As a documentary filmmaker who can claim to know the forest of VR content creators as home, Kachin Benson further points out that

without investment, it is difficult for younger filmmakers to get into VR filmmaking because the production cost is high compared to what the market is willing to pay. Most (if not all the equipment) must be bought abroad, which is expensive. A 360° camera costs between 3 to 4 thousand US dollars (approximately four million Nigerian naira), and another 3 to 4 thousand US dollars to buy the computer that can compute it. The few people who practice VR in Nigeria do it from their own pockets, and they would want their money back as quickly as possible. The quickest way to get their money is to gravitate towards real estate and the gaming industry, where

they can make commercial videos and start making their money back.

It is true that the Nigerian film industry as a whole has developed and grown tremendously in terms of funding and available budgets. However, in an interview regarding the development of documentary films in Nigeria, the growth has been different for the documentary subsection. Nigerian documentary filmmaker and founder of Represent International Documentary Film Festival (iREP), Femi Odugbemi echoes a commonly held position, noting that “the capacity of an industry to grow depends on the amount of investment in it. Documentary filmmaking in Nigeria has just been sustainable; documentary in Nigeria has not had the kind of investment that the feature film has had” (personal communication, July 27, 2023). Concerning VR, Kachi Benson said, “to the best of my knowledge, there is no institutional support for VR or the promotion of VR in Nigeria, and I have not seen that. It still needs a lot of convincing people to see the need and buy into it” (personal communication, April 26, 2023).

Another challenge for VR filmmaking in Nigeria is the skill set. Although the Nigerian film industry is gradually professionalizing (Ezepue 2020, 3), the Nigerian film industry was started and is still mainly being run by amateur filmmakers. VR filmmaking requires a degree of technical knowledge and expertise surpassing regular digital filmmaking, and the training involved is expensive. Again, Kachi Benson detailed how he had to travel abroad (in his case to the United States) for training before making his first VR film. He said, “it is tough doing VR in Nigeria because the cost of entry is high. Not everyone can afford it” (personal communication, April 26, 2023). Thus, even with access to equipment, it is still costly for younger filmmakers to get into the VR filmmaking space.

## **Conclusion**

This research submits that with VR, documentary filmmakers in Nigeria can provide their audiences with greater insight into

300 the events being portrayed, leading to a stronger connection between the audience and the story. This does not imply that every documentary should adopt VR; some stories work just as well in 2D documentary forms. For VR experiences, the materials (information) and sense are captured, relayed, and received as a complete package in the communication process, just as if the recipient were there. Hence, suppose a filmmaker's goal is to connect with his/her audience so that the story is perceived as realistically as possible. VR will then be the gateway to "literally" bringing the audience to an event or place, which the audience will not ordinarily go to or cannot reach from elsewhere in the world. *Daughters of Chibok* (2019) is just the beginning, and documentary filmmakers have not even begun to scratch the surface of how much VR can help to tell Nigerian stories.

More so, when the locus of VR technology shifts from the gaming and real estate industries to documentary filmmaking in Nigeria, the accuracy of the representation of reality in a VR documentary will amount to the filmmaker's ethics to stay true to reality, since the power of the technology is great enough not only to make the user feel present, but also to manipulate truths and perspectives in the process of digital transcreation. A process that is no less dissimilar to the process of 2D documentary filmmaking. The reality the audience will be interacting with is not necessarily the truth but a new kind of truth (reality) about the same event. The most significant contribution is the insight to how much VR technology can change documentary filmmaking in Nigeria, for the better or (hopefully not) for the worse.

Then again, Nigerian documentary films have always reached audiences across different thresholds, from video cassettes to VCDs, to satellite television and most recently through video-on-demand (VOD) platforms. Nevertheless, with VR technology's competitive alternatives, the scope of the audience can be broadened even further, notwithstanding Nigeria's acute shortage of VR documentary filmmakers.

The primary flaw affecting VR documentary filmmaking in Nigeria is the fact that there is no support of any kind; otherwise, there would be more VR documentary filmmaking activities in Nigeria, given the needed capital investments.

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**POLITICS OF THE BODY**

**SOFT POWER**

**NAIJA POP CULTURE**

**EMBODIMENT**

**PERFORMANCE**

# **Becoming Nigerian, Embodying Naija: African Popular Culture and Its 'Non-African' Online (Re)Creators**

Izue Nwankwo

The rise of previously underprivileged nations in global media dominance is directly linked to the liberatory power of the internet, given that these hitherto comparatively marginalized nations now wield substantial influence on social media and digital platforms. This advancement has created newer, more individualized national mediaspheres, and in the case of Nigeria, given rise to varied forms of the global dissemination of variegated cultural productions, which in turn are being transcreated by non-Nigerian actors on social media. This chapter thus explores the decentralization of the global center of entertainment in the west and the growing influence of the emergent

308 **hubs in the Global South. Using interviews, close reading, and comparative analyses, it particularly interrogates the acts of three non-Nigerian and White (*oyinbo*) online transcreators of Nigerian cultural artefacts, namely Juliana Belova (@asiwajulz), who lived in Nigeria between 2020 and 2021, and also in early 2024, who performs online dance and drama skits, Sonu Malayil (@mr.jollofbiryani), an Indian living in Canada, who produces lip-syncs of Nigerian comedy skits, and Janine Udogu (@nwanyiocha), who documents a vlog of actualities of Swiss-Nigerian life with her mixed family. This chapter thus engages with questions around digital media, soft power, pop culture, and body politics regarding how these influencers present themselves and how they and their performances are, in turn, read by their overwhelmingly Nigerian audiences.**

### **Transculturality and Politics of the Body**

It was a quiet, cold, snowy early December morning in Zurich. I had arrived the previous night and was going that morning to a suburb named Otelfingen, to meet and interview Janine Udogu, a Swiss vlogger, popular within the Nigerian onlinesphere as @nwanyiocha.<sup>1</sup> She is one of the first *oyinbo* content creators whose social media posts are based on Nigerian everyday and

1 She has more than 720,000 Facebook followers and over 100,000 each on Instagram and Twitter, as well as a substantial following on YouTube, an active blog and is successfully exploring TikTok. She presents herself on

popular culture.<sup>2</sup> This trip is one of the few I have had in a three-year-long interest in “White” (i.e. *oyinbo*) online performers who have become a significant part of Nigerian cultural production. Since meeting with her, I have also had the opportunity to interact with others like her, including Juliana Belova, to ascertain their perspectives on their engagements with the re-creation, re-generation, and dissemination of Nigerianness on social media platforms. In this chapter, I examine deliberately selected acts by three such re-creators, namely, in addition to Udogu, Juliana Belova (formerly @oyibomarlian) and Sonu Malayil (@mr.jollofbiryani), who are Russian and Indian respectively.<sup>3</sup> These three online personalities variously create content that speaks to and about their experiential knowledge of Nigeria(ns). Even though they do not all have a European background, their physical appearance—skin complexion and hair texture, and general phenotype, is typically not Nigerian, thus characterizing them as *oyinbo*.

The performers whose works are examined here are deliberately chosen to show Nigeria’s popular cultural influence across the globe, and how these creators variously exploit the convergence of personal and public spaces within social media to disseminate their diverse experiences of the country. Specifically, two things are in focus in this chapter. The first is how Nigeria has emerged as a global entertainment hub to the extent that its online spaces now feature non-Nigerian performers. This development indicates the growing dominance of the nation’s cultural soft power, beginning first with its unique film industry, Nollywood, and then extending to its music, Afrobeats, as well as its myriad

her socials as a blogger and children’s book author, exploring Igbo culture, language, and life.

- 2 *Oyinbo* is a Yoruba word that denotes Europeaness, foreignness, more importantly, being lighter skinned than other Nigerians, and sometimes affluence (Manyika 2003, 68).
- 3 Juliana Belova has since changed her Instagram handle to @asiwajulz, where she has over 100,000 followers. Malayil’s handle, @mr.jollofbiryani has over 270,000 followers on Instagram and 1.2m on TikTok.

310 dance and comedy enactments. Each of these artistic forms has (in)directly instantiated the emergence of numerous memes and other digital peculiarities in global online conversations and multifarious exchanges (Dahir 2023; Krings and Simmert 2020). The second concern of this chapter is how non-African bodies construct, produce, and transmit Africanness on social media and how such productions are, in turn, mediated, viewed, and interpreted by the majority Nigerian audiences for whom these non-African influencers perform. Put more succinctly, there are two sides: how the body is presented and how it is viewed, otherwise referred to as embodiment and corporeality. Though sometimes used interchangeably, corporeality is “the role of the body as a set of structures whose identity and meaning is mediated by culture and society,” and embodiment is “the processes by which social actors realize distinction, identity and lifestyle through the medium of the body” (Gilleard and Higgs 2018, 5).<sup>4</sup>

Corporeality and embodiment multifariously discuss human categorization around gender and femininity (Blood 2005; Bray and Colebrook 1998), childhood and youth (Coffey, Budgeon, and Cahill 2016; Colls and Hörschelmann 2009), as well as ageing (Gilleard and Higgs 2018; Rajan-Rankin 2018). There have also been scholarly enquiries from the purview of disability (Chaudhry 2019; Reynolds 2021), relations between humans, machines, and artificial agents, (Kanda and Šabanović 2018), and of “race” (Daniels 2009; Gilleard and Higgs 2014). For the present study, the intricate ways both phenomena feature within “racial” categories imply the use of “certain corporeal features, skin pigment, hair texture and phenotype to create hierarchies of difference” (Rajan-Rankin 2018, 33). These *hierarchies* advance the “politics of the body,” which denotes how the body is “politically inscribed” and “shaped by practices of containment and control” (Brown and Gershon 2017, 1). Due to the capacity of the human body to carry

4 Amoncio's chapter in this volume also speaks to the various roles identity plays in social interactions.

and transmit innumerable cultural meanings, it has been aptly described as “the best work of art” (Rebay-Salisbury 2016, xii), and a site “in which constructions of differences are mapped onto human beings” (Brown and Gershon 2017, 1). Hence, presentation/embodiment entails conscious designations and renderings of the body to portray and convey specific significations, while viewing/corporeality refers to how the human body possesses and/or has material qualities read onto it in ways that convey socio-cultural particularities and associations. Therefore, my reading of (non-)native reenactments (a reperformance of gestures, attitudes, and styles) of Nigerian pop culture derives from the view of the human body as simultaneously being the agent on which activity is made and one that acts. Based on Schneider’s (2011) work, this paper examines how the reenactments under study here engage with the histories and memorializations of relations between Africa and the west, as well as the interactivities between these transcreators and their largely Nigerian audiences.

Moreover, there exist wide-ranging academic enquiries on the interrelationships between the body, performance, and power, and one of the derivative summations from most of them is that there exist stereotypical expectations and suppositions concerning individuals and groups based solely on phenotypical features. Noland (2009) specifically discusses how cultural practices are embodied and challenged through how bodies gesture and perform, thus highlighting the role body movement plays in the production of cultural norms. Blocker (2004) takes the purview of feminist criticism to interrogate ways in which artists deploy their bodies to challenge and redefine social norms, while Schneider (2013) engages a similar feminist lens to interrogate inherent power dynamics that performance artists unearth in their engagement of their bodies in querying prevailing cultural norms. Applying the sum of these three readings to the performances examined in this chapter, these *oyinbo* transcreations of Nigerian pop culture could be read as the exploitation and

312 commodification of the cultural expressions of a historically marginalized group. As such, within racialized considerations, the politics of the bodies of these performers ordinarily reinforce hegemonic power dynamics and perpetuate stereotypes of pilfering artefacts from formerly colonized peoples. In this chapter, however, these reenactments are examined as cultural exchanges rather than appropriation, better termed cultural expropriation, described as “an attempt to provide a broader access to cultural resources and spaces that have provided value for privileged beneficiaries so that others may experience these benefits in a way that has the potential to be mutually enhancing” (Haynes 2021, 302). Therefore, this chapter presents a different reading of these transcreations, one that is informed by the emergent social realities of intercultural encounters buoyed by digital technology.

Grouping humanity in this way indubitably influences the racialization of bodies (Grosz 2005). Given the fact that such categorizations follow the trend of centuries of domination through enslavement and colonization rather than biology, they have become weaponized and politically charged, thus creating an abyss between considerations of Black and white bodies. The outcome is that the white body has

been projected as the standard, the norm of beauty, of accomplishment. Not only the body proper but its periphery; its embellishments have also been recognized as such. On the contrary, the black body, projected as the “bad” body, has always been projected as being inferior and unwholesome. (Manganyi 1973, 28)

For these reasons, Black people have tried to assimilate and mitigate associated negativities through various means—skin-lightening (Moshoadiba and Senokoane 2020), passing (Ginsberg 1996), among many other ways of circumventing systemic racism (Banaji, Fiske, and Massey 2021). With the internet, suffice it to say that it has created a global marketplace where bodies interact

multifariously, virtually and curiously brushing against each other (Slocum 2008). Consequently, even with its preponderance of “racialized bodies” (Daniels 2009, 116), the online space facilitates intercultural encounters in unprecedented ways, thereby providing more interactions across actual and assumed human categories. Moreover, since “race” is not only made or remade through exclusions and erasure but also by ongoing connections (Saldanha 2006), the proliferation of digital technologies across Africa has given African creators greater online presence (Bisschoff 2017; Ugor 2021), thus deepening transcultural encounters to the point that Black bodies now feature in spaces hitherto exclusive to others. African bodies are thus more immersed in their agency much more than was possible in the past.

This online evolution of African agency is significant because, in the past, the west had always dominated the airwaves, so to speak, in terms of media prowess, but the internet has created a less restrictive avenue for other voices and cultural productions to be placed on the global stage. Hence, with this multiplicity of perspectives, contemporary cyberspace interactions transform bodies in ways that “both resist and reinforce hierarchies of ... race” (Daniels 2009, 101). It is within such transcultural ambience that this chapter cites its interrogation of these non-African online performers of *Nigerianness*.<sup>5</sup> The emphasis is to discuss such online performances, particularly how they concurrently reinscribe and redefine, first Nigeria’s position in the world, and second, historical and cultural relations between Africa and the west. It is pertinent also to note that they share these productions with their online community of followers, most of whom are Nigerians or other Africans, who in turn distribute them, describing, commenting, editing, and re-making those videos in a variety of ways to suit their purposes. These consumers also

5 *Nigerianness* is used here as an omnibus term to denote instances of playing being Nigerian through various means, such as language use, mannerisms, cuisine, dressing, and a general exhibition of traits associated with Nigerian arts and traditions—dance, music, songs, comedy, among others.

314 circulate these cultural productions on other more personalized platforms such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and other less public channels. What is significant here is that with an increased online presence of Africans, it is less tenable for persons from dominant groups to pilfer or “appropriate” indigenous or locally created cultural artefacts from Africa and elsewhere without giving credit to the original creators, as used to be the case when the west had unchallenged media dominance. The idea of an original here does not point to a pure, unmodified media product that does not rely on outside influences, but in the sense of the first known individual(s) to generate the content and make it publicly available. This is in acknowledgement of the transnational backdrop against which these sorts of cultural products are produced and disseminated in contemporary times.

### ***Naija* as a Unique Soft Power**

“Performing *Naija*” or Nigerianness is a product of Nigeria’s soft power. Touted as the most populous Black nation on earth, for the past two decades Nigeria has usually been seen as a large market for multinational companies, particularly those from South Africa. Whether it is in satellite television, banking, or mobile telephony, South Africa has maintained dominance across the continent. MTN, for instance, a mobile telephone provider, has mostly had more subscribers in Nigeria than in its home nation of South Africa (Vanguard 2007). It is noteworthy that the coming of mobile telephony, especially as handled by these foreign companies, led to the demise of government-owned parastatals in Nigeria such as NITEL (Bakare, Ekanem, and Allen 2017), leaving the role of government agencies as merely regulatory and with no direct involvement in establishing communications infrastructure and connectivity. This has been the trend in many facets of Nigerian life—since the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) of the 1980s and the privatization of public companies of the late 1990s and early 2000s, successive governments in Nigeria have gradually withdrawn from active

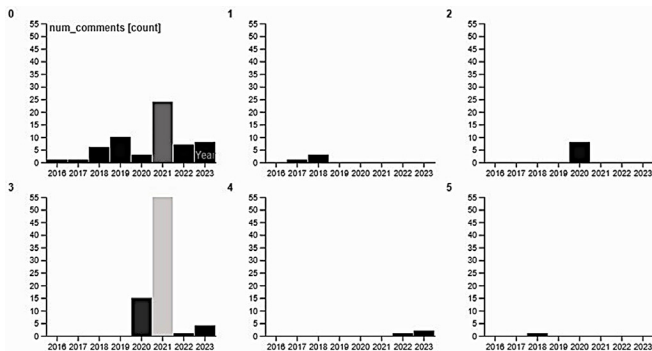
involvement in developing and providing infrastructure. The private sector has been left to cater for whatever production setup they require, from power to other amenities such as water and hospitals. While this condition has had a quite negative effect on productivity and the economy, the cultural sector has thrived and successfully put the country on the global map of entertainment.

Nigerian popular culture has become a form of soft power which, enabled by digital media, especially the internet, sells (if not imposes) the nation's productions globally. It started with Nollywood, and then came Afrobeat with even greater international recognition for Nigerian artists, as can be seen in the contributions of Jeduah and Simmert to this collection. With the internet, these productions have diversified into other artistic as well as everyday interpersonal relations, which are now disseminated globally, thus making Nigeria one of the emergent global cultural hubs for entertainment and popular arts. The "Naija" soft power is therefore not driven by government investment or policy but is a kind of grassroots, *de facto* soft power. It is different from the form of soft power wherein a nation promotes artistic productions as a way of expanding its global influence and interests (Nye 2017). It is a unique kind of soft power which evolved out of the tenacity of culture producers to create content against all odds, despite all constraints, bottlenecks, and even government-induced hurdles. The kind of cultural productions examined in this chapter are the yields of this soft power. It is for this reason that Nigeria has become attractive to people from hitherto privileged cultures to the point that they are now co-producing Nigerian content with locals. The kind of soft power established by Nollywood and Afrobeat rebrands the country, especially the city of Lagos, as an interesting place to be and as a vibrating pop cultural capital of entertainment.

The propagation of this soft power has been made possible through the open platforms of the internet. With little or no regulation as in other traditional media (Betiang 2013), the

316 internet provided Nigerians an opportunity to put their cultural productions out to global audiences. With the popularity of what Nigerian creators have put out in terms of Nollywood and Afrobeat music, non-African creators such as Juliana Belova (@oyibomarlian) encountered Naija music and dance, and eventually opted to travel to Nigeria to participate in online comedy and dance skits. Her decision in 2020 to move to Lagos to properly participate in Nigerian cultural productions is salient proof of how “Naija” soft power has spread globally. She was drawn by Afrobeat music and dance in her native Moscow. In my online interview with her, she detailed how she encountered Afrobeat and was drawn to a dance style popularized by Nigerian singer and dancer Afeez Fashola (known as Naira Marley) around 2019. Through viral videos and dance challenges on different social media platforms, Naira Marley’s song and dance were disseminated globally, where people from diverse backgrounds visually encountered their reenactments. Belova told me that she taught herself the dance steps and used them at clubs and events in Moscow frequented by the Nigerian diaspora there. It was at one such setting that someone, referring to her said, “See dis Oyibo Marlian” (Look at this white person that has become a Marlian) (Belova 2023). It is important to note that the so-called Marlian Gang was frowned upon in Nigeria for their exhibition of what many considered anti-social behaviors (Rasak 2020), but this did not prevent the dance moves they invented from becoming online sensations. When Belova eventually moved to Lagos in 2020, she assumed the name, Oyibo Marlian, posted her Nigerian journey on her social media platforms, and garnered a substantial Nigerian following to her Instagram account.

The graphs in figure 1 analyze the 153 posts on Belova’s @asiwajulz (formerly @oyibomMarlian) Instagram page, beginning from the first available post in 2016 till April 2023. Graph numbers 0 to 5 represent the frequency of comments and likes on posts bearing specific locations. 0 represents posts with no location mark whereas 1 to 5 represents posts bearing specific



[Fig. 1] Frequency of comments and likes on the Instagram account of @asiwajulz by April 2023.

locations—Belgium (also the Netherlands and Germany), China and the UAE, Nigeria, Egypt, and then Russia, respectively. Belova arrived in Nigeria in early 2020, spent a few days and returned to the UAE before going back to Russia. She returned to Nigeria after the 2020 COVID-19 lockdown and spent the whole of 2021 in the country. It is evident from graph number 3 that her posts received more comments and likes (vertical axis and black/white, gray tones) between 2020 and 2021 when she was in Nigeria. This is also true of graph 0 which has no location tags but shows more likes and comments for 2021, when she spent a full year in Nigeria. Since late 2021, when she left Nigeria and went to Egypt, spending the entire year there and only returning to Russia in April 2023, comments and likes on her page have declined. What is shown here by these graphs is that Belova's social media popularity did not pick up till she started spending time in Nigeria and making posts there. It is also shown that she made more posts during her time in Nigeria than at any other time, which is an indication that being in the Nigerian onlinesphere, or more precisely, performing *Naija*, inspired her creativity and increased her social relevance for her mostly Nigerian audiences.



[Fig. 2] Screenshot of the “Am I welcome to Nigeria?” post on the Instagram account of @mrjollofbiryani.

Significantly, “Naija” soft power can also be explicated from Malayil’s reenactments. He styles himself as an “Indian-born African inspired” comedian, and his social media skits are mostly lip-syncing imitations of Nigerian comedy, recently diversifying into performances of tasting/eating food from different African countries. Nevertheless, most of his representations are about Nigeria(ns), such as wearing costumes that identify him as Nigerian. His major act of performing Nigerianness is through his lip-sync imitations and impressions. By his own admission, he has never visited Nigeria, but encountered the nation’s culture through his interactions with Nigerians living in Canada. This is further proof of the global spread of Naija soft power, because it is not just about the people he met, but his encountering the kind of cultural products that he now imitates. This is the case even

though, unlike Belova, he makes his videos outside Nigeria; out of the over nine hundred posts on his Instagram page, the two with the highest number of likes (above 241,000 and 132,000 respectively) are lip-syncs of the comedy skits of two different Nigerian online comedians. The first, entitled “This life no balance,” is credited to Darlington Opara (@sirtabasco\_) and the second, “How to apologize to a woman (sic),” is credited to Kingsley B. Ogbonna (@doctall\_kingsley), who are popular Nigerian online comedians. Also, two of his three posts with the highest number of comments on TikTok—4,000, 3,800, and 2,800 respectively, are equally lip-syncs of Nigerian comedy skits. Figure 2 is a still from the third one, entitled “Am I welcome to Nigeria,” which is his recreation of a viral TikTok filter in which individuals ride in a little boat to any destination they wish. In Malayil’s case, he uses this post to speak to and engage with his audiences about whether he is welcome to Nigeria or not. This video has the most comments in his IG feed, and in their comments, his Nigerian followers disclose how they will welcome him with open arms. An example can be seen in the sample comment in the picture in which the individual gives him a Yoruba first name as a sign of welcome should he decide to come to Nigeria at any time.

Janine Udogu (@nwanyiocha) is Nigerian by marriage and as such has a connection with the country other than that of popular culture. She is one of the first white content creators to embody *Nigerianness* on social media. For her efforts, she has garnered a substantial Nigerian following, celebrating her fifth anniversary in 2022 as an online content creator. Her posts reflect on aspects of her life in an inter-cultural household—a Swiss mother and a Nigerian father, with four children and a cute chihuahua named Brutus. In my conversations with her, three interviews through a chat, a video call, and an in-person meeting, she spoke about her own background, especially her having a stepfather who is originally from North Africa, and how that experience introduced her into cross-cultural encounters within her Swiss background. Nevertheless, being one of the first non-African online content

320 creators whose posts are about Nigerian culture, she started out with platforms such as Facebook and Twitter before Instagram and then TikTok became popular. Her use of these platforms is based on their affordances as well as their popularity at every stage of her online life. She has dutifully maintained a presence in the most significant social media platforms, posting events from her family life and everyday engagement. It is noteworthy that she and her family live in Zurich, Switzerland, but her most significant posts, just like Malayil's, are the ones she makes about Nigeria, particularly her regular visits there with her family and her general enactment of *Nigerianness*.

One salient aspect of the background narratives about these three non-Nigerian performers of *Nigerianness* is how they have built their online relevance and social capital on the existing popularity of Naija pop culture. Udogu specifically mentioned to me that within her regular work, none of her colleagues is aware that she has a social media account, let alone one that is this popular. What this shows is that her online followership come from Nigerians and other Africans and not Europeans or other westerners. As such, their involvement in performing Naija does not subscribe to the historical use of colonial structures and personae to popularize African culture but is the opposite—building their own popularity on existing structures of African popular culture. Juliana Belova (@oyibomarlian), for instance, in her engagement with Afrobeats as well as comedy skits and dance movements considered Nigerian, *performs* Naija. Interestingly, her enactment of Naija pop culture, as has been shown previously, gives more visibility to her posts. I will return shortly to discuss the specific ways in which she embodies *Nigerianness* aside from her obvious engagement with Naija pop culture.

### **Becoming Nigerian, Performing Naija**

My concept of “becoming Nigerian” or “performing Naija” derives partly from Judith Butler’s (1990) discussions on how gender

identity is socially constructed through non-verbal enactments and speech acts. The other part emanates from Richard Schechner's (2013, 28) take on performance as "being, doing, showing doing, and explaining showing doing," which signifies that in the presence of an audience, people show themselves in ways they want their bodies/appearance to be read. In this wise, performing or being Nigerian entails embodying specific behavioral and speech mannerisms that audiences can read and interpret as such. It is, however, the case that those usually considered Nigerian have different corporeal qualities, hair texture, and body complexions, for instance, which cannot be easily embodied by white performers. They can adorn themselves with appropriate costumes and make-up, but for historical reasons, it has become problematic for a white person to darken their exposed bodies for the sake of "performing Black," particularly due to the lingering trauma of blackface performances across the Anglophone colonies from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, which were used to reify white supremacy while denigrating Blackness (Hoxworth 2024). This is why the new normal as proposed here is the evocation of Nigerianness, regardless of skin color, undergirded by "becoming" other than merely "imitating" (which can easily be a sarcastic rendition of) being Nigerian.

As someone who posts everyday events and aspects of her life and that of her family, Udogu is an interesting example in the study of how these creators, in her case particularly, embrace Naija. I was curious as to how and why she started this online project, and her response is worth repeating here. She has an interesting tale about the beginning—it happened by accident. She wanted to sell *abada* to European mothers and to encourage them to tie their babies on their backs, which is something she learned from her numerous visits to Nigeria.<sup>6</sup> She then

6 A piece of designed cloth tied around the waist mostly by women. It is called "wrapper" or "lappa," but I prefer the more common term among Igbo-speaking people, *abada*.

322 made an instructional video on how to do this to promote her “business” and her passion to see European mothers carry their babies the African way. The opposite happened. The *abada* business did not take off, but instead she gained a community of Nigerian followers on Facebook and Twitter interested in her mixed cultural family life and stories. Based on her interactions with them, she gradually tailored her content to meet this new expectation. Of course, this type of video has been recreated by other content creators in recent times, but hers is one of the earliest, at least online. It is little wonder that it went viral, interestingly not for the European potential buyers she anticipated, but for Africans, especially Nigerians, who were enthusiastic about this *oyinbo* playing Nigerian.

Two things stand out for why this video of hers attracted, boosted, and increased Nigerian followership on her social media accounts. The first is her difference, her *oyinboness*, which bestows a higher level of extraordinariness to even the most common of acts that she posts. The act of women tying babies to their backs in Nigeria is a banal one. I believe another example that can compete with Udogu’s example in terms of extraordinariness, particularly in the public space, would be a man tying a baby to his back in that fashion. What is at play here is that the extraordinariness of this action for the *oyinbo* (and for a man also), comes from the merger of historical and cultural privilege as well as the act not being a commonplace occurrence. I will discuss the concept of privilege more in the following section. The second reason her post created more engagement with her platforms is her intercultural cross-over, which is a reversal of what is common to Africans. There are more examples of locals trying to be *oyinbo* than there are of *oyinbo* “becoming” Africans, perhaps due to the historical problematics of white-playing-Black occasioned by the infamous blackface tradition of US minstrelsy as well as allegations of appropriations of African culture by westerners (Cherid 2021; Taiwo 1995).

Other performers enact representations of Nigerianness that are more artistic and imitative. Malayil has video skits in which he displays various aspects of performing Naija, such as dancing to viral songs, dressing in various kinds of Nigerian attire, actual visits to and outings with Nigerian diasporans. He also holds periodic live discussions with his followers on TikTok where he speaks about his passion for Nigerian culture and tries out his knowledge of Pidgin English expressions. As shown previously, his most significant posts to date are those about Naija, and in most such posts, he wears costumes that elicit various Nigerian identities. A good example can be seen in figure 2 above, with him in a boat, dressed in a gown and bonnet, a form of domestic dressing for women, which when worn by men indicates an affiliation with comedy. The fact that he takes the time to dress in this and other Nigeria-specific manners is an indication of a deliberate effort to associate and be identified with Nigeria. He wears clothes associated with Nigerians, specifically dressing in a *babbar riga* made in Nigeria's national white and green colors on the country's Independence Day celebration in 2022, while he visits the home of a Nigerian family living in Canada for the festivities.<sup>7</sup>

Aside from posts he made in Canada, he has also made posts in collaboration with other Africans during his travels and visits to his native India and the United States. While in India, he produced skits that contain mixes of film elements reminiscent of Bollywood and Nollywood. In the United States, his posts are about food tasting, particularly trying out different African cuisines in different restaurants across many cities. Even though some of them are promotional, the fact that he is trying out these food varieties is another way of performing his belongingness to African, albeit Nigerian society. Food works in the same way as dress because trying out other people's dishes and (or performing) enjoying them like he does evidences acceptance and

7 *Babbar riga* is a wide, flowing gown worn by men, over a matching inner long-sleeve shirt and pair of trousers, especially in northern Nigeria, but popular across the country, as a show of affluence.



[Fig. 3] Range of hair braids worn by Oyibo Marlian. Credits: @asiwajulz, Instagram page.

puts locals at ease with the individual (Flowers and Swan 2012; Schaefer and Simon 2017). Such videos attract lots of comments from followers on his pages. The fact that he chooses “jollof” as part of his name also emphasizes how important Nigerian cuisine is to his art and personality. This is one of his ultimate performances of *Nigerianness*—picking up the name of what Nigerians consider a staple way of making rice as part of his stage name.

Furthermore, in figure 3, Belova’s braided hair is obvious. Sometimes referred to as “blonde braids” or “blonde cornrows” (Oenal 2020), white women wearing these hairstyles, which are considered characteristically African, has elicited mixed reactions from different individuals, such as when a couple of American celebrities wore them in public (Abdul-Jabbar 2015; Karen 2020; Safronova 2015). The argument is whether this is cultural appropriation or not (Alonge 2015). Belova wore a range of different kinds of braids throughout her stay in Lagos, as seen in figure 3, as can be seen in some of her skits. Her use of this hairstyle is one visible way of embodying and showing belongingness to Nigerian society. This is shown in audience responses wherein, rather than condemnation, there are expressions of acceptance and admiration for her braids; with people outright telling her how beautiful she looks in them, as shown in figure 4 below. The preceding examples are some of the ways these creators embody *Nigerianness*: the use of costumes, bodily action such as dancing, singing, and lip-syncing, and then using the country’s pop culture.



326 will be used instead. Being referred to as *onye ọcha* has several significations, particularly when used for a local, who is either fair-skinned or behaves in a manner that shows contempt or is different from the rest or both. “Whiteness,” apart from being associated with being European, “is also expressed in the naming of other Black Africans ... when they get rich” (Ndlovu 2022, 118). Hence, “whiteness” is associated with privilege, success, power, and prominence, and the characteristic explication is that it is connected to colonialism and European hegemony. While that eventually became the case following colonization and its erosion of cultural values, it is also the case that even before the advent of Europeans, the color white and fair skin were prized, especially among the Igbo (Ardener 1954).

Nevertheless, aside from the ruling conceptions of “whiteness” surrounding the use of terms such as *ọcha* and *oyinbo*, Udogu’s choice of her Instagram name states the obvious—a light-skinned person. For me, her choice of name stems from three basic reasons. First, it is what people in Nigeria ordinarily call her. Second, by taking ownership of the name, she Nigerianizes herself by re-envisioning her personality through the eyes of how locals see her. Thirdly, as a result, the name simultaneously localizes and exoticizes her, imbuing her with alternating identities of belonging and non-belonging, “our *oyinbo* wife.” Suffice it to say that among other significations, “Nwanyiocha” concurrently elicits senses of otherness and sameness, something like “our *oyibo*” or a foreigner who is now ours. This is also true of “*Oyibo Marlian*”—Belova was, at least at the time she was performing in Nigeria, an *oyinbo* who is also a “*marlian*,” which is a Nigerian pop cultural movement at the time she advertised her belongingness. Many people who had similar online affiliations rallied to her defense, showing acceptance of her. In every case, these content creators do not simply operate unchecked, because they are often subjected to the reactions and comments of their followers.

## Audience Power

Regardless of how these online recreators perform *Nigerianness*, what is unique about their enactments is how they circumvent “appropriation” by making their works into forms of “appreciation.” There is primarily an identification with the local culture, which is shown aggregately by their body of work, wherein they address the specific demographic to which they perform, mostly Nigerian audiences. Udogu, for instance, did not get to choose this audience *ab initio*, but the kind of materials she posted online appealed to them, and she was quick to adapt and own what eventually emerged from her first videos. For Malayil, he acknowledges all the sources for his lip syncs and augments his performances with samplings of various dishes and visits to Africans living in Canada and other places that he visits. Hence, in their (re)enactments, there is a conscious effort to show identification with Nigerians and other Africans, some level of performances of belongingness. Then comes the show of love for the people and their culture and transcreative acts which are done from the perspective of enthusiasts and eager-to-localize demeanor rather than a superiority posture. These directly impact the reception of their work positively, as can be ascertained from the overwhelming likes they receive for their efforts. Suffice it to say that all of them presents themselves as open-minded and ready/willing to learn. Consequently, the idea of appreciation emanates from the reverence (unlike contempt or ridicule, as in blackface) contained in their reenactments. This can also be seen in their gestures and styles of performance, which are often designed with deference to the local cultures from which they are transcreating.

Furthermore, looking at Belova, when she abruptly left Nigeria in late 2021, she moved to Egypt and modelled for assorted brands, yet her social media presence declined. She made a YouTube video on her @juliewanderz account detailing the reasons why she made the move. That video received lots of backlashes, and

328 as she admitted in an interview, she had to take it down, saying that she was misunderstood (Belova 2023). One of the things she complains about in the video is the living conditions in which she found herself while in Lagos and how people were taking advantage of her, hence her decision to move to Cairo to recover her sanity. Most of the comments were antagonistic, a complete deviation from the acclamation she received in the past for her engagement with Naija pop culture. Some of the comments queried why she had “the temerity” to complain when she admittedly came to the country with only one hundred US dollars in her pocket. They then went on to ask her which country in the world anyone could go to with that amount and expect to live opulently. She was variously labelled “ungrateful” and “entitled,” with some calling for a boycott, for Nigerians to unfollow her. Little wonder she actively removed that video and maintained a low profile on the Naija front while she was in Egypt, and off social media, as can be seen in the graph above. Since returning to Russia in March 2023, she has reactivated her Naija posts both on YouTube and Instagram, consciously conveying positive messages. As she acknowledged in the interview, she is willing to return to Lagos if the opportunity arises again.

It can be deduced from the preceding that the Naija audience has the power to hold these forms of non-Nigerian creators accountable when they arrogate certain privileges to themselves. The fact that Belova was expressing her true feelings in a YouTube video, parts of which she also put up on her other channels, does not matter to this troop of followers who are quick to remind her of how un-Nigerian she is and that such comments are not welcome from her. Even though the main video has been removed, there is a similar one with a milder rendition of her Naija experience, where the comments are also milder (Juliewanderz 2021). Here is a sample of the kind of clapback she received for what I call “stepping out of line” with her Nigerian audiences. It is a comment taken from her YouTube channel, where she said some negative things about her stay in Nigeria:

Before you travel to a country, you have to be prepared financially. I can't decide to travel to Russia with no money and no family. Whatever have happened to you will surely be the same for me. You are even lucky to get an apartment. I would be sleeping without shelter in Russia. That is just a mistake you made. I remember you saying you came to Nigeria with just 10 dollar or something. Only the rich enjoys a visit to Nigeria. If you don't have money, I'm sorry but you will have a real hard time. Be strong!

Udogu vlogs aspects of her everyday life as a "Naija wife," which derives from the regular "our wife" or "communal wife" practice of many Nigerian ethnic groups. Specifically for the Igbo, her husband's ethnic group, every wife or child married or born into any community can be linguistically claimed to belong to everyone there. By performing these roles, she courts a form of acceptability of *nwanyị anụ́tara na mba* (a woman married from another land), which used to exist in traditional Igbo societies. Before colonization, there were two major political groups for women—*ụmụada* (daughters married outside the community) and *ndị alýtaradi/anụ́taradi* (women married into the community), while a third group of unmarried women is said to be "virtually silent, occasionally thought to be expendable, and often regarded as potential foreigners" (Nwachukwu-Agbada 2017, 88). What is significant with these groups is the understanding that women's ability to work collectively and network within these political groups "gave them immense protection and coverage" (Nzegwu 1995, 447). Though the power of these associations has diminished, respect and acceptance for women married from other communities still come through their active participation in familial and communal activities, and not just by taking care of their husbands and their nuclear households. Owing to urbanization, it is not possible to keep such close ties with family members, but I consider what Udogu does online as being like what used to exist, especially given how she interacts with comments on her posts. She is keeping tabs on her "husbands,"

330 in this case all Nigerians, because her nationality is different. By Igbo tradition, she is required to refer to every Nigerian she encounters, whether known to her or not, regardless of gender, as “my husband,” while she is “our wife.”

## Conclusion

Precisely speaking, given that the overall reception of these forms of enactment among Nigerian followers is positive, as evident in the increasing followership and receptive comments on the posts, it then follows that their work is well appreciated. Whether it is the consideration of “our wife” for Udogu, “our fellow Marlian” for Belova, or the African comedy inspiration that Malayil deploys, the general notion about these forms of non-African embodiment of Nigerianness is friendly and amenable. These productions are direct offshoots of Nigeria’s cultural relevance, specifically accruing from its pervasive cultural capital and soft power being disseminated globally through the internet. This begs the question—What is the use of soft power if it does not influence “outsiders,” not just to change their views about Nigeria, for instance, but also to copy and replicate its cultural productions? It is therefore the case that one aspect of Nigeria’s soft power is the tacit expectation that others emulate these productions, essentially “copy” them, while the “original” remains known, and not obliterated as used to be the case. The internet, of course, would not allow for conditions where original creators are completely effaced and replaced with those who have copied them.

It is my view in this chapter that this crop of online creators is “appreciative” of Nigerian pop culture and their followers are enthused by their appreciation. There is however the understanding that this “appreciation” plays out against the backdrop of post/colonial power relations and the derivative images most Nigerians have of Europeans. It is for this historical reality that when a white woman or an Indian man seems to appreciate aspects of Nigerian culture, it is still viewed as unexpected and

somewhat strange. I have discovered that some of these performers are better known within the Nigerian onlinesphere than among non-African social media users. Secondly, social media platforms do not dole out as much money for online posts as they did before, largely because the number of influencers and content creators has increased, and the need for financial inducement, at least for the older platforms, has diminished.

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# TRANSREGIONAL CULTURAL TRAVELLINGS

**POPULAR MUSIC**

**CULTURAL MOBILITY**

**PERFORMANCE**

**SOCIAL MEDIA**

**SOUTH KOREA**

[ 1 1 ]

# The Social Life of African Music in Korea

Ute Röschenthaler

African music and dance are recent phenomena in South Korea where they became known in the early 2000s, Afrobeats in the late 2010s. African diasporas played a minor role in this transfer. For America-oriented Korean audiences, African music first had to be validated in the United States before assuming popularity in Korea, partly through Korean projects and partly via the internet and social media. Based on ethnographic research in both physical and virtual spaces, this article explores the history of African music and dance in Korea and the novel genres and performances that emerged through experimentation and advancement. The article investigates the forms of cooperation between

340 **African and Korean artists, how they employ social media, and how they understand the innovative cultural products that are created through collaboration.**

This article examines the physical and virtual routes across which Nigerian and other African music arrived in Korea and how this music was received. My initial assumption was that African music came to Korea with Africans directly from Africa, but, as will be shown below, the process is more complex and partly goes back to Korean music and performance projects and to global media and events.

African music has been studied primarily in terms of its multiple influences on both sides of the Atlantic (see for example, Kubik 2017). Much less well known is its voyage across the Pacific and on digital social networks to Asia, in this case South Korea, condensing space and time (Harvey 1990; Oh 2023, 11). The cultural mobility of African music (from the continent) to Korea is a recent phenomenon, not older than two decades, and various African-Korean cooperations have emerged that gave rise to novel forms of music and transgress “geographical and cultural borders and stylistic boundaries” (Oh 2023, 8–9; Yoon 2017). Afrobeats is even younger in Korea, but its prominence has sparked great enthusiasm among young people and encouraged cultural entrepreneurship. It is important to note that for music to become popular, there must be an incentive through which an interest is created that validates it as attractive.

To understand how these cultural mobilities and related entrepreneurial activities emerged I researched the perceptions and activities of Africans and Koreans and the history of how African music arrived in Korea and assumed popularity. My findings are generated with connective ethnography as a method, which includes a multi-sited approach in which field sites span both digital and physical spaces, as well as the connection found

between them (Hine 2006; Kozinets 2010, 63; Snee et al. 2016). I combed scholarly literature, the internet, and social media for information about African music in Korea, and I have worked with Korean-speaking assistants to get access to Korean internet sources. The larger part of my findings is based on field research in Korea in August 2022, mainly in Seoul but also in Pyeongtaek and Busan. I also rely on extensive previous field research in various African countries.

This article begins with observations on the role and practice of Afrobeats in Seoul and the excitement it created among young people. In a next step it examines the history of West African music and dances in Korea. The final section analyses the influence of African music on Korean cultural production, how this exchange has been understood, and the contribution of African agency in this process. This is to show that African music did not come directly with the diaspora from Africa but first had to make a detour via the USA. The metaphors of the salad and soup bowls illustrate the extent to which elements of Korean and African music and dance can still be identified as such or can fuse to form new genres.

## **Dancing Afrobeats in Seoul**

Strolling along one of the big shopping streets in the Dongdaemun neighbourhood, near Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, I noticed the sound of music and a crowd that had formed a circle around some student performers. One of them held a microphone and entertained the audience when the dancers needed a break from performing to the music that emerged from two big speaker boxes. The audience was also invited to perform in the circle. I watched their K-pop cover dance for a while and suddenly I had to hold my breath: Burna Boy's "Last Last" (2022) emerged from the speakers and two female dancers performed what was clearly recognizable as Afrobeats moves (fig. 1). The moderator announced that the entire



[Fig. 1] Street dancers, performing to an Afrobeats song (Photo: Röschenthaler, Seoul, 2022).

performance would be placed on YouTube, the “lifelong learning platform” (Oh 2023, 10). Wondering where they had learned this, I found several options on the internet where djembe music and Afropop dance classes, including Afrobeats, were offered.

### **Afropop Dance Classes in Seoul**

Students interested in African music can choose between lessons in West African percussion, mainly djembe, Manding dance and contemporary Afropop dances. They are offered by professional African artists, African-Korean couples, and Korean performers. Among these offerings, Afropop classes are currently the most popular. I contacted several of the teachers on Instagram and email about whether I could watch their dance classes and have an interview. They were all very welcoming. Here I present my observations of an Afrobeats dance class by the Korean teacher Yoda (his artist name).

On a Thursday evening, I visited his dance class. Eleven young people—two men and nine women—had assembled in a basement studio in the Yeongdeungpo district of Seoul to learn how to dance Afrobeats. Each of the ninety-minute dance lessons



[Fig. 2] Yoda's Afropop dance class (Photo: Röschenthaler, Seoul, 2022).

begins with warm-up exercises, followed by the gradual mastering of a choreography that the teacher has developed to a Nigerian Afrobeats song. He shows the first three steps and movements, after which they all perform them together several times. The studio has one or two mirrored walls so that everybody can see their own movements and those of the teacher from the front and back from every position in the room so as to be able to monitor and adapt their performance. The next three steps are learned in the same way until they master the entire choreography for the song (fig. 2).

At the end, the teacher picks out groups of two or three who separately show their newly acquired performance while others record the performance on their mobile phones. The class ended with a performance by the teacher. As the pandemic was still unfolding, the students were not yet numerous again, and they all danced with masks (as they did during the entire pandemic period; private dance classes were not prohibited). The

344 performances were immediately mediatized and in no time visible on the students' various social media sites for their friends and followers.

The observations in the dance class illustrate the close intertwinement of offline and digital life, being physical—moving bodies—as much as virtual (Oh 2023, 2) and the students as media users and “creative subjects” (Yékú 2021, 164). Mobile phones as ubiquitously available multimedia devices allow for instantaneous digital media presence. As one Burkinabé businessman stated: “With smart phones everything goes faster. Koreans want things to be done fast.” Afropop dance classes are seen as a perfect sport to balance the long working hours in Korean companies and to mitigate stress. Only a few students seriously intend to learn dancing.

### **How the Korean Dance Teacher Discovered Afrobeats**

Yoda is Korea's first Afrobeats dancer. In our interview, he explains how he began to practice street dance, hip hop, house, and pop when he was twelve years old and still in high school. For a professional dancer, he says, skills in movement are more important than an academic degree. In 2013, a friend suggested he travel to New York to get to know more dances. His African-American hip hop teacher told him: “If you really want to learn street dance, you have to learn African dance and ballet.” He decided to follow the advice, and his first African dance was Manding from Guinea, then Sabar from Senegal, and other dances from Côte d'Ivoire: “So I tried, I took a class, and that's how I started with traditional African dance. And I had so much fun” (interview, August 2022). He trained in New York for about one year and decided that it might be his vocation to become a professional dancer.

Back in Korea, he began teaching house dance at first, and he searched the internet to find out whether there were other Koreans who practiced African dance. He found the Fonike dance

group and joined them in 2014. They were about ten dancers and musicians at the time. Shortly afterward, he decided to travel to Guinea, Senegal, and Côte d'Ivoire to learn further dances from the source, and to Paris where he studied French as an exchange student and took further dance classes. He started teaching African dance in Korea in 2015.

Around 2016, he discovered Afrobeats videos on YouTube: "I first saw lots of videos on YouTube and Instagram. At first, I practiced by myself watching videos. Then I traveled to New York, Paris, London, to learn more." In 2017, he then began offering his own Afrobeats classes in Seoul, which also included other popular African genres like coupé-decalé and amapiano. He rents his own studio for the classes and also teaches at a university college, and he occasionally organizes Afrobeats parties. He announces his classes on Instagram, where he also shares videos from his classes and of other activities such as street performances in other cities to which he has traveled.

When he started Afrobeats in 2016, no one in Korea knew what it was about, but meanwhile a growing number of people have become interested in it. Afrobeats has become his brand, as he is the first Afropop dancer in Korea. Meanwhile, four of his students have professionalized and offer their own Afropop classes. Like their teacher, they have traveled to African countries, Europe, and North America, episodes of which can be watched on their Instagram sites. Two of them established the dance company AfroKorea. "Infused with neoliberal capitalism" (Oh 2023, 2), they attract advertisement and use their social media appearance for "enselfment and identity formation" (Ugor 2021). Yoda himself says he only uses his internet appearances to advertise his classes and performance skills (fig. 3) and to interact with his students and receive invitations for performances.

With his activities, Yoda promotes Afrobeats among Koreans and makes a living from this profession. 80% of his income is from tuition fees and 20% from other performances, among which live



[Fig. 3] Yoda presenting himself on Instagram (Photo, courtesy Yoda).

performances are more frequent than film projects.<sup>1</sup> In 2019, he was invited to perform at a major Africa festival in New York.

### **The US Charts Made Afrobeats Popular in Korea**

Afrobeats became known in Korea not just because of Yoda offering dance classes. Increasing numbers of students flocked to his classes after Afrobeats had climbed the US music charts, the Billboard Hot 100. A Ghanaian DJ in Songtan told me that a decade earlier everyone wanted to listen to hip hop, but now it was Afrobeats:

1 This information is from an interview with a journalist available on <https://youtu.be/78Epoj3bRV8> (accessed August 23, 2022).

When I play Burna Boy with his song Last Last, everybody bounces. There is a thirst or hunger for that music .... The perception changes, people want more of it. Afrobeats is big here. Many people gravitate towards Afrobeats now. Afrobeats, that's the trend, even in the US. ... If you play that music, it does not matter [whether Africans, Koreans, or Americans], everybody will bounce there. ... everybody! (interview, August 2022)

Yoda is sure that Afrobeats became globally popular because the Nigerian singers collaborate a lot, mostly with American musicians, but there is also a Korean artist who works with a Nigerian musician in Paris (Black Doe); they perform Afrobeats with Korean lyrics.

The success in the USA from 2016 onwards validated African music and created excitement for it in Korea. Similar excitement can certainly also be found in other Asian countries. As mentioned earlier, I found a number of private advertisements on the internet with offers of African dance classes, many more than I had ever noticed in other Asian capitals. In Kuala Lumpur, Guangzhou, Ho Chi Min City, and Mumbai there were perhaps one or two, but in Korea were almost a dozen. I was curious to find out how interest in African performance began.

## **History of African Music and Dance in Korea**

In the 2000s, Korea began to position itself internationally with cultural production and to promote cultural diversity in the country, which had previously seen itself as primarily mono-ethnic. Africa played only a subordinate role in public opinion as a distant developing region.

## The 2002 World Cup in Korea (and Japan) and Its Aftermath

The interest in Africa among Koreans—and likewise of Korea among Africans in Africa—increased when in 2002 Korea (together with Japan) hosted the World Cup—a major event through which Koreans became aware of Africa's nations. Four African teams—Nigeria, Cameroon, Senegal, and South Africa—made it to the final 16 and Senegal to the quarter final when it won over France. These African successes were widely covered by the media. The English-speaking daily Korea Herald celebrated that “the tiny country” Senegal—it is three times larger than South Korea—won over their former colonizers (Lee 2002).

The attention that Africa received during the World Cup led to the creation of several Africa museums. The Ethiopian Museum already existed before the World Cup; it was constructed in honor of the Ethiopian soldiers who supported Korea during the Korean war (1950–1953). But the museum on Jeju Island, with three floors of traditional African art, was built in the early 2000s (Kim 2020, 151). It was constructed after the mosque in Djenné, the largest mud building in West Africa and a UNESCO Cultural Heritage site.

Right after the World Cup an African Village was created, complete with mud huts, in a town on the outskirts of Seoul. About twenty Ivorian musicians, dancers, cooks, and other craftspeople were invited to live in the village and perform for Koreans, a bit like in the (infamous) tradition of the human zoo, as the director thought that Koreans would want it authentic. The invited Ivorians soon started complaining about their working conditions and that they were never paid. Eventually, the project was publicly criticized for showing a primitive lifestyle (for a discussion on stereotyping Africa and multicultural discourse in Korea, see G.-S. Han 2007, 44). Some of these professional artists still live in Korea, and work in factories. But as they lack official documents, they cannot be employed as performers at concerts and festivals (interviews, Seoul, August 2022).

In 2006, a similar museum was created, the Africa Museum of Original Art in Pocheon on the outskirts of Seoul. In 2009, its director invited a group of Zimbabwean carvers to create sculptures and in 2012 ten professional artists arrived from Burkina Faso, made up of five dancers and five musicians, seven men and three women. At first the director had tried to bring performers from Kenya, but the Kenyan ambassador denied the project because the offer did not meet his expectations with regard to per diems, lodging, and return tickets. The Burkinabé had to perform traditional music and dance in fiber costumes several times a day and teach school classes at the museum during the remaining time. The director kept their passports and they had to work the whole day. They had to cook themselves but had time for this only in the evening. The money they were paid was not sufficient to buy their food and their accommodation was substandard. After a year, they had picked up the language and began complaining, and finally they managed to get a press conference, with countrywide media coverage (interviews, Seoul, 2022; Kim 2020, 151). The media spoke of keeping the Africans in slave-like conditions, and it became a scandal. The director was forced to pay and give them return tickets (J.-T. Ko 2021; see also Yoon 2020). Most of them left but two remained in Korea, married Korean women, and now work as professional freelance music and dance teachers and performers.

### **Manding Music Arrived via New York**

There is another important path through which Koreans discovered African music and dance. In the late 1990s, a Korean music professor—Kwak Yeon Kwen, now Chairman of RMA Rhythm and Music Association and founder of the Kumbaya percussion group—traveled to the US. There, he became acquainted with West African music, which had become known in North America and Europe following the tours of Les Ballets Africains, the Guinean state ballet (Cohen 2012). It seems that either migrants or former participants from the ballet remained in the US and



[Fig. 4] Portrait of the Kumbaya djembe group (Photo: Röschenthaler, Seoul 2022).

began to offer courses in djembe percussion and West African dance. The professor met them by chance, and took classes to learn djembe, and on his return brought the djembe to Korea (see also Polak 2010). That was coincidentally in the year of the World Cup.

In Seoul, he began to teach djembe at the university and in private classes. He did this for some time and then founded Kumbaya in 2003—the first percussion group for African music in Korea (fig. 4). To improve their skills, he bought videos—at that time there was no YouTube yet—and developed a musical repertoire. He told his students:

You need to wake up your percussion soul when playing the djembe ... djembe is great energy, and this ... was the driving force for Kumbaya's steady development. ... Koreans like percussion and something of the rhythm of African percussion resembles Korean music. (interview, August 2022)

In 2005, he invited Ivorian percussionists to Korea to perform with Kumbaya. He recalled: "I am thankful to them because they brought the real African style of music" into the group.

The professor was soon joined by African djembe players living in Japan. There were already West African musicians in Japan and one of them, Mamady Keita, a former member of the Les Ballet Africains (Singh 2008), created a djembe academy with branches worldwide, including Singapore, Taiwan, and Seoul. The professor admits that he became greatly inspired by Mamady Keita's work.

More percussion groups emerged and began to mix African and Korean music and instruments, and traditional and contemporary music. In 2002 there were five African percussion teams. One of the professor's students, Hwan-Jin Joong, became the CEO of Africa Music and Dance Institute (AMD) in Chongju. He learned French in Paris and traveled to Côte d'Ivoire to learn djembe. He created his own team, which is significantly different from Kumbaya. He regularly invites musicians from Côte d'Ivoire to play with him in Korea, and he has a project in which he experiments with African and Korean music. He also teaches at the university and gives private classes (interview, August 2022). A Korean musician with the artist name CD Kibo who learned djembe in Burkina Faso, created the group Djembecola, with six members, in 2018. They play Manding music with instruments from Burkina Faso mixed with electric bass, guitar and drum set sounds. They also teach students.

In 2020, an Ivorian djembe player, Ibrahim Konaté, founded two groups, Amene for djembe music and Tegere for modern African music (with instruments including drum set, guitar, electric bass, djembe, and sometimes saxophone). Born in Abidjan to Guinean parents, he worked for the artist Nyama Kante and her *koteba* theater group. Following her relocation to Japan, she invited him to play in her group. After working nine years in Japan, he moved to Korea in 2020 to join his wife, Moonhee Yang, a Korean dancer and leader of the Fonike dance group. He had met her in Abidjan

352 when he brought students from Japan for djembe workshops to the city. He also offers djembe classes in Seoul and teaches his students Ivorian songs. He recently released an album, which is on iTunes.

In short, Korean musicians brought West African djembe music from New York to Korea, where they were joined shortly afterward by Guinean percussionist Mamady Keita's Asian project. Through this validation, West African music gradually enthused Koreans, and after some time the percussionists were joined by dancers.

### **West African Dances in Korea**

A decade after the djembe arrived, Koreans were introduced to West African dances. Like the djembe and later Afrobeats, the dances also came via New York. It began with Moonhee Yang, who had studied contemporary dance in Seoul, and then went to New York to supplement her training. By chance, she discovered Guinean dance classes, got fascinated, and took courses. After leaving New York, she traveled to Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire to improve her skills. She also participated in the Seoul International Dance (SI) Festival and began to cooperate with Korean percussionist Namori. With two other Korean performers she founded the dance company Fonike and began teaching West African dance in Seoul, but returned every year to Africa. On one of these trips to Côte d'Ivoire, she met the Ivorian djembe musician mentioned above. Shortly thereafter, they married, and he moved to Korea.

One of the co-founders of Fonike is a professional jazz dancer and a trained psychologist. Eunjung Kwon Lee stumbled on the percussion group of Namori on her way to her jazz classes. In the building, people complained about noise from the basement, which they said was Apurikan, that is, African music. The jazz dancer went downstairs and immediately fell in love with the music and took all their classes. With the other dancers she

decided to create the group Fonike. She worked with Fonike for three years and at some point Yoda, who had returned from New York, joined them. At that time, it was the only group in Korea for African dance.

Finally, in 2013, she decided to have her own project and traveled to Senegal to the famous Ecole des Sables dance school. In 2015, she founded her dance company Tagg and began teaching West African dance. Due to some interviews on television, interest in her activities grew. In 2017, on her third trip to Senegal she met her future husband from Benin, Daniel Ahifon, they married and moved to Korea. The couple offers dance classes of both traditional African dances accompanied by live African percussion and contemporary or Afropop dance to popular songs streamed from YouTube. They offer two-month courses of eight 90-minute sessions. As with the classes of Yoda, most participants are young women, including a few Afro-Koreans and foreigners. Whenever they are invited, the couple performs at events and festivals. They can make a living from their art, as many street or urban dancers are interested in the Afropop genre of dance (interview, August 2022).

With time, several dance and percussion companies for West African music have emerged in Korea, including Fonike, Tagg, Koule Kan (founded by one of the Burkinabé dancers, Emmanuel Sanou), Amene, Tegere, Kumbaya, and AfroKorea in Seoul, Anyafo in Kwangju, Wontanara in Daegu, and AMD in Cheongju. Most of the performers are active in several of these groups and teach in various schools and perform at festivals to make a living. Other groups are non-professional and just gather to make music and dance for enjoyment. Most of these groups rent a studio for their classes, only CD Kibo has a dance school called Djembecola, meaning he owns a permanent studio. All these groups announce their classes and concerts on social media and have uploaded numerous videos on YouTube and Instagram. Fonike, Tagg, and Koule Kan all have their own YouTube channels. The numerous professionally made videos of the performances by Tagg and

354 Koule Kan are well-sorted according to various categories. Yoda, too, collaborates with these musicians and dancers in various projects in Seoul and other Korean cities.

### **The Validation of African Music**

First arrived African music, followed by dance. That is the case with traditional music and dance and with Afrobeats too, as Yoda put it: "Music is always first because when music is getting popular, dance is influenced by music. We always dance to a certain type of music." The dancer Daniel Ahifon stated that:

Social media make it easier for artists to promote their music, it helps them transfer their music to the whole world, and you can see in the social media that African music is becoming bigger and bigger, it's on the top now, so everyone wants to listen to African music. (interview, August 2022)

Korean dancers, African artists, and businesspeople with whom I spoke are convinced that Afrobeats became globally popular because Nigerian artists collaborated with American singers. They mentioned Davido cooperating with Chris Brown, Wizkid with Justin Bieber and Beyonce. Yoda explained: "They use a lot of Afro music in their soundtrack and we the dancers dance all their music and mix Afrostyle with their choreography."

Afrobeats obviously had to make the detour via the US. When asked why music did not come directly from Africa to Korea, an African businessman answered:

Koreans are Western oriented in their desire for amusement. Today they are more open because of social media and that provides an opportunity to enjoy other cultures.

The dancer Daniel Ahifon made a very similar statement:

Here in Korea, you know, what is popular, it is also popular in America, because Koreans are very much attached to American culture ... When something is going high over

there, they copy it from there; they also take it seriously. Because I think they have America as a model ... some people [in Korea], they want to know that if it is from America, they know already that it is interesting ... then they can love it.

Afrobeats became popular in Korea not because it is Nigerian but after it had reached the charts in the US. My observations and these statements reversed my initial assumption, mentioned earlier, that the African presence in Korea would raise interest in their cultural products. It illustrates a variation of the migration paradox (Nieswand 2011), that at home the African musicians were celebrated as artists whereas in the host country they were considered just migrants or exotic figures, like in the African Village and the African Museum of Original Art. In some of the cases mentioned, African music arrived with the teachers through travel, in others by social media and the US charts, which are also featured in the media. Through these channels African music became of interest and popular among a wider audience. When Yoda began with Afro dance in 2017, nobody knew what it was. This quickly changed when the first Nigerian song made it to the charts.

## **The African Community in Korea**

In addition to the limited number of musicians and dancers who came into the country through museum invitations and marriages, and represent most of the African artists, there is a considerable African community in South Korea. Africans came to Korea in larger numbers in the early 1990s after the neoliberal reforms when private importation became an option for traders in most African countries. Many of them ventured to Asian cities as commodities were cheaper in Asia than in Europe.

### **The Activities of Africans in Korea**

Most Africans in South Korea are students, factory workers, and businesspeople. As elsewhere, they come to the country to earn

356 money, make savings, and return to their home country to start businesses and families.

Currently, there are more than 20,000 Africans registered by the immigration service in Korea, but certainly their number is higher, as many work undocumented in Korean factories (see also Cho 2020). This is hard physical labor, twelve hours a day, six days a week. There is not much time left for leisure, only Saturday nights and Sunday.

Other Africans are businesspeople. They trade Korean used cars, spare auto parts, and mobile phones to Africa. Used cars are mostly sold in online auctions. Businesspeople rely on large networks of customers and attract customers on their Facebook pages and other professional sites.

A third group of Africans are students at the various Korean universities. Some have fellowships from the Korean government or from their home countries (see also Oppong-Yeboah, Owusu, and Kim 2018). A few other Africans have restaurants or barber shops, some are DJs, footballers (or hoping to get into a football team), teachers, or diplomatic employees, and some Africans and Afro-Koreans have become TV stars and models.

African communities exist in all Korean cities, the largest being in Seoul's Itaewon neighborhood, Pyeongtaek, and Osan. All nations are represented, but Nigerians are in the majority, followed by Ghanaians. African traders came to purchase commodities such as secondhand televisions, computers, clothing, and fabric to send back to Africa. A vibrant African community emerged in the so-called African street in Itaewon and in Haebangchon nearby, with markets, shops, restaurants, and clubs run by Africans (interview, Seoul 2022; S.M. Ko 2016).

In the 1990s, Koreans did not mingle with this vibrant African community. Itaewon was considered a shady and rough place, because it was situated next to the US military base established since the Korean war in the 1950s (Yonhap News 2011). Many of

the military were Afro-Americans, others were Africans who had joined it in the USA. They frequented the African restaurants and nightclubs because in many Korean places they were prohibited because of frequent drinking and fighting (Yang 2017).

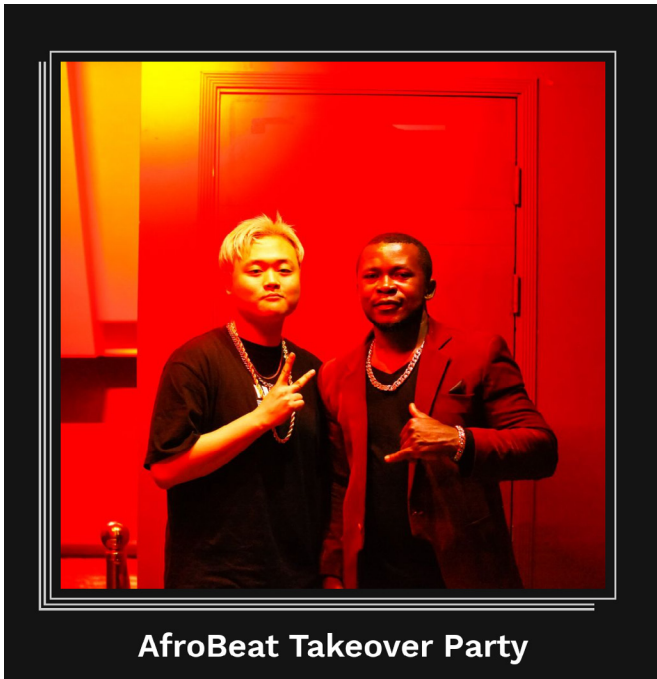
When China joined the WTO in 2001 and opened its doors to foreign traders, the African community decreased as many Africans moved to China due to more attractive prices. After the World Cup young Koreans became interested in spending time in Itaewon to socialize with foreigners and experience the neighborhood's cosmopolitan flair. In March 2011, there was the song "Itaewon Freedom" that was a hit on Facebook and YouTube and promised to offer the freedom that was not easily available in the "strictly regimented" Korean society (Yonhap News 2011).

In 2020, the military base was joined with the base in Pyeongtaek and more Africans left Itaewon to settle there. Pyeongtaek has a large African community and several African bars, clubs, and restaurants.

### **Afro Entertainment**

In 2022, several Africans recommended that I visit the Afro Fever club in the city of Songtan (near Pyeongtaek) as the most interesting meeting point in the area. The club, which plays Afrobeats, Dancehall, and Reggae, is run by AfroEntertainment, an enterprise that is owned by a Cameroonian cultural entrepreneur. During the week, he works as a product manager for Loreal Korea, and on weekends he organizes events for the African community, financed by his own private money. He explained: "Music is like therapy. I invested my savings to build up this club." He continued that Africans were longing for places where they can relax, spend the little free time they have, forget about the stress during the long working week in the factories and the demands from their families back home.

He came to Korea as a student in 2008, then worked for Korean companies, and in 2016 he began with his entertainment



[Fig. 5] Poster of Afrobeats Takeover Party, organised by AfroEntertainment (Photo: Courtesy AfroEntertainment).

business. He organized events on weekends, rented a club, and invited DJs to play African music. In 2019, he decided to have his own place, the Afro Fever club, but then came COVID, and so he had to pay the rent and wait until June or July 2022. He organizes club nights each Saturday. His objective is to create a place where the African community can comfortably listen to African music and develop a sense of belonging far away from home (fig. 5). He explains:

Africans, they will always connect to the music because it takes them back home. It makes them feel like I am

home, even though I am not home. So if it is Afrobeats, or Ndombolo, or Coupé Décalé, whatever music, people will connect to it. So, I feel, Africans will always respond [to music] because it's like a fake zone. (interview, August 2022)

For larger events, like on Nigerian Independence Day, the entrepreneur organizes parties in a larger club and invites artists from Nigeria and other countries. There are VIP tables with bottles of whiskey for several hundred dollars. He has no sponsors yet, he pays the rent, the artists, and the promotion, because “you know, there is not yet enough trust in us people, but with the events going well, there will be more trust.”

On Sundays, after a long club night, the entrepreneur organizes football matches for the African community, and he was involved in organizing the Korea-Africa Cup of Nations (KAFCON) 2022. On his Facebook page he explains: “our wish is for *KAFCON* to be an annual event to unite people from the motherland,” and another post states: “we hope to promote African talent in Korea through sport and polishing the image of Africa in Korea.” For one of the matches, AfroEntertainment cooperated with Africa Insight, a Korean civil society organization working for African-international cooperation and advocacy, which is also responsible for the Seoul Africa Festival. The city government of Seoul subsidized the event, where sixteen teams compete for a prestigious trophy, with a cash prize of 5 million won for the winning team (fig. 6).

To dress the African teams, he developed an apparel line, including T-shirts, pants with African flags, and hoodies with the print of AfroEntertainment: He writes on Facebook: “we produce design and do printing on all types of fabric clothing line production. Afro Entertainment is a movement” (November 18, 2020). At a certain time, he also hosted Afrobeats classes by a Nigerian professional dancer for which he invited “Nelson Miracle from Nigeria to help spread the Afrovibes in South Korea” (Facebook, November 20, 2019). He regularly invites special guests to his events, such as the Ghanaian artist Dani Kwadz, with



[Fig. 6] Poster of the KAFCON football match 2022 (Poster: courtesy AfroEntertainment).

whom he also appeared on Ariang TV in a music show. The events and activities of AfroEntertainment are announced on Facebook, Instagram, and on the AfroEntertainment website.

To attract Koreans to the club, the entrepreneur decided to invite Korean musicians as special guests and further enhance the acceptance of Africans in Korea. The first guest artist was Lewis Hyun-Jun Park (Facebook, April 15, 2019). Koreans visit the club, but as mentioned earlier, Afrobeats became popular among Koreans only after the Nigerian songs climbed the US music charts, the Billboard Hot 100. From that moment, Afrobeats was played everywhere, and Korean-owned clubs began inviting African DJs to run the party, but there have also been complaints that Africans were denied entry into these clubs because Koreans

wanted to remain among themselves (Khameneh and Lee 2022; Chitrakorn 2019). These elaborations demonstrate that Korea still lags behind in realizing its multicultural policy (Im 2020).

### **African and Afro-Korean Celebrities**

A few Africans and second-generation Afro-Koreans have become public figures and celebrities, and due to their roles in media and mainstream public performance function as proliferators of multicultural perspectives. There is Jun Min, actor and model, born in 2001 in Itaewon, the son of a Nigerian father and a Korean mother. He was still in school when an agent discovered him on his Instagram account and offered him a contract. He is the first Afro-Korean model and became the most popular model in the country presenting Korean fashion on the catwalk. In 2017, he was featured in *Time Magazine* as one of thirty most successful teens (Time Staff 2017).

Another celebrity is Jonathan Yiombi, the son of Congolese refugees, who became one of the most widely known YouTubers and TV celebrities in Korea. He grew up in Korea and speaks Korean fluently (Y.-H. Han 2022). In one of his shows, Jonathan features Afro-Korean projects, African artists, and entrepreneurs. He invited several of the African-Korean artist couples discussed earlier and intends to promote African cultural activities. In such shows, the artists perform, wear African dresses, and explain their history and meanings in round table conversations. In a show on Ariang TV he featured AfroEntertainment, Afrobeats was played, and the owner of AfroEntertainment and the Ghanaian singer Dani Kwadz presented their projects. And there is Sam Okyere, a Ghanaian media celebrity who also had a popular TV show, but at a certain point he complained about racism and was completely discarded.

In the past, before the 1990s, Afro-Koreans born from Afro-American military with Korean mothers were discriminated against and regularly prevented from becoming public figures

362 in many ways. Michael Fuhr (2016, 199–200) noted that in public opinion it was unthinkable for them as well as for European-looking people to become K-pop stars, as they were considered unfit to embody Korean values. There were exceptional cases of professional singers such as Kim In-Sun alias Insooni, a legendary female R&B and soul singer. She became successful in 1978 due to her strong voice and talent, with the female Disco Trio Hee Sisters, although she faced discrimination and was often banned from participating in TV shows. Still, in 2007 female hip-hop singer and rapper Yoon Mi-Rae, born Natasha Shanta Reid, talked on her album about her continuous experiences of being discriminated against. The Ivorian and Burkinabé performers who worked in the African museums in the early 2000s also testified to the complicated relationship of Koreans with foreigners. This complication is reflected in the observation that street performances with Korean singers and dancers are appreciated and get large audiences whereas Africans performing in the streets to African music, even together with Koreans, are considered a problem. People perceive it as noise and call the police.

## **Korean-African Activities and the Digital Life of African Performances**

In this final section I examine cultural transfers and African-Korean cooperations. The first part discusses the economic dimension of whether the transfer is seen as illegitimate appropriation or rather cultural promotion. The second part looks at the product and its social dimension. It examines the concept of cultural mixing and fusing and contrasts the idea of exclusive property with collective ownership.

### **Promotion or Theft?**

It is well known that K-pop has taken its inspiration not only from Afro-American Hip-Hop (Yang 2017) but also from Afrobeats and other African popular music. In 2021, for example, the Korean

Rapper and songwriter Penomeco released his new album *Organic*, including the songs “Bolo” and “Shy (eh o),” which are based on Afrobeats. The songs and video are on Spotify and YouTube. The song “Bolo” was widely appreciated in Korea; one commentator dubbed the artist the Korean Wizkid (YouTube August 29, 2021). Penomeco explains that he himself composed the songs and penned their lyrics, including phrases in Nigerian languages, making use of vintage instrumentation (PNMcorea 2021). Other examples of Korean albums based on African popular music are those the famous female singer Hyo-Yeon, especially her song “Desert,” and the title song of NTC Dream’s album “Taste” (Flavour, or Hot Sauce), which is a hip-hop song with Afrobeats.

The adoption of African music by Korean groups provoked a discussion in social media about the legitimacy of making money by employing or rather being inspired by parts of songs that were not created by the Korean artists themselves (see also Jeduah, in this volume). It raises the question of when pint legitimate inspiration ends, especially if the business of the previous artists is disturbed because the copiers can market the new song better. It can be a moral question with a legal dimension, raising the defining problem of what exactly is protected by copyright, since a work or parts of it are protected but the genre is not (in this case Afrobeats). Moreover, Afrobeats itself is based on music that experienced inspiration from Caribbean and other music that previously had traveled across several continents.

The debate was sparked by earlier complaints by African-Americans that Korean K-pop got big and made money by appropriating their hip-hop songs, while African-American musicians continued to live in poverty (Chitrakorn 2019; De Luna 2020), and that Koreans would ignore the socio-political context and the related existential troubles of how this music was created (Gardner 2019). Some claimed it was an ethical issue, others a matter of copyright. However, Africans, and some Koreans, with whom I spoke argued against this view. They welcomed the use

364 of African music by Koreans as a kind of promotion of African expertise and creativity, and as “beneficial for cultural production and mixing” (Siems 2019; see also Nwankwo, in this volume). But none of my interviewees knew anything about whether African musicians ever earned royalties when their songs were played in Korea.

This position is reflected in a feature by an online magazine on the song “Idol” from the album *Love Yourself* by BTS, who used South African music in this song:

As you can see, the influence is strong, from the Ankara [wax cloth] suits the boys wear throughout the video to the song featuring Afrobeats. There’s also the choreography, which features popular African dances such as the South African Gwara-Gwara and Nigerian Shaku Shaku. One of my favorite parts is the fiber-covered dancer invoking the Korean Lion dance and several types of African dances and costumes. I asked Twitter folks what dances they thought were represented, and from what they told me along with my own research, there are tons of dances and characters this one dancer embodies, such as the Senegalese mythical characters Kumpo and Kankourang and the Afro-Brazilian Maracatu dance. (Monique 2018)

This quote illustrates the various ideas that users see in a video based on African popular culture and shows the complexities of interpretation. Like when Yoda and other Korean choreographers make their own choreography on an Afrobeats song, they invest themselves with their bodies in this music and make their own dance, thus honoring the African artist.

There is also this fascinating relationship between the practices of mimesis shared by all people (Taussig 1993) and the feelings of theft or deprivation when cultural practices are imitated by others. The moral discussion and its realization in copyright intend to undermine cultural practices of imitation and copying with the result that a piece of music is supposed to belong

exclusively to its assumed originators, that is, either to one or another owner; it discourages non-monetized exchange, mixing, and fusion. Copyright is supposed to enhance commercial distribution of cultural products but in practice prevents their circulation. This is paradox in a world whose parallel life on internet and social media has become increasingly borderless (Ugor 2021, 19).

Such arguments are raised primarily by those who have invested time, energy, and financial resources in the creation of music, or otherwise, increasingly also by disempowered groups who raise their voices to make their situation known (Ugor 2021, 7). Copyright, however, only covers some aspects of cultural creativity, while others are complex and difficult to define (swagger, intonation, gestures, movement, fashion). Therefore, as Danielle Fosler-Lussier (2020, 11) argues, drawing boundaries around music does not work. Traces of other cultural productions exist in every music, which has constantly been enriched and fused by cultural borrowings. There would therefore be no point in trying to differentiate between cultural borrowings and illegitimate appropriation (Gardner 2019), rather it would be a matter of negotiating consent and resistance by the various stakeholders in the arena of popular culture (Hall 1981, 79).

Interestingly, most African and Korean performers and entrepreneurs who were interviewed during this study disfavored the appropriation discourse and advocated the free circulation of music. Only one businessman regretted that “we feel a little jealous about it” because K-pop artists make money with the music of Africans, and these would not have “anywhere to support their interests, an infrastructure that stands behind us.” They argued against a narrow view of cultural circulation. Rather, they saw Koreans taking inspiration from African music as a good thing and as a kind of unpaid promotion, like in one comment on Ghanaian YouTuber Kwadwo Sheldon’s Facebook page: “Really unbelievable, we Africa [*sic*] are really inspiring the world with Afro songs most especially Nigeria” (Sheldon 2021).

366 My interviewees had nothing against copying as it encouraged creativity. They had some respect for copyright but thought it did not have a big impact on their work. One Ghanaian DJ said: “We want to connect, there are Korean dance groups doing African dance and Koreans organizing Afrobeats events. It is beautiful, it can be digested. But only as long as people are getting paid.” In the same vein, a cultural entrepreneur stated:

I have no concern with people consuming our culture, you can consume it in whatever way you want. There are many people who are not okay (with it) who say: oh it’s cultural appropriation, and they are enjoying our music ... You [they] are stealing from these people [the Africans], and you don’t even like these people. The only challenge for us Africans is, you know, what can you do about it as an African. There are Koreans who are teaching Afrobeats dance. They make a living from it. But what are we Africans doing? We always give complaints. Why don’t you teach the dance? We have to take advantage of it. We have something we can sell. Why don’t we join with Koreans? Together it is more fun. (interview, August 2022)

For other African and Korean musicians, it is not a question of appropriating *per se* and that others make money from it, but of badly appropriating and distorting. This is a different argument than that of theft. The Ivorian djembe player, Ibrahim Konaté, explained:

As long as the quality of a [Korean] piece that is based on African models is high, it is appreciated and makes African music known, but not if the quality is low. ... This reflects negatively on the value of African music.

He remembered an example of a Korean djembe group who learned to play on their own and only from internet sources and could not master the djembe.

The concepts of cooperation and communication contrast with the discourse of property theft. My interviewees argued that it is not just about monetizing cultural products; it is about jointly developing and innovating performance. Concepts have been proposed to describe the products as transculturation, hybridization, creolization, globalization, which are mostly concepts that veil the agency of individuals at work, as if these processes were happening on their own.

Viewed from the perspective of the product, it can be made by mixing, fusing, blending, or bricolage, that is, by recombining elements in ever new combinations and variations from a corpus of existing pieces, similar to how Lévi-Strauss (1962) defined it when he analyzed American Indian mythology. This concept stands in contradiction to the idea of creating something completely new, an innovation that emerges from a genius inspiration. To use a food metaphor: in the bricolage concept, music and dance move in packages, and are recombined like in a salad bowl where the individual elements remain recognizable, while in the metaphor of the soup bowl, the product is fluid and its elements homogenize and become indistinguishable.

The Beninois dancer Daniel Ahifon explained that he performs African dance but not the original Congolese, Ivorian, or Senegalese dance. Unlike these, his is not traditional and unchangeable. It is African but at the same time it is something new, and it is based on his own choreography. Even from the beginning it was specifically Beninois because as children he watched TV and imitated what he saw:

I dance Africa, my style is from all over Africa, due to my experience of life because all this music and dance from all over, much of it was born in front of me. And then I had experiences of that, in the street, in the club, we were learning from TV since I was a child ... You fuse them [the

dances] to one dance, that is my expression actually, you can call it Afropop, it is something new. (interview, August 2022)

What emerges can be viewed from the perspective of property or of product, but also from the perspective of communication. To the question of whether it is appropriation, mixing, or innovation, the Korean percussionist Hwan-Jin Joong answered that this is not decisive, it is rather “communication from country to country, [because] seen from the cultural point of view, what happens here is more on an equal footage.” Like some of the African artists, he thinks there is a good use of African music and a complicated one, that is, where the new creation does not correspond to the performance that was imitated. As an example, he cited the song “Rica Rica” (2022) by the Korean group Nature, who imitated an Ivorian dance called Sawile that they saw in television. In the Sawile, a masked dancer performs in such a way that only his feet are moving very fast but not his body. In the Korean percussionist’s opinion, Nature did not grasp the idea very well, meaning that something must inspire the artist to get the idea of it and make it spark over to the audience, or as Thierry Paquet put it in the context of urban space: “s’appropriier un espace,” which in philosophy—in contrast to sociology—does not mean taking possession of but *devenir autre* (*sich anverwandeln*, becoming [the] other) by getting in contact with it (Paquet 2020, 47). This is a different understanding than that of copyright, which is an economic system by which to monetize cultural products.

Some of these artists conceptualize local African dances and music as different from contemporary genres, but most of them further mix and fuse them. The Burkinabé percussionist Amidou Diabaté suggested calling this music “*tradi-moderne*” (in French), because it is neither African, Korean, traditional, nor modern. They make this music not so much because they are aware that all music is always fused, consisting of various borrowed elements, but because they enjoy creating something novel by combining Korean and African styles of music and dance. As Eunjung Kwon Lee explained, “it is new, we call it Afro-Korean dance,” or

“Afro-Fusion dance ... It is not the Manding you find in Africa; it is influenced by American ballet.” There is the choreography, the movement on the floor and by the body in the space, and there is the music which instigates these movements. The music is based on a song created by an African artist, but the choreography is made by the dancer or her partner, the Korean dancer. She continues:

I use some of the steps I know from West Africa, then I develop it, I reconstruct the steps and make them a little different from the original steps, and I combine them, sometimes I make them shorter, faster, I break down and put the segments into another new step. (interview, August 2022)

The choreography is not written down, and copyrighting choreography is something newly coming up in Korea. The choreography is repeatable; students are trained to repeat it.

In some projects the different styles are intended to remain recognizable, like in AMD’s project where there are pieces in which the main element is the Korean traditional music but with African instruments, or African music with Korean instruments. In other cooperation projects the various kinds of music fuse together to form something novel, for example, when a choreography is developed by a Korean artist to a song by an African musician. In some pieces like *Bolo* by Penomeco the movement is hardly recognizable as African, whereas the audience clearly recognizes the inspiration from African dance in the Yoda’s performances, as is reflected in the comments on his dance on YouTube. The overwhelming majority of Africans are very positive about his performance, writing for instance “you killed it,” meaning, his performance perfectly matches the music.

## Conclusion

This article set out to examine the routes by which African music arrived in South Korea and how it was embraced by Koreans. It began with the present-day excitement about Afrobeats among young people in Korea. The article then investigated the history of African percussion and dance, which actually did not become prominent in Korea through the presence of Africans who were in the country in greater numbers from the 1990s onwards. The surprising finding was that music and dance, Afrobeats included, all made the detour and needed to be validated via the USA to become appreciated in Korea.

These findings have shown that an initial excitement and enthusiasm for a particular music first has to be created. In Korea, this excitement for new cultural products has historical roots in a perceived cultural hierarchy, which implies that American cultural products are more interesting than others. African music was appreciated not because it was produced in Africa but because of its introduction via the US. Subsequently Koreans traveled to Africa to perfect their skills at the “authentic” source. Afrobeats only became popular following its success on the US charts. In a next step, African musicians in Korea were able to make their agency visible, to work in schools and perform at festivals and carry a positive image of African culture into Korean society.

Even though it was Koreans who created interest in African music in Korea, African agency becomes increasingly visible.

First, having faced discrimination, those African entrepreneurs, musicians, and dancers who have settled in Korea intend to rebrand the image of Africa. They teach in schools and work in various social projects, supported by the government, travel the country to various cities to teach, and perform on stage and at festivals. With these performances and teachings, they have the objective of making African music and dance more widely known in Korea, especially to school children. They intend to

create an awareness of cultural expertise and contribute to an image of Africa that is contemporary, positive, and appreciated by audiences.

Second, they are occasionally present in the public media and on various social networks where they present and promote their activities, and through sharing they reach potentially large numbers of followers. The number of these performers is not high, but with their pertinent public appearances as proliferators they are having an impact over time.

Third, they are active in cultural entrepreneurship: running club nights, DJing, organizing sports events, and offering opportunities for Africans and Koreans to interact and exchange. Such entrepreneurship takes place both in physical space and social media. Mobile phones as multimedia devices—which for many African entrepreneurs represent their mobile offices—enable the close intertwinement of daily experience and their second life on social media, commenting and exchanging with users and followers. African and Korean cultural entrepreneurs in Korea use social media to different extents: some only announce the timeline of their activities, others also promote their skills through music videos, explaining the background to their activities, creating an archive of events and related materials, and still others become influencers, such as some of Yoda's students who attract followers and advertisement and make it a day-filling activity.

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**CULTURAL APPROPRIATION**

**TIKTOK**

**YOUTUBE**

**DIGITAL METHODS**

[ 1 2 ]

# **Korean Afrobeats: Controversies About Appropriation vs. Appreciation**

**Bakar Abdul-Rashid Jeduah**

**The emergence of Afrobeats as a contender in the global music scene has been exemplified by Afrobeats artists: receiving coveted music awards such as the Grammys; selling out shows in prestigious spaces such as the O2 arena in London and Madison Square Garden in New York City; signing on to global labels such as RCA and Atlantic records; and serving as models and muses for global fashion brands. As Afrobeats continues to gain popularity in the international music space, due in part to the globalizing features mentioned but also as a result of the practices of content creators and users on social media platforms, it is moving beyond international consumption to international creation.**

378 **Earlier, making Afrobeats music was predominantly the practice of Nigerians, and Africans in general, both at home and in the diaspora, but it is currently also being produced by people from other ethnicities. Since it is a cultural phenomenon that originated among Black Africans on the continent, this has generated debates about cultural appropriation. Taking the Afrobeats inspired song “Bolo,” by Korean singer and rapper Penomeco, as a case study, and analyzing TikTok videos and YouTube comments on said song, this paper interrogates the cultural appropriation debate with regards to Afrobeats by centering the voices of Africans in the discussion. This study concludes that although the performance of Afrobeats by people from other ethnicities and groups draws criticism, the transcultural nature of Afrobeats coupled with its potential for reshaping global power dynamics in the area of music is of importance to social media users of African origin.**

In the last couple of years Afrobeats, the contemporary West African music form, has been steadily gaining popularity across the world. It has developed a large fanbase that includes Africans and non-Africans alike. This global popularity has led to the emergence of African popstar celebrities who are being nominated for and winning Grammy awards, selling out and performing in prestigious spaces such as London’s O2 Arena, New York’s Madison Square Garden, and the Coachella and

Glastonbury festivals, as well as being the faces for global fashion brands. The globalization of Afrobeats has further seen collaborations between these artists and some of the biggest names in contemporary pop music. Some of these collaborations have been attempts to leverage the global fanbase of the pop stars by pushing Afrobeats songs further into the mainstream through remixes. These efforts have included Wizkid and Tems's collaboration with Justin Bieber on "Essence," Fireboy with Ed Sheeran on "Peru," Rema with Selena Gomez on "Calm Down," and Oxlade with Camilla Cabello on "KuLoSa." Other collaborations have been on completely new songs; Chris Brown has been dominant in this space.

As Afrobeats continues to become popular in the international music space, due in part to the globalizing features mentioned, but also as a result of the practices of content creators and users of social media platforms, it is moving beyond international consumption to international creation. It is inspiring transnational content creation on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube (see also Simmert in this volume). Through TikTok practices, for example, Afrobeats songs are gaining popularity on and off the platform. They are achieving massive listenership via the streaming platforms because of their popularity on social media. This increase in listenership has put Afrobeats songs on many Billboard lists of popular songs and created a global fanbase for the genre.

Until recently, Afrobeats music production was the practice of Nigerians, and Africans in general, both home and in the diaspora. Recently, however, people from different ethnic backgrounds have begun producing Afrobeats influenced music as well. As a music form, Afrobeats has been eclectic right from the start and continues to be so. It draws on the popular music genres that preceded it, such as Fela's Afrobeat, Highlife, and Juju. It also samples elements from other music forms around the world and blends these together with elements of African music. This is evident in the name preferred by some of the artists:

**380** Afro-fusion. Afrobeats is a transcultural phenomenon (Ortiz 1940; Lull 2000); it combines musical elements that have moved through time and space and have been reshaped, culminating in the current form. With Korean and European artists taking up Afrobeats, the genre's transculturation has reached yet another level. In August 2021 Penomeco, a South Korean rapper and singer, released two Afrobeats influenced songs "Shy (eh o)" and "Bolo," which he claimed were inspired by his love for Nigerian music. The more popular of the two songs, "Bolo," became the subject of debate about Koreans taking up Afrobeats. This discourse ensued in the comments section of his YouTube video for the song, as well as in TikTok content. Since Afrobeats is a cultural phenomenon that originated among Black Africans on the continent, the conversations centred around cultural appropriation.

Using digital methods and examining the case study of the Korean musician Penomeco's song Bolo, this paper explores the cultural appropriation discourse on social media about Koreans taking up Afrobeats. Drawing on an analysis of TikTok videos and YouTube comments, this paper seeks to understand how meaning is derived from a Korean Afrobeats song within those spaces. It also seeks to identify the dominant voices present in the discussions, as well as how this discourse is shaped.

## **From Cultural Appropriation to Transculturation**

Hyperconnectivity, which is a feature of the global world, means that consumption of ethnic culture is no longer limited to a specific ethnicity (Huntington 1993; Kymlicka 1991). Hyperconnectivity, which refers to the rapidly increasing connection of people to each other, and to digital content, is largely supported by the widespread use of social media and smartphones. It has changed the nature of social relationships by transforming cultural practices and products heavily mediated by the digital. Space and time have therefore been collapsed, and this has

consequences for how one contextualizes the self (Brubaker 2020) and the perpetuation of neoliberal modernity (Hoskins and Tulloch 2016), as well as reshaping the way we see, think, and feel (Brubaker 2022). This raises the need to re-examine the way cultural appropriation is theorized. Cultural appropriation is conceptualized as occurring within relationships of groups of people, especially through the arts. It has been conceptualized as taking elements from another culture, although merely coming into contact with other cultural practices would not be considered cultural appropriation (Rogers 2006). It includes using artistic styles that are specific to a cultural group, as well as representing the cultural experiences and practices in both cases by non-members (Matthes 2016). Discussions about cultural appropriation are often shaped by the power relations that exist among the groups in question (Van Leeuwen 2015). They also shape and are shaped by social, economic, and political factors. According to Ziff and Rao (1997) cultural appropriation between a dominant and a subordinate group raises some concerns. The first concern is that when taking elements out of a culture leads to distortion, it can also lead to the degradation of said culture. This is in reference to traditional cultural practices as opposed to popular practices associated with a group. The second concern refers to the fact that some practices can only be understood within the cultures in which they are practiced. This concern is related to preserving the cultures of marginalized groups. The third concern takes an economic form; the appropriation of another culture brings financial gain to the wrong people. White musicians are often accused of achieving success by imitating their Black counterparts who get little or no recognition for their work (Zimmerman 2014). Cultural appropriation raises moral questions, especially when people external to the membership of the group benefit from the use of the elements and practices in question. This is often exemplified by the use of elements and practices of indigenous groups in mainstream popular cultural practices by members external to the group, such as the use of Navajo design elements in fashion (Matthes 2016). These views of

**382** culture and cultural appropriation, however, have been subject to criticism by other scholars, especially in the context of a global and hyperconnected world. Rogers (2006) argues that the cultural appropriation argument tends to present an essentialist view of culture. He explains that the arguments presented in the conceptualization of cultural appropriation as constituting cultural exploitation “perpetuates the notion of culture as singular, clearly bounded and autonomous” (ibid., 489). Culture is not static; it is dynamic, and it evolves when it comes into contact with other cultural practices. Although some aspects of a group’s cultural practices might remain the same, for example religious rituals, other parts like music do change over time. Music practices, for instance, constantly incorporate elements from others when different ethnicities interact. Essentialism also extends to group membership, wherein some notions of boundaries are created to distinguish between members and non-members, perpetuating the idea that cultural groups are homogenous entities (Matthes 2016). The conceptualization of cultural appropriation based on dominant-subordinate group relations is criticized for regarding the culture of subordinate groups as pure and unchanging while that of dominant groups is seen as dynamic (Clifford 1988; Torgovnick 1997). This is a particularly problematic view of societies, with some seen as capable of change and development and others not. Another criticism of the cultural appropriation argument is directed at the notion that cultural appropriation commodifies the cultures of subordinate groups and generates economic benefits for others. The argument against this assertion is that the people for whom certain cultural practices are native, express agency in this regard; they “sell,” for lack of a better word, elements of their culture to the outside world and hence participate in commodifying it (Rogers 2006). A concept that puts the cultural appropriation discussion into perspective is transculturation. According to Lull (2000, 242), it is “a process whereby cultural forms literally move through time and space where they interact with other cultural forms and settings, influence each other, produce new forms, and change the cultural

settings.” He conceptualizes transculturation as creation of hybrid forms of culture through contact with other forms. He maintains that the culture that becomes hybridized is not a pure form to start with; this is because, as mentioned earlier, cultural forms are never pure. Hybridization of culture occurs when the elements of a foreign culture that a culture comes into contact with are localized. Transculturation exists within a globalized and transnational space. Rogers (2006) explains that transculturation frames cultural appropriation, beyond the discussion of exploitation, by presenting a non-essentialist view of culture as a hybrid form. He points out, however, that this does not do away with the argument of some dominant groups exploiting the culture of subordinate groups, it only introduces some nuance into the discussion.

Globalization complicates discussions of popular culture as far as contemporary popular music is concerned. Music genres from one end of the world draw a global audience because of the internet. K-pop, for example, has cultivated a fanbase that extends well beyond South Korea and the Korean diaspora. However, the music genre itself, although originating from Korea, incorporates other music genres such as hip hop and reggaeton, genres originating from African Americans and Latin Americans respectively. Contemporary popular music development on the African continent has equally been heavily influenced by other music genres such as hip hop, reggae, and R&B, all genres which developed outside the continent (Krings and Simmert 2020). Afrobeats itself is described as one of the most eclectic genres of music (Dasent 2023). Given the eclectic nature of Afrobeats as a music form, the understanding of the academic conceptualization of cultural appropriation as a socio-political phenomenon that occurs between a dominant and a subordinate group, as well as the problematization of this conceptualization by proponents of transculturation, presents a lens through which to view the debate that is the concern of this paper.

## Methodology

To carry out this study, digital methods for qualitative research were used, combining qualitative analysis of videos and comments. Digital methods as a research method are a broad approach that deals with digital data by focusing on the medium. The medium, according to Rogers (2009), refers to the digital space under study; its specific features organize the social occurrences that take place in it, and this in turn influences the kind of information that is generated for research purposes. In other words, the affordances of each digital platform, coupled with the platform specific engagement of its users, determines the type of data that is generated thereon and, in effect, what kinds of studies can be conducted on the platform. In digital methods, tools that are native to the medium are employed in carrying out the study. “Native” here refers to tools “written for a particular processor or operating system, rather than simulated or emulated” (Rogers 2015, 9). Whereas other approaches, such as digital ethnography, adopt the methods used in offline research to online spaces (Simmert, in this volume), digital methods rely on tools developed specifically for studying digital mediums. Inspired by the cross-platform approach to conducting research on social media—an approach that allows the researcher to observe how a phenomenon occurs on different platforms, thus providing more nuanced findings (Rogers 2017)—the social media platforms TikTok and YouTube were both studied to this effect. In cross-platform studies, each platform is explored according to the uniqueness it offers in terms of its architecture and use (Rogers 2017). For instance, whereas both TikTok and YouTube are video streaming platforms, TikTok users often express their points of view through short-form videos with no substantial debate or discussions going on in the comment sections. On the other hand, YouTube comments are known to be spaces where discussions ensue, with multiple positions being expressed and challenged. To understand the discussions surrounding Korean Afrobeats, it was therefore appropriate to combine TikTok videos

with YouTube comments to get a more nuanced understanding of the debate. 385

On TikTok Zeeschuimer was used in collecting a corpus of videos for analysis. Zeeschuimer is a browser extension, developed for the Digital Methods Initiative (DMI) at the University of Amsterdam, which is a tool created for researchers to monitor and collect data from a social media site as one browses it (Peeters 2022). Zeeschuimer acts as a tool that extracts metadata from the content one sees on the social media site through one's own account. A multi-step approach was used in arriving at the final corpus of videos for analysis. First, using the search term "Afrobeats Korea," a corpus of videos was retrieved. After conducting a content analysis, the results did not provide substantial findings. This step, however, revealed the most used Korean Afrobeats songs in content creation on TikTok. These songs were "Bolo" by Penomeco, "Pye Life" by Lil Cherry, "Pick up the phone" by Kohway, and "Tinnitus" by Tomorrow X Together. From this point, the most popular song, "Bolo" by Penomeco, was chosen for the next step. "Bolo" is an Afrobeats inspired song by Korean singer and rapper Penomeco. It features actor, singer, rapper, and producer YDG. The song is one of two Afrobeats songs recorded by Penomeco in 2021. Penomeco mentioned in an interview that he was inspired by Nigerian Afrobeats music, especially the music of Nigerian Afrobeats musician Burna Boy. The song, which is almost completely in Korean, contains a few phrases in English and Pidgin English. The title "Bolo" is Igbo slang for fool. The song also features an Igbo word *Omalicha*, which means beautiful one.

A new corpus of videos and their metadata was collected from TikTok, this time by following the "Bolo" sound on the platform. Instead of using a search term wherein only videos that contain the hashtag in their captions are returned, in this step only videos that use the song "Bolo" in their videos were returned. The videos were further reduced to only the ones that expressed an opinion about Koreans performing Afrobeats; this is because sounds on TikTok are used for a variety of content, some not of any

386 relevance to this study. With the help of 4CAT, a tool also from DMI that captures and analyzes data from social media (Peeters and Hagen 2022), the extraction from TikTok was converted to a spreadsheet that was easier to work with. Among other elements, this spreadsheet contained metadata such as the account name of the TikTok user, the caption of each specific post, the number of likes, shares, and comments on the post, and the URL of the post. This final corpus was then analyzed using content analysis.

The third step was to complement the TikTok data with comments from YouTube. This was done through YouTube data tools (Rieder 2015). These are a collection of tools that enable the extraction of data from YouTube via its API. Using the *video comments* module of the tools, all the comments along with metadata from the comment section of the “Bolo” video on YouTube were collected for analysis. These comments were analyzed using the thematic analysis approach, which allows the researcher to focus on the collective meaning that is expressed in text or speeches (Braun and Clarke 2012). The comments were thus coded and examined for themes and patterns of meaning. Together, the results from both platforms were used to understand the discourse on Korean Afrobeats.

## Findings

The analysis of TikTok videos and YouTube contents showed similar sentiments, although expressed in different ways. Typical of TikTok practices, the opinions were presented with the combination of stickers, moving images, and sound. Stickers are superimposed on TikTok videos, they can take the form of emojis, images, and texts. In this case, the stickers were text that expressed the producers’ points of view. These texts were superimposed onto moving images that took the form of either the music video from the “Bolo” song, or unrelated videos from Korean popular culture. The final component was the song itself, which accompanied the text and the images. Very prominent in

the discourse and expression of sentiment on both platforms was the issue of cultural appropriation. Participants in this discourse, beyond their sentiments about the song, debated the appropriateness of Korean musicians making their own Afrobeats music. On YouTube, these discussions took place in the form of mini conversations within the larger comment space. These conversations, however, were repetitive, in the sense that the arguments remained the same even as the participants changed. Participants took different sides of the argument and emphasized their position by using capital letters and foul language. TikTok posts, on the other hand, expressed the users' opinion without responding specifically to others. They did however allude to an ongoing debate to which their posts were contributing.

### **Meaning of Cultural Appropriation**

Throughout the discourse, participants expressed their understanding of cultural appropriation; a meaning which underlined either their criticism or their appreciation of Korean Afrobeats.

Ok I obviously don't speak for everyone, this is literally just my opinion and you're free to disagree, but to me this doesn't feel at all like appropriation. This feels like they put genuine research and love into it. If anything, to me, this song is an example of \*appreciation\*. They know where the kind of music they do comes from, and this song shows it more than anything else. (YouTube)

I'm gonna say this one time THIS IS NOT CULTURAL APPROPRIATION. He said he was inspired by burna boy and actually did some research bout the language and the culture. So if you want to gatekeep afrobeats just say that. (TikTok)

Fire, fire, fire!!! Totally nail it!! Cultural appreciation this is what I call artists capable to take inspiration from different cultures. (YouTube)

**388** The quotes above exemplify the understanding of cultural appropriation by which participants judged Penomeco's "Bolo." Emphasis was placed on terms such as research and inspiration. Participants understood cultural appropriation as taking or using elements of another's culture without first trying to understand it. Thus, to ethically borrow from another culture, one had to research and understand it. In this case, for Penomeco to have appreciated and not appropriated Afrobeats culturally, he ought to have understood where it was coming from and in what context it is used. For the participants, cultural appropriation also involved not giving credit to the source of inspiration for the cultural element that had been borrowed. Thus, since Penomeco was upfront with the fact that his song was influenced by Afrobeats, specifically Burna Boy's music, a lot of the participants considered his song an appreciation of Afrobeats.

Cultural appropriation has also been conceptualized as a western phenomenon. It has been a recurring sentiment that cultural appropriation as a concept was something that was prevalent in western societies, especially in the USA, where a significant percentage of the population is African American. The nature of race relations in USA, coupled with its very multicultural makeup, makes discussions of cultural appropriation more prevalent in that country. Although there was an absence of a significant number of African Americans and people from the west in the videos and comments analyzed, these groups were still very much referenced. The quotes below sum up these sentiments.

How many black Americans are going to say he's appropriating their culture? (TikTok)

If you're a black American please shuuuuut up about anything that says this is cultural appropriation bcuz you don't even know the first thing about being an African! (TikTok)

it may surprise the west but we Africans don't give a damn about how upset y'all are. Cultural appropriation stops in the west where it started. (YouTube)

White people really think they are being white knights for speaking against this when people who owns this culture are vibing. (YouTube)

Participants alluded to African Americans as a group without very close ties to the African continent but with a high investment in how non-Africans participate in African culture. White people were equally positioned negatively as “white saviors”; assuming the responsibility of protecting the African cultural form from use by non-Africans, although it was not in their place to do so.

### **Dominant Voices**

As mentioned before, the discussions did not include a large number of western voices. They were instead dominated by Black Africans and Nigerians. They identified themselves as such in their submissions. As shown in the quotes below, participants would often start their comments by stating their ethnicity before offering their opinion. They identified as African, Nigerian, and Ghanaian among others. Since “Bolo” has one or two Igbo words in its lyrics, some participants went as far as to mention that they were Igbo.

Idk why y'all so stressed in these comments, as an African I feel appreciated cuz they used afrobeat lol and this song is so fucking good so peace and love and stop fighting. (YouTube)

As a Nigerian (capital of Afrobeat) I must say he did this so beautifully. (YouTube)

It is interesting to note that these ethnic identities were used as a yardstick for having something important to say. As if their identity as African or Nigerian made their perspectives on this music that originated from Africa/Nigeria the ones that mattered most.

390 Apart from being African, the dominant voices in the conversation were also those of fans of Korean popular culture. They used pictures of Korean actors and musicians as profile photos on TikTok, and some account handles referred to these popular culture stars. At first glance, one might think the account holder was Korean, however a visit to the account, and sometimes the comment itself, revealed that the user was African. They referenced their knowledge of the Korean drama and the K-pop scene.

### **Arguments for Appropriation**

Beyond researching and giving credit for inspiration, critics of Korean Afrobeats weighed the ethics involved, given race relations in Korea. Some arguments made against Koreans producing Afrobeats music were rooted in the treatment of Black people in Korea, as well as their portrayal in Korean popular culture. Participants were worried about the ethical implications of Koreans benefitting from performing Afrobeats while Korean society was still very much discriminatory against Black people, especially Africans.

As an igbo this highly disturbs me Pls stick with your k pop and stay out of my language Because your ppl are r@cist af Tufiakwa. (YouTube)

I'm not west African but I'm referring to this from the perspective of the black experience. I and many others have witnessed the mass cultural appropriation discrimination, black face, use of the n word and mocking that has occurred from some Korean artists. While yes he has credited the culture and his inspiration and does it very well, it unsettling to me that he can profit off an inherently black sound in a place where being black is often frowned upon and mocked constantly. (TikTok)

This was illustrated by commenters complaining about how negatively Black people were portrayed in Korean drama. In

the previous section, it was established that while most of the participants were African, they were also fans of Korean popular culture. They were therefore knowledgeable about the Korean popular culture landscape, including cultural narratives and stereotypes that are propagated.

Please stop portraying Africans as violence and criminals in K-drama. You're gonna loose Africa fans, if that continues. We consume a lot of your movies. (YouTube)

They were equally aware of the discourse within the Korean popular cultural space about the participation of people of other ethnicities in Korean popular music, popularly known as K-pop. One such debate concerned the first black K-pop artist in South Korea. Fatou, the Belgian-Senegalese member of the K-pop band Blackswan, moved to South Korea because of her love for K-pop, and became the first black "idol," as band members of K-pop groups are commonly called (cf. Adler in this volume). This sparked a lot of controversy in Korea, including negative criticism on the one hand and discussions about Korean society's treatment of Black people on the other. Participants in the discussions were therefore questioning how legitimate it is for Koreans to produce Afrobeats music when their society is not very receptive to an African K-pop idol.

### **Beyond Cultural Appropriation**

A significant number of TikTokers and YouTube commenters were in favour of Koreans, or anyone else participating in the production of Afrobeats music. Several arguments were made against the cultural appropriation perspective. One such argument was against the idea of gatekeeping. The idea was that any attempt to oppose this participation was an attempt to control and limit who can and cannot make Afrobeats music. Music, they claimed, should be free for everyone to partake in, and just as African musicians localized music forms from other parts of the world, so could anyone perform Afrobeats. Afrobeats

392 as a musical form is an umbrella term that captures a variety of blended and syncretized beats. These beats blend traditional African rhythms with imported music forms from all over the world. Afrobeats therefore includes versions such as Afro-soul, Afro-house, Afro-pop, and Afro-dancehall, among others. Commenters also pointed out that Afrobeats music also incorporates words, terminologies, and references from other cultures. The argument was therefore that as an eclectic music form, Afrobeats production could not be restricted to only Africans, and that it was enough that non-Africans who made this music were upfront about their inspiration for the music.

The argument for music to be open to participation from all ethnicities was closely tied to the *Afrobeats to the world* agenda. The opinion was that performance of Afrobeats by people from different parts of the world, and from different ethnicities, was a step towards popularizing Afrobeats globally. The global popularity of Afrobeats would make Africans and African popular music relevant in the global popular culture scene. Just as K-pop has established Korea and Koreans as a popular music force globally, Afrobeats could achieve the same feat if non-Africans were encouraged to partake in its production. Consequently, “Bolo” generated excitement that in Korea people were not only listening to African music, but they were also inspired by it musically. This is because Asia has not historically had any impact from African popular culture. Thus, this was considered a giant step towards taking Afrobeats to the world.

### **Ambivalence**

A running theme from the videos and comments analyzed was ambivalence. While some people took a stance on whether Koreans performing Afrobeats was cultural appropriation or appreciation, some others were caught in the middle.

I'M TRYING TO SAY THIS SONG SUCKS BUT I JUST CANT ITS LITERALLY IMPOSSIBLE. (TikTok)

I have mixed opinions on this song. One part of me deems this cultural appropriation, but the other part make wanna dance like hell when this comes on. Can y'all help me?'  
(YouTube)

As evidenced by the quotes, on the one hand they thought the song was good; in some cases, they could not stop listening or dancing to it. On the other hand they were unsure how to react to a Korean-made Afrobeats song. There was a sense that one had first and foremost to be against any such song, even before listening to it. This sense of unspoken expectation created an ambivalence, when they were unable to reconcile the fact that they enjoyed a song they believed they were expected to shun. Although they did not explicitly mention where the expectation was stemming from, the understanding that cultural appropriation discussions are dominated by the west, which in turn dominates global popular culture space, means that the experiences of African Americans and Black Europeans tend to be globalized. Thus, although the experiences of these groups are different from those of Black people in Africa, those experiences tend to be universalized as the Black experience. Therefore, when an African is faced with "Bolo," an Afrobeats song made by a Korean, in all likelihood they draw from these universalized experiences and could be faced with this ambivalence. They are faced with the task of deciding whether to judge the song based on their perception of it, or to judge it based on the narrative they have been exposed to in popular culture.

While some participants asked for help with which choice to make, others dealt with this ambivalence through humor. This was done through TikTok transition videos, where they used a *them-me* template. In these videos, the user creates a meme where one image corresponds to *them*, an imaginary judgmental audience that is admonishing them or disapproving of Korean Afrobeats. This is then followed by a *me* image, which shows the user enjoying the song. Although in these videos the user seemed to pick a side, they still expressed an awareness

394 of this ambivalence by imagining that there was a disapproving audience. Their way of dealing with this dilemma was therefore through a humorous outlet.

## Conclusion

The methodological approach that pays attention to social media platforms as a space for everyday discussions brings to the fore points of view and perspectives of groups that would ordinarily be absent in these discussions. In this instance, the voices of Africans, who also happen to be fans of Korean popular culture, are privileged in trying to find out how Koreans making Afrobeats are perceived. The findings show that within this space discussions about Korean Afrobeats are largely about cultural appropriation and appreciation. TikTok posts and YouTube comments reveal that cultural appropriation is conceptualized as borrowing from other cultures without due research or acknowledging the source of inspiration. Some participants in this discourse therefore believe that since Penomeco checked both boxes, then his song “Bolo” constitutes cultural appreciation and not appropriation. The participants further conceptualized cultural appropriation as a foreign concept; one that is often found in western discourse. To them African Americans and white people are more concerned about cultural appropriation in comparison to themselves, who were mostly African.

Owing to the foreignness of the concept, participants who opposed the description of Korean Afrobeats as cultural appropriation considered Korean Afrobeats as a positive step towards popularizing Afrobeats globally. For them, the interest in having Afrobeats as a global popular music phenomenon far outweighed concerns about cultural appropriation. On the other hand, participants who were opposed to Korean Afrobeats questioned the treatment of Black people in Korea. Since they were knowledgeable about Korean popular culture, they were familiar with the discourse on race relations in Korea. Participants

expressed concern about how ethical it therefore was for Korean musicians to profit from music created by Black people. Finally, the participants expressed a sense of ambivalence with regard to the Korean Afrobeats. They were unsure how to react to it; on the one they thought it was a good song, but on the other hand they felt they were required to not like the song because it was made by a Korean.

The analysis supports the position that understanding the flows of cultural products within a globalized world requires looking beyond culture as an essentialized entity. Afrobeats is a hybridized music form that continues to incorporate elements from other music genres and other cultures. Per the transculturation argument, this illustrates the concept of culture of as non-static and not clearly bound. Therefore, as evidenced by the results of this study, in understanding the use of Afrobeats by musicians from non-African ethnicities, a more nuanced approach is required, an approach that goes beyond the cultural exploitation argument. Beyond the criticism of Koreans creating Afrobeats music, transcultural engagement is considered an avenue through which African popular culture will compete on the global stage. The #Africatotheworld agenda, which often accompanies Afrobeats content on social media, seeks to change the global power dynamics by making Africa and Africans a key player in the popular culture scene. This, as the findings showed, relies on the ability of Afrobeats to move to across geographic boundaries and be localized in other cultural spaces.

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**KENYA**

**POPULAR CULTURE**

**CINEMA NARRATION**

**TRANSCREATION**

**REMAKING**

**K-FILM**

# **Korean Film and Popular Arts in Kenya: The Oral Remaking of *Fabricated City* by DJ Afro**

Matthias Krings and Solomon Waliaula

This paper seeks to unravel what happens to a Korean film when subjected to an oral performance practice such as Kenyan cinema narration. This popular art form is geared at linguistic, cultural, and medial adaptation of foreign films. Korean films are the latest addition to the repertoire of films subjected to this oral remaking practice in Kenya. *Fabricated City* (2017) directed by Park Kwang-hyun is a Korean film revolving around a protagonist's quest for justice and vengeance against an elite crime syndicate, which are topoi that resonate with the anxieties, aspirations, and tensions of the everyday life of Kenyan audiences. The central part of our essay is dedicated to analyzing

400 **a version of *Fabricated City* with voice-over narration in Kiswahili by DJ Afro, Kenya's most popular cinema narrator. We argue that DJ Afro's performance can best be understood as transcreation, as a form of creative adaptation that sits between the oral and the filmic, Kenya and Korea, and that seeks to convey the meaning of the Korean film for Kenyan audiences by accommodating and adjusting it to their everyday social experiences.**

## **Introduction**

Hallyu, the "Korean wave" of popular culture, has reached Kenya. According to data released by music streaming services, Kenya is among the top three K-pop consumers in Africa, alongside Nigeria and South Africa (Odidi 2023). Likewise, serials and films produced in South Korea have gathered a fan base among Kenyan viewers. As foreign cultural products they are met by a particular kind of Kenyan cultural entrepreneur known as deejay (DJ) and a mediation practice referred to as cinema narration or film deejaying. Film deejays are cinematic go-betweens, mediators between foreign films and local audiences whose task is both to interpret and to enhance the audience's aesthetic experience. This includes transmuting moving images into spoken words, translating dialogues into Kiswahili, and explaining and commenting on certain cultural and film elements (Krings 2012). Their performances either take place live in video shows or are recorded as voiceover in studios; in either case the deejay suppresses most of the original audio element of the film and superimposes his own voice and commentary on the moving images. Film deejaying has been a thriving cinema practice in East Africa since the late 1980s, when VHS video shows sprang up in many

different places (Böhme 2018; Englert 2010; Waliaula 2014). With the arrival of the digital era around the turn of the millennium and the advent of social media and digital exchange platforms a decade later, it has become part of Kenyan mainstream popular culture (cf. Ogone 2020).

At the heart of our paper, we will concentrate on a close reading of one Korean film, *Fabricated City* (2017), directed by Park Kwang-hyun, with voiceover performance by DJ Afro, who is Kenya's most popular film deejay. This pars-pro-toto methodology is backed-up by our previous studies on the reception practices of Latin-American telenovelas and Nigerian films by active audiences in Kenya (Waliaula 2014; 2019) and the performance of Hollywood and Nollywood films by cinema narrators in neighbouring Tanzania (Kring 2012; 2013). We argue that DJ Afro remakes *Fabricated City* through a transcreative process that plays out on different levels. Conceptualizing film deejaying—locally sometimes also referred to as *tafsiri* (translation or interpretation)—as a form of transcreation, which is a concept we borrow from translation studies (Katan 2021), seems to be particularly apt. Translation always entails the creation of something new, which at the same time remains attached to the content of the source text. Usually, however, what is translated and what it refers to are not perceptible simultaneously. With film deejaying as a genre of technologically mediated “secondary orality” (Ong 2010, 134) this is different, at least partially. The images of the original film, though mostly stripped of the original soundtrack, and the deejay's interpretive voiceover narration are to be experienced at the same time. By analyzing a transcreated version of a Korean film such as DJ Afro's version of *Fabricated City* we can literally watch over a Kenyan deejay's shoulder while deriving meaning from a Korean film for Kenyan audiences.

## Cinema Narration in Kenya

Film narrators were already part of the configuration of cinema in many parts of the world during the era of the silent movie. With the advent of sound film in the late 1920s (Lacasse 2000) film narrators became obsolete, the Japanese *benshi* being a notable exception (Gerow 2010). In East Africa, cinema narration has its unique trajectory that spans across different historical configurations of cinema. To understand this oral art form better one needs to locate it in its larger historical and socio-cultural context, which takes us back to Kenya under British colonial rule when mobile cinema was used as part of official communication efforts by the Colonial Film Unit (Rice 2010). During such screenings audiences “often felt free to reject or ridicule the proffered images” (Druick 2009, 123). Trying to make sure that the intended meaning of their educational films was brought across, the Colonial Film Unit employed film commentators who accompanied film projection with live commentary and explanation in local languages. After independence in 1963, the Kenyan government sustained this practice for the purpose of communicating with citizens, particularly in rural areas. During the 1980s and early 1990s mobile cinema was used commercially as a vehicle to advertise consumer goods. During such shows foreign fiction films were screened and the intermissions used to advertise and sell the products (Waliaula 2018, 31–45). While major Kenyan cities had a few regular film theaters that not only served as “Hollywood’s embassies” (Melnick 2022) but also catered to lovers of Indian films, it was the rise of the video show that brought global cinemas ever closer to a wider segment of Kenya’s population. These makeshift theater halls were (and still are) thriving on Kenya’s inclusion into a global shadow economy of cinema distribution based on small media, such as VHS, VCD, and DVD (Lobato 2012, vi). This “video revolution” hit not only the urban centers but also “small market settlements all across Kenya, eastern Africa, and for that matter much of the rest of the continent” (Ambler 2002, 119).

One can, however, argue that this media revolution of the 1990s was only a matter of technology and infrastructure. The oral performance that accompanied the viewing experience was a constant that went back in time, adapting to different media configurations along the way. The video shows offered a convivial atmosphere in which audiences were actively involved in simultaneously viewing and responding, making the whole process audience-centered. Such communal consumption practices would eventually be dominated by some individuals to the extent that they stood out as commentators and storytellers (Waliaula 2014, 82). The informal distribution networks of the 1990s made many foreign films available and accessible to ordinary Kenyans from the low-income bracket. They could watch them in the video shows at a small and affordable fee. A complete parallel circuit of film distribution had thus been established by relying on “grey and counterfeit media” (Lobato 2012, vi) or the “infrastructure of piracy” (Larkin 2004). It is this scenario that created the need for the transcreation of foreign films for local audiences whose viewing experience was not complete because they did not understand the foreign languages used in the films. Individuals that engaged in this new art referred to themselves as deejays, borrowing the concept from the context of music. They saw themselves as deejays because they played the role of hyping and enhancing the aesthetic experience for the audience. Initially, the deejays performed live in video shows, but with improved technological innovation they were able to pre-record their performance on VHS tapes, and later on VCD and DVD. These were distributed in informal channels by selling and renting.

DJ Afro, whose real name is James Muigai, is the most famous cinema narrator in Kenya. He started his practice in the outskirts of Nakuru town in the Central Rift Valley region. In a television interview he revealed that growing up he never thought of making a career in cinema but got himself involved gradually as a fan and performed for fun, without undergoing any training. He considers his art a God-given talent (Citizen TV Kenya 2017).

404 Eventually, he moved to Nairobi to try his hand at the practice as business, performing live in video shows in the Rongai and Kiserian neighborhoods where he rapidly became popular with fans. He moved back to Nakuru where he flourished as a live cinema narrator and later was able to get access to equipment and started recording his performances and selling them on VCDs and DVDs (Künzler 2019, 16–17). By 2016 he had risen to the level of a celebrity, dwarfing all other deejays that joined the cinema narration practice. He has arguably developed cinema narration into one of the genres of local popular arts. In 2021 Netflix Kenya commissioned him to narrate the trailer of *Thunderforce*, by then one of their latest productions (Kanuri 2021).

There have been other deejays such as DJ Fish, DJ Smith, DJ Sky, DJ Shaggy, DJ Mike, DJ Lenny, and DJ Afro Junior. Each of them has tried to establish a distinct performance identity, but it has been largely an imitation of DJ Afro, whose style has consolidated into a generic form, complete with a fixed structure and textual properties. In the more recent past, local commercial television stations such as Gikuyu TV, Kameme TV, Mzalendo TV, and Mount Kenya TV have become an additional distribution option for narrated films. Most recently, digital technology has enabled film enthusiasts and entrepreneurs to download films from various internet sites. It is in this way that recent films from the US, Europe, and Asia easily get to East Africa (Künzler 2019, 10–11). Therefore, the scope of films available for narration is wider, and as it widens, so does the art of cinema narration.

## **Korean Films and K-drama in Kenya**

Korean films are the latest addition to the repertoire of foreign films to have been subjected to cinema narration in Kenya, after films from Hollywood, Bollywood, Nollywood, as well as Chinese cinema. These have had a much longer presence in Kenya, either through formal distribution or the shadow economy mentioned above. Alongside this has been a vibrant trend of televisual

cinema dominated by American, Mexican, Indian, Australian, and Filipino serials and soap operas (Waliaula 2019). Several studies have explored how Kenyan audiences have made such foreign content relevant for themselves (Frederiksen 2000; Fuglesang 1994; Wambua 2014). Some dominant themes have been spectatorship, identification, and modernity (Waliaula 2019, 186), with the fictional reconstruction of social life in these dramas being used as an acceptable model that is worth emulating.

Korean television serials, also known as K-drama, were introduced to Kenya around 2010 in distinct social circumstances. A Korean-funded religious television station called GBS, Good News Broadcasting, founded in 2009 as part of a community development initiative, was arguably the first to air K-drama in Kenya. The Kenyan state broadcaster KBC TV and the private station KTN also aired K-drama, but the audience was still limited to the socially privileged class who could afford television sets and electricity, and in whose everyday home life television viewing is a favorite pastime. With the emergence of digital content streaming platforms such as Netflix and Showmax in Kenya, K-drama has expanded in distribution and has a growing fan base. Some of the K-dramas that have been popular with Kenyan audiences include *Voice* (2017), *My Name* (2021), *The Glory* (2022), and *Bloodhounds* (2023). The last one has ranked among the top ten most viewed serials on Netflix Kenya.

Significant aesthetic patterns can be recognized in the K-dramas mentioned above. They are based on very rich melodramatic narratives that resonate with the anxieties, aspirations, and tensions of the everyday life experience in Kenya. The typical K-drama story tends to revolve around oppression of the weak and vulnerable in society and lack of justice because of the existence of powerful individuals who use their vast financial resources to create mafia-esque networks that block social justice. It is these social conditions that breed unbridled crime and counter-crime, which is part of an adaptation mechanism in the quest for justice and retribution mainly by the

406 marginalized members of the society. The quest for justice, and even vengeance, is at the core of the plotlines of K-drama, and the main theme of *Fabricated City* as well.

The K-drama revenge plot is characterized by a juxtaposition of formidable antagonist forces against apparently weak or less privileged protagonist forces. This heightens the pathos in the narrative and sets the audience on a quest for justice. The dramatic action consists in the protagonist's epic struggle for vengeance and/or justice, eventually getting assistance from a benevolent agent. The denouement of these K-dramas is always defined by the vanquishing of the antagonist forces and restoration of order, and even when this is a culmination of bloody violence and death, it stands out as retributively justifiable and thus welcome poetic justice. In *Bloodhounds* (2023), directed by Kim Joo-hwan, for instance, the main character is a young man who sets out on a mission to save his mother from the machinations of an unscrupulous money lender. In *My Name* (2021), by Kim Jin-min, the female protagonist decides to join the Dongsheng crime syndicate to avenge the murder of her father. In *The Glory* (2022), directed by Ahn Gil-ho, a young woman is bullied in school by the antagonist and his gang to the point of dropping out. Later in life, when she has become a schoolteacher, she executes a cold and calculated revenge.

Kenyan audiences identify with narratives that plug into their social imaginary in ways that echo critical perspectives to popular arts as subversive and political (Barber 2018). In this light popular art becomes a site of improvisation in which strategies of opposition, survival, and subversion are constantly formulated (Hofmeyr 2002, 129). Most of the K-drama that is popular in Kenya is that which raises grievance against the political economy of social experience, and we argue that local audiences identify with this drama because its poetic justice offers them vicarious relief and a sense of the restoration of social justice.

Netflix-based Kenyan audiences of K-drama, mainly young women, share their experience on social media in fragmented posts that are part of other related discourses ranging from the texture and social relevance of the various K-drama narratives to the physical appeal of male actors and their usefulness in fantasies of romance, with opinion split on whether or not the boyishly smooth facial appearance of male K-drama actors is good enough to use in sexual fantasy (personal conversation of Waliaula with female fan in Nairobi, May 15, 2023). Significantly, this fandom went side by side with an increasing presence and marketing of Korean beauty products as well as mainstream consumer brands such as Samsung, LG, and Hyundai (Kasuku 2019). By around 2019, Korean films became accessible to Kenyans through informal channels such as download websites. The films are saved in memory sticks and then distributed in DVD format. Eventually, they also reached the video shows. In the beginning, most of the local video show audiences and even cinema narrators could not distinguish the Korean films from Chinese films (personal conversation of Waliaula with fan in Jua Kali, Eldoret, May 12, 2023). Thus, among the three narrated films that were sold to us as Korean, only two were actually Korean, one was Chinese.

### **Intertextuality and Socio-cultural References in DJ Afro's Performance of *Fabricated City***

*Fabricated City* is a story revolving around Kwon Yoo, a young talented online gamer who lives with his mother. He is framed for the gruesome rape and murder of a young girl, a murder that enrages the public and sets the city against him. Only his mother believes his plea of innocence and she seeks help from the public attorney, but in vain. His case is quickly wrapped up and he is sent to jail, where he is subjected to heart-rending torture from hardcore inmates as the warders watch helplessly. One night, after a day of painful torture, Kwon has a dream in which

408 his mother asks him to set out and seek the truth. He wakes up feeling miraculously energized and focuses on the mission to seek out the real culprits and expose them. With the help of his friends from the online gaming team Resurrection Force, he eventually manages to uncover the true culprits, an evil group that commits murder and frames innocent people relying on the services of the public attorney to cover up their guilt. Kwon and his group put together a carefully crafted plan to nab the culprits and obtain enough evidence to prosecute them. Ultimately the truth is exposed, the culprits are punished, and Kwon and his team are feted.

### **Oral Narrative Structure**

While DJ Afro's formal assignment as film narrator is the voice-over that he inserts on the soundtrack to convey the film story to his audience, he has formulated a number of performance elements that stand out as an extension of the subject of the performance. Some of the words and phrases bear a relationship to the film but others go well beyond it and are made in reference to the contexts of performance and reception—in a concentric manner from the closest, such as opening formula, to allusion and imagery that go beyond the film narrative in translation, to a performance tradition that is plugged into the socio-cultural experience of the performer and his audience. Consider this sequence at the opening of the narration. Out of the twenty-seven lines, spoken incredibly quickly as is typical for DJ Afro, only the last three relate to the plot. The opening credits still running, he starts with his signature opening, a set induction to mark the point where he moves from the everyday mode to the performance mode. The following lines include the rhetorical technique of apostrophe, which echoes the live performance situation where the performer invokes the audience and creates some rapport with them as well as setting up an apt aura for the performance with a bit of hype and self-praise (cf. Heron 1976, 23-24).

1	<p><i>Aaaaaa</i>  <i>Alriiiight!</i>  <u><i>Asante sana</i></u>  <i>Na bashi,</i></p>	<p>Aaaaa          Alright!          Thank you so much.          And now,</p>
5	<p><u><i>Ndugu,</i></u>  <u><i>brother,</i></u>  <u><i>wapenzi</i></u>  <u><i>watazamaji,</i></u>  <i>niko hapa tena.</i></p>	<p>brother,          brother,          beloved          viewers,          I am here again.</p>
10	<p><i>Ni style moja</i>  <u><i>tena maridadi zaidi.</i></u>  <i>Tunakuja kuliaza picha letu hapa basi</i>  <i>design kama hii <u>shashaaa</u></i>  <i>Ni kwenye route hapa</i></p>	<p>It is a style          that is very colorful/beautiful.          We have come to start our film          in this design now.          It is in the stages of,</p>
15	<p><i>Sasa <u>bila shaka</u> basi za mwanzo</i>  <i>mwanzo.</i>  <i>Mwanzo mwanzo</i>  <i>wa sinema.</i>  <i>Endapo ...</i>  <i>Na ikiwa ni style moja tena basi</i></p>	<p>without a doubt, the          beginning.          The beginning          of the film.          And if ...          And it is in a style</p>
20	<p><u><i>maridadi zaidi.</i></u>  <i>Ikiwa ni style moja</i>  <i>tena hapa abasi <u>maridadi zaidi.</u></i>  <i>Tunakuja kupata tena hapa,</i>  <i>basi <u>bila shaka</u> basi,</i></p>	<p>very colorful.          It is in a style          once again, very colorful.          We come to meet here,          without a doubt,</p>
25	<p><i>kikosi fulani</i>  <i>kinajulikana kama vile</i>  <i>Resurrection Force.</i></p>	<p>a certain squad,          which is known as          Resurrection Force.          (0:47–1:16 min)</p>

You notice the repetition, circumlocution, and redundancy in this sequence. Significantly, some of the words and phrases used here, such as *ndugu* (brother), *wapenzi watazamaji* (beloved viewers), *asante sana* (thank you very much), *bila shaka* (without a doubt), and *maridadi zaidi* (very colorful), recur in other sections of the performance and thus move from the lexical to the structural; lexical in the sense that they have some meanings in relation to the immediate context of use, and structural in the

410 sense that they are part of the formulas of the performance as an oral form in which the performer does not use a script but composes in performance. He needs certain words, phrases, and even entire lines to help him in this process. They are fill-ins that enable him to keep talking while also watching and mentally composing the next lines. They were inevitable in live performance situations, yet they became part of the evolving structure and were retained in studio recorded versions such as the one our analysis is based on.

In performance, there are also some words that are used to create some rhythm such as *endapo* (if) which is semantically meaningless in its context (line 18). There is also the poetic rendition of some words through change in pronunciation, such as *sasa* (now) which is rendered to *shashaa*, to add colour and rhythm (line 13). He introduces each film as 'horror cinema' when of course not all films he narrates are of the horror genre. This use of the word horror is thus part of the constant elements the narrator uses to sustain this narrative form. Some of the phrases, such as *asante sana* (thank you very much; line 3) are an echo of the outdoor broadcast media practice of the 1980s that we shall focus on in a later section.

Consider the sequence below, still in the introductory section, where most of the structural words and phrases are retained, with a few additions:

1	<p><i>Walalaaa!</i>  <i>Ni design moja tena maridadi zaidi</i>  <i>vita zimechacha hapa basi.</i>  <i>Tena vibaya sana</i></p>	<p>Walalaaa!          It is a colorful design          as it is heated up here.          Indeed very serious.</p>
5	<p><i>Na kikosi hasa bila shaka</i>  <i>cha Resurrection</i>  <i>kimetumwa ala zenye waizi</i>    <i>kwenye operation</i>  <i>ya kuja kufanya rescue</i></p>	<p>And the squad, no doubt,          the Resurrection          has been sent to the crooks'          hideout            in an operation          to do a rescue.</p>

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>10 <u>Rrrrrrrrrrrrr</u><br/> <i>Kiko hapa <u>bila shaka</u><br/> <u>basi jeti zinalipuliwa <u>design kama</u><br/> <u>hiyo basi</u><br/> na kisosi cha magaidi.<br/> <u>Bara bara!</u></u></i></p>      | <p>Rrrrrrrrrr<br/> They are here, no doubt,<br/> and the bombs are being<br/> exploded like this<br/> by the squad of crooks.<br/> Alright!</p> |
| <p>15 <i>Na kisha kakuingilia hapa basi<br/> <u>bila shaka pale</u><br/> Na aliye star kwenye <u>horror sinema</u><br/> <u>ukipenda</u><br/> sio mwingine tena basi <u>bila shaka</u><br/> ni huyu</i></p> | <p>And then enters,<br/> no doubt ...<br/> And the star in the film, if you<br/> like,<br/> is no no one else, but this.</p>                    |
| <p>20 <i>Jina lake hapa kamili basi<br/> ni Ji Chang-wook<br/> ama <u>ukipenda</u> Kwon Yoo<br/> Jina ya sinema.</i></p>   | <p>His formal name here<br/> is Ji Chang-wook,<br/> or, if you like, Kwon Yoo,<br/> his film name.<br/> (1:32–1:58 min)</p>                     |

The underlined words are all structural and are used frequently in DJ Afro's performances. Only two have lexical value, the exclamation *walalaaa* in the first line and the chant *rrrrrrrrrr* in line ten. The rest are mere formulas that can be found in other sections of this performance, too, as well as in his performances of other films. The use of such words as *bila shaka*, *bara bara*, *horror cinema*, and *ala za waizi* is structural. There are other words that are drawn from Sheng, Kenya's youth language, based on a mixture of Swahili and English, such as *design* to mean method or approach (lines 2 and 12). Indeed, while DJ Afro's language of performance is formally recognized as Kiswahili, there is frequent code-switching to Sheng as well as a few words from local languages such as Gikuyu, Kikamba, Maa, and Dholuo. This is arguably an element of the rhetoric nature of an oral performance where the performer maintains a connection with his audience in different ways. In this case, his use of some words from these different languages is to acknowledge members of the audience that belong to these ethnic communities.

DJ Afro also makes use of words, phrases, and images that refer to specific media practices in Kenya, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, when the political economy of media was defined by the state. At that time, Voice of Kenya (VOK) was the only public radio station and, in practice, was the voice of government (Ogola 2011, 83–86). This had the effect of making radio very formal and formulaic in its programming as did the use of what was perceived then as “pure” Kiswahili from the coastal region. This was popularized in football commentary, where radio commentators frequently used certain words and expressions. Consider this sequence from a radio football commentary during an African Cup Winners quarter finals match between AFC Leopards of Kenya and Diamant Yaounde of Cameroon on October 1, 1988 (Waliaula 2011, 266). There were two commentators involved, namely Ismail Mohammed and Topi Lyambila. See the underlined words in the section of Topi Lyambila:

**Ismail Mohammed:**

- |   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| 1 | <i>Kabla hatujamaliza,<br/>Topi una maneno yoyote ya<br/>kuongeza?</i> | Before we conclude,<br>do you have anything more to<br>add Topi? |
|---|--|--|

**Topi Lyambila:**

- |     |   |   |
|-----|---|---|
| Aaa | <i><u>bila shaka</u> Ismail Mohammed,<br/><br/>mambo ni kwamba,<br/>5 hivi leo pia wakenya,<br/>wakenya mashabiki wa Kenya,<br/>wameshuhudia mchezo <u>maridadi</u><br/><u>kabisa</u>.<br/>ambao ulionyeshwa<br/>na timu hii ya AFC Leopards.</i> | Aaa, without a doubt, Ismael<br>Mohammed,<br>news is<br>today Kenyans have also,<br>Kenyan fans<br>have watched a very colorful<br>game<br>that was displayed<br>by this team AFC Leopards. |
|-----|---|---|

These are popular phrases used by DJ Afro in his performance as well, and perhaps the most iconic is DJ Afro’s frequent use of *asante sana* (thank you very much), which is a direct imitation of the protocols of outside broadcast football commentary

in the 1980s. Usually, there were a number of commentators involved and when one received the microphone to do his part, he started by thanking the one that had passed it on to him. The commentators also thanked the producer in the studio at the beginning of the match and at the start of the second half.

DJ Afro's performance also demonstrates influence from the performance style of June Dezina Vel, a popular radio presenter who was famous at the turn of the millennium as a Taarab music presenter. Her performance style was characterized by a loquacious and mellifluous speaking style in Kiswahili for which she earned the nickname Tausi (peacock). She popularized the phrase *ukipenda basi* (if you like), which she used to mark her mastery of Kiswahili by saying the same thing in different ways (Wetende 2017). Consider the use of the same phrase here by DJ Afro as he introduces a squad of fighters:

- |    |   |  |
|----|---|--|
| 1  | <i>Hapa sasa bila shaka<br/>moja kwa moja<br/>sasa basi bila shaka<br/><u>ukipenda sasa basi</u> operation</i>                | Now without a doubt,<br>straight away,<br>without a doubt,<br>if you like, an operation, |
| 5  | <i>hara zenye waizi<br/>kuja kukabiliana hapa basi<br/><u>ukipenda basi</u> hapa<br/>kukabiliana<br/><u>ukipenda basi</u></i> | matters of crime<br>to come and deal with,<br>if you like,<br>to fight,<br>if you like,  |
| 10 | <i>na kisosi fulani<br/>vha magaidi</i>   | a certain squad<br>of terrorists.<br><br>(1:19–1:28 min)                                 |

Here DJ Afro draws on June Dezina Vel's introduction of Taarab songs and artists. It is significant that June Dezina Vel was a deejay of sorts because she introduced and hyped Taarab songs in her program *Rusha Roho* on Citizen Radio, which was very popular.

DJ Afro manages to construct pathos in his performance by use of prosodic features of language, particularly tonal variation and vocal inflection. He shifts from relatively objective narration of events to sad recounting and outright lamentation and back. It gives his performance a poetic feel with a balance between detached narrative description of events and a lyrical reconstruction of said events. Consider the sequence below. It is the moment when Kwon is sentenced to a jail term. DJ Afro seeks to recreate the scenario both in the eyes and emotions of the audience, such that there is the explication as well as the injection of the affective element. The first two lines are prosaic, but then the third line is a lament. From there on, the tone changes and is full of pathos. The tone gradually moves back to the detached rendition:

- |    |  |   |
|----|--|---|
| 1  | <p><i>Makosa</i><br/> <i>kumuua mtoto</i><br/> <i>Woyeee!</i><br/> <i>Yeye mwenyewe haamini.</i></p>   | <p>It is a mistake<br/> to kill a child.<br/> Woyeee!<br/> He does not believe it.</p>  |
| 5  | <p><i>Mwanzo anakumbuka vizuri sana</i><br/> <i>yeye alipeleka basi hapa simu</i><br/><br/> <i>na akatoka huko</i><br/> <i>Itakuaje aliuu mtu?</i><br/> <i>Hata yeye mwenyewe haamini.</i></p> | <p>First he remembers vividly<br/> he took the phone to some<br/> place<br/> and left.<br/> How come he killed somebody?<br/> He does not believe it.</p> |
| 10 | <p><i>Mamake haamini.</i><br/> <i>Mamake alijaribu kuomba msamaha.</i><br/> <i>Mamake anamjua vizuri</i><br/> <i>Na anajua mtoto wake</i><br/> <i>hawezi fanya kitu kama hicho.</i></p>        | <p>His mother does not believe it.<br/> His mother tried to apologize.<br/> She knows him well.<br/> She knows her child<br/> cannot do such a thing.</p> |
| 15 | <p><i>Lakini anaambiwa,</i><br/> <i>wewe huwezi tetea mtu mzima.</i><br/> <i>He is over 18.</i><br/> <i>And he is guilty as charged.</i><br/> <i>Makosaaa!</i></p>                             | <p>But she is told,<br/> you cannot defend an adult.<br/> He is over 18.<br/> And he is guilty as charged.<br/> Mistake!<br/> (16:43–17:18)</p>           |

His poetic rendition also involves manipulating the soundtrack, and is characterized by the rhythmic muting and unmuting of the soundtrack in a way that allows the audience to get a feel for the action as it unfolds and as he weaves his narrative. This echoes a music deejay adjusting the playback speed on the turntable and is very captivating in a live performance context where the adjustments allow both the deejay and his audience to participate in the performance. Consider the sequence below. It is an action scene where two groups are engaged in close combat. The narrator is not just a voice-over on the muted soundtrack but also reinvents bursts of ideophonic sounds to heighten the action and also to invite the audience as well. These are dense sections with shifts in point of view. The narrator gets into the narrative and directly addresses characters in the film and then comes out to describe events from the perspective of a viewer. Significantly, he also leaves in bits of the original soundtrack as well, and all these different perspectives make the performance orchestra-esque, the narrator situated at the center as the conductor. Consider the sequence below:

- |    |   |   |
|----|---|---|
| 1  | <p><i>Weeee!</i><br/> <i>Huku nako vita,</i><br/> <i>hapa basi bado zimechacha.</i><br/> <i>Rrrrrrrrrr</i></p>                            | <p>You!<br/>         Here it is battle,<br/>         here it is still hot.<br/>         Rrrrrrrr</p>  |
| 5  | <p><i>Asante sana!</i><br/> <i>Chukua kombora!</i><br/> <i>Rrrrrrrr</i><br/> <i>Rushia magaidi</i><br/> <i>kuwalipua design hiii!</i></p> | <p>Thank you very much!<br/>         Take that shot!<br/>         Rrrrrrr<br/>         Throw it to the terrorists<br/>         to blow them up in this fashion!</p> |
| 10 | <p>(Sounds)<br/> <i>Bara bara,</i><br/> <i>asante sana</i></p>  | <p>(Sounds)<br/>         Alright,<br/>         thank you very much.<br/>         (2:28–2:41)</p>  |

There is rapid shift in point of view, as is evident in these lines, which indeed sound like free verse poetry. The first line is addressed to a character in the film in imperative form, the next

416 two are addressed to the audience in narrative and the fourth line, as an ideophone sound by the narrator, is meant to be a verbal imitation of the action (firing of a machine gun). The next line, *asante sana*, is like a closure that sets off another rapid shifting in point of view. The next five lines follow a nearly similar pattern, ending with the closure, *asante sana*.

### Social Experience and Local Imagery

DJ Afro frequently reconstructs scenarios and dialogue in ways that depart from the actual film narrative to accommodate the local social experience. It is a sort of re-imagination and representation of the film scenes to bring them close to similar scenes in everyday life, which is something we suggest conceptualizing as one of several forms of transcreation. Consider this scene: it captures the moment when Kwon, still new in jail, is subjected to bullying by hardcore inmates. He mentions some of the criminal activities the inmates were convicted of and includes some with particularly Kenyan references. He also foregrounds sodomy, presenting Kwon as being condemned to the desires of the chief bully, who is described as a man that relishes in sodomizing every new inmate that is brought there. What comes through here is a commentary on the local fears, anxieties, and myths of life in jail. It also includes references to local metaphors, each of which can be traced to specific people and/or events.

- |    |   |   |
|----|---|---|
| 1  | <i>Na hapa kwanza ndipo<br/>kuna watu wahalifu zaidi.<br/>Wololo yaye!<br/>Watu ambao wanajaribu</i>                              | And here is where reside<br>the most hardened criminals.<br>Wololo yaye!<br>People that try                                     |
| 5  | <i>kugeuza serikali<br/>huwekwa kwa hili gereza.<br/>Watu ambao bila shaka<br/>wamepatikana<br/>na mauaji ya watu wengi zaidi</i> | to overthrow the government<br>are put in this jail.<br>People that have no doubt<br>been convicted<br>of murder of many people |
| 10 | <i>wako ala za waizi.</i>   | are here.   |

- Walanguzi wa madawa za kulevya, wezi, hali kadhalika pia watu kama wale watu wa kupika tu pussy nyao. Kama mwenye aliweza*
- 15 *kupika paka akauzia watu Nakuru.* Drug traffickers, thieves, and also people like those people that cook cats. Like the one who cooked cats and sold it as meat to the people of Nakuru.
- Ala za wezi. Watu ambao waliweza kuhamisha mto wako ala ni wezi.* The place of thieves. People that were able to move a river are in this place.
- 20 *Kisha kijana wetu sasa alikuja akakamatwa: "Wee mono, kuja kipande hii! Hapa ni gerezeni, ni nini unakaa kama uko kanisani?"* Then our boy was now caught: "You, new one, come here! This is prison, why are you posing like you are in church?"
- 25 *Yule jangili mkali sana ala hizi anajulikana kama vile Maduku. Ndio huyoo Ukikuja ala zenye waizi lazima maduku akuonje.* The worst terrorist in this place is known as Maduku. There he is. When you come to this place of crooks Maduku must have a taste of you.
- 30 *Jamaa wetu akacheiki polisi "Wee polisi, toka!" Polisi akaondoka. Uniambie sasa ni nani atamsaidia? Askari jela ameondoka.* Our boy looked at the prison warden. "You, prison warden, leave!" [voice-miming Maduku] The police officer left. Tell me now, who will help him? The prison warden has left.
- 35 *Wololo Askari jela ameondoka "We, kuja hapa! Unaona hii mkono hivi? Hivi ndivyo makagari yangu iko!"* Wololo! The prison warden has left. "You, come here! Do you see this hand? That is the size of my genitals!" (17:47–18:58 min)

We note that in this sequence DJ Afro's performance may overtly look like a transcription of the film action, but for his audience it is an added layer of the familiar social experience that is not to

418 be taken as truth but as part of the performance. When he lists the kind of criminals found in that jail, he includes Kenyans whose transgressive behavior has been featured in the media, such as the selling of cat and dog meat to unsuspecting customers (lines 14–16; Nation 2013). His reference to people moving a river (lines 17–19) is part of the comic relief he infuses here and is related to a popular politician that once blamed the government for asking people living in riparian zones to move and suggesting that the government should move the rivers instead, which was regarded as laughable buffoonery (Maichuhie and Mosoku 2018). The word *mono* (line 21), used as a metaphor in this context, refers to a freshman in high school but also has connotations of a target for bullying, which is a common social experience in Kenyan secondary schools, and many stories, fact and fiction, are told about it. The phrase *wololo yaye* (line 3) is an expression of shock and lament at the same time in Luo language. It was popularized by the main character known as Mzee Ojwang, in the popular television comedy serial *Vitimbi* (1985–2014) during the 1980s and 1990s, which was based on everyday social experience (Barasa et al. 2019). The last two lines are part of the carnivalesque in DJ Afro's performance, where he uses the vulgar and grotesque in humorous ways. *Makagari* (line 39) is a word he has created in reference to men's genitals, and he uses it frequently. Incidentally, in 2018 DJ Afro's recorded performances were banned from airing on TV by the Kenya Film Classification Board on the grounds that some of the language used was vulgar and not fit to be part of entertainment for children. DJ Afro responded to this by arguing that he was not personally responsible for the reproduction and distribution of the alleged recorded versions of his performances (Standard Digital Videos 2019). By this, he meant that some of his performances, live and/or studio recorded, were meant for adult audiences but they were also accessible to inappropriate audiences because he was not in control of the distribution process.

The cinema narrator styles himself as a teacher who is a source of knowledge on the film as well as other related information. Orienting the audience to the geographical and socio-cultural context of the film is part of the knowledge the narrator feels obliged to share with his audience. This information is not necessarily given at the beginning of the performance. Consider this sequence below. It is in the middle of a fast-paced action scene when he switches from a verbal transmutation of fast-cut imagery of battle and gunfire to this explication of the film's context. Just as abruptly as he started this explication, he shifts back to the action.

1	<i>Marisasi</i> (sounds) <i>Design</i> (sounds) <i>Kama hiyo</i> (sounds) <i>Ndugu brother mpenzi mtazamaji</i>	Shots. (sounds) Design. (sounds) Like that. (sounds) Brother, beloved viewer,
5	<i>Hapa basi leo hii</i> <i>Nimekupeleka moja kwa moja</i> <i>Kule hadi upande wa Korea</i>  <i>Hapa ni Korea</i> <i>Ndugu, brother, wapenzi</i> <i>watazamaji</i>	here therefore today I have taken you direct to that part [of the world] called Korea. This is Korea, Brother, beloved viewers,
10	<i>Alaaa!</i> (sounds) <i>Hapa</i> (sounds) <i>ni Korea</i> (sounds) <i>Aaah</i>	Alaaa! (sounds) Here (sounds) is Korea (sounds) Aaaaah,
15	<i>nitakua nakutembeza tembeza</i> <i>hapa basi Korea</i> <i>Aaah mtazamaji</i>	I will be taking you around here in Korea. Aaaah, viewer,

	<i>huku ni upande wa Korea.</i>	this is the part called Korea.
	<i>Rrrrrrrrr!</i>	Rrrrrrrrr!
20	<i>Kwon Yoo,</i>	Kwon Yoo,
	<i>(sounds)</i>	(sounds)
	<i>Kwon Yoo,</i>	Kwon Yoo,
	<i>(sounds)</i>	(sounds)
	<i>Asante!</i>	thanks!
		(4:14–4:34 mins)

It is evident that, in this case, his explication was most probably structural, used as a vehicle to help him navigate a moment of composition in performance. And in the following sequence, he follows this orientation-to-Korea theme abruptly again in the middle of action when he gives his audience more information about the social status of the hero in Korea, which is pure imagination.

1	<i>Huyu ni mmoja kati ya wale watu wanatambulika sana Korea, ndugu, brother, mpenzi mtazamaji. He is the best in Korea.</i>	This is one of the people who are most famous in Korea, brother, beloved viewer. He is the best in Korea. (4:50–4:58)
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However, there are moments when the narrator decides that a specific part of the film is complicated and needs clarification, which then becomes a moment to explain and break it down to the audience. There are parts that he probably considers easy and that can be retold without explanation. These are the parts that he also interrupts to tell his own stories. Consider this sequence, at the workshop of the criminal gang when Kwon and his team have tracked down the criminals. They learn that it is an information control center and thus the right place for them to seek information. They decide to use intricate technology to discreetly insert their own computers along the information chain so that they can get access to the information. DJ Afro considers this as a critical but complex point along the narrative and

thus decides to include explication in his narration and call his audience's attention to it from the start.

1	<i>Mtazamaji, sikiza!</i> <i>Kwa hii nyumba kuna mitambo.</i> <i>Hii nyumba ndio ina control</i> <i>ma satellite na internet zote.</i>	Viewer, listen! In this house are machines. This is the control house for all internet and satellites.
5	<i>Na ju wanataka kujua magaidi</i> <i>chenye wanafanya</i> <i>wao wanataka kuweka device yao</i> <i>(pause)</i> <i>Hapa</i>	And because they want to know what the criminals do, they want to install their device here. (pause) Here,
10	<i>ili wakitaka kutumia satellite</i> <i>kwa vyovyote vile</i> <i>watatumia.</i>	so that when they want to use the satellite for whatever reason, they will use it. (59:34–01:05)

The narrator also makes inference from specific actions along the plotline to advise the audience on the conduct of life. This is captured in the following sequence where the narrator juxtaposes the social life of the main character with that of the audience. It is evident that he shifts focus from the film at this point and addresses the audience directly on their social conduct.

1	<i>Mamake anampenda Kwon Yoo</i> <i>sana.</i> <i>Na hio akaona</i> <i>hatakaa nyumbani</i> <i>Kumbuka ni vibaya sana</i>	Kwon Yoo's mother loves him so much. And he decided not to be staying at home. Remember, it is very bad,
5	<i>wewe ni mtu mzima</i> <i>unafikisha miaka 23, 24, 25, 27.</i> <i>ati bado unakaa nyumbani.</i> <i>Unakula kwenu.</i>	you an adult, you have reached 23, 24, 25, 27 years, and you still stay at home. You eat at home,

	<i>unalala kwenu</i>	you sleep at home.
10	<i>Unaona?</i>	You see?
	<i>Unafaa ku ...</i>	You need to ...
	<i>Heri utengeneze kikosi</i>	Better form a group
	<i>kama hiki cha Resurrection.</i>	like this Resurrection Force.
	<i>Wanapatana kama mabeste,</i>	They come together as friends,
15	<i>wanatafuta computer expert,</i>	they look for a computer expert,
	<i>anawatengenezea ka game,</i>	he develops a game,
	<i>kisha watu wanakujanga kucheza,</i>	and people come to play
	<i>wanalipa.</i>	and pay.
	<i>Unaona?</i>	You see?
		(8:39–9:10 min)

The underlined parts mark the direct address to the audience. He focuses on one of the problematic social experiences in Kenya: unemployment among youth. On the face of it, this seems to be mocking the many youths that still live with their parents well into their twenties, but it also works as a carnivalesque expression where social aspiration, tensions, and anxieties are expressed and sublimated.

### Directing the Viewing Experience

DJ Afro advises his audience on what to watch and how to watch. He plays the role of a curator in a sense. He shifts from describing the action to expressing his own feelings about the action, to careful explication of what he considers to be important parts of the story (introduced by appropriate discourse markers), to rhetorical questions that lead to further explication and narration. In some cases, the shifts in tone are marked by a dramatic pause. Let's consider this rather long sequence below:

- 1 *Ile guitar ndio ndio hiyo  
yenyé magaidi walibeba.*  
*(Pause)*  
*Kuchungulia ndani ya guitar*
- 5 *akaona yule mcheza filamu.  
Amewauwa.*  
*(Pause)*  
*What!?*  
*Mcheza filamu*
- 10 *amewauwa.*  
*(Pause)*  
*Makosaa.*  
*Wololo yayee!*  
*Punde si punde*
- 15 *kukaingia magaidi.*  
*(Pause)*  
*Kulikuingilia majangili, cheki maneno!*  
*(Pause)*  
*Wakaanza kusafisha ile nyumba.*
- 20 *Unaona?*  
*(Pause)*  
...  
*Wakaosha ule mwili.*  
*Wakaosha fingerprints.*
- 25 *Unaona?*  
*Kisha kuna tuvitu tunawekwa ala hizi.*  
  
*Kuna tuvitu tunawekwa ala zenye  
waizi.*  
*Kwingine kunaoshwa.*  
  
*Zingine zinawekwa*
- 30 *picha ya huyo mcheza filamu.*  
*Alikuwa peke yake*  
*kunaongezwa kapicha ka dame  
fulani.*  
*Nataka utazame mtazamaji:*
- That guitar [case] is there,  
that was brought by the  
terrorists.  
*(Pause)*  
When he peeped in the guitar  
[case]  
he saw the film actor.  
He had been killed.  
*(Pause)*  
What!?  
The film actor  
had been killed.  
*(Pause)*  
Mistake.  
Wololo yayee!  
Suddenly  
the terrorists entered.  
*(Pause)*  
Terrorists entered, just see!  
*(Pause)*  
They started cleaning that  
house.  
You see?  
*(Pause)*  
...  
They washed that body.  
They washed the fingerprints.  
You see?  
Then there are things that will  
be put here.  
There are things that will be  
put here.  
The other place is getting  
cleaned.  
It is refurbishing  
the film actor's photograph.  
He was alone,  
the image of a certain girl is  
added.  
I want you viewer to watch:

	<i>kunawekwa kapicha ka dame fulani.</i>	the image of a certain girl is added.
35	<i>Kisha gloves zinawekwa design kama hiyo. Kwanini? Hii sasa ni ku manipulate fingerprints.</i>	Then gloves are put in that manner. Why? This now is manipulating fingerprints.
40	<i>Kwa ufupi, mtazamaji, nikuelezee:  Kuna mtu amekufa hapa, na kuna mwempe anataka kusin- giziwa. Unaona?</i>	In short, viewer, I explain it to you: Someone has died here and there is one that will be framed. You see? 01:01:27–01:03:20

As shown above, the narrative is uneven in tone. The underlined parts show moments when the narrator switches from the verbal reconstruction of the narrative to explication and argument, which are marked by the rhetoric question “Do you see?” (lines 20, 25, 43).

### **Distraction and Comic Relief**

DJ Afro’s performance frequently has sequences that interrupt the main action to inject humor, and these are hinged on the film but then made to digress.

Consider this: the hero and a colleague are tracking down the criminal gang and have managed to trace their hideout. They see two men in suits enter one car and two others enter another car. So they decide to split, each tracking one car. A dog appears in the way of one of the cars. Then the narrator abandons the main story and starts a story based on the dog, which he suddenly interrupts again and gets back to the main story.

- |    |   |   |
|----|---|---|
| 1  | <p><i>Jamaa wetu akafuata gari la wale watu wa suti.</i><br/>(Pause)<br/>Wee!</p>   | <p>Our hero followed the car of the men in suits.<br/>(Pause)<br/>You!</p>  |
| 5  | <p><i>Hapa kuna mutina. Mutina ndio hii. Inatafuta ndutu. Inatafuta funza ili iikule. Imeskia imemiss kukula funza,</i></p> | <p>Here is a dog on the loose. A dog on the loose is here. It is looking for jiggers. It is looking for jiggers to eat them. It is craving jiggers,</p> |
| 10 | <p><i>kulia ndutu</i><br/>Alright!<br/><i>Mutina inataka kulula funza ilifunza ziende kukula</i></p>                        | <p>to eat jiggers.<br/>Alright!<br/>Loose dog wants to eat jiggers, so that the jiggers eat</p>   |
| 15 | <p><i>minyoo yenye iko ndani ya tumbo lake. Kumbuka mutina haipatiangwi dawa za minyoo. Ahaaa!</i></p>                      | <p>worms in the dog's stomach. Remember, a loose dog is not dewormed.<br/>Ahaa!</p>   |
| 20 | <p><i>Punde si punde wakaona guitar kubwa ikitolewa kwa gari</i></p>  | <p>Suddenly they saw a big guitar [case]. being taken out of the car.<br/>(56:20–56:51 min)</p>   |

It is arguable that such distractions from the main story are part of the narrator's effort to buttress his agency as a narrator telling a story to an audience that is also watching the story unfold on the screen. And the instantaneous story he creates here is rooted in the immediate social context, putting together different elements in a new and unusual manner. Stray dogs are a common feature in Kenya and jiggers are also a problem to people especially in the rural areas because they infect the toes and cause a lot of discomfort. Dogs are not known to be predators on fleas. But in this case the narrator imagines a scenario where a stray dog, stressed with worms in its stomach, looks for jiggers to eat so that the jiggers can eat the worms. It is just fantasy, yet acceptable in the immediate context of performance. But there are moments when the comic relief is inserted right in

426 the film narrative as in the sequence below, where the narrator extends a known Swahili proverb in a way that the translation of the film extends to experimentation with existing oral forms such as proverbs.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1 <i>Huyu sasa ni mamake.</i><br><i>Kumbuka, mtazamaji, hapa basi</i><br><i>Waswahili husema:</i><br><i>Uchungu wa mwana,</i> | This now is his mother.<br>Here, viewer, remember<br>the Swahili say:<br>The pain of a child,                   |
| 5 <i>aujuaye mama.</i><br><i>Utamu wa mwana,</i><br><i>aujuaye ni baba.</i>   | it is the mother that knows.<br>The sweetness of a child,<br>it is the father that knows.<br>(13:35–13:50 mins) |

Here the distraction from them film narrative is at the same time an engagement with, and a creative reconstruction of elements of the oral tradition such as proverbs.

## Film narration as Transcreation

The artistic performances of DJ Afro and other film narrators from neighboring countries such as Tanzania and Uganda have generated several scholarly reflections so far. Most prominent among the theoretical perspectives that have been deployed is the paradigm of localization/globalization (Krings 2010), which turns the film narrator into an agent of “localization of global cultural products” (Maageria 2018) who enables local audiences to participate in “global cultural flows” (Ogone 2020). The concept of domestication has been used in reference to both content and media/technology, that is, the decoding of cultural meaning encoded in the foreign films and the reconfiguration of cinema through the video show and the oral (live) performance of the film narrator. Several authors have pointed at the potentially subversive and counter-hegemonic nature of this media practice (Krings 2012, 27; Ogone 2020, 10). Kimani and Mugubi (2014, 9) have likened DJ Afro’s performances to “verbal commentary, an old art form in oral cultures,” and some form of reference to oral

storytelling can be found in almost every study written on the subject so far. Substantiations of this claim, however, have rarely been made. By fleshing out structural elements of oral narrative performance in our analysis of DJ Afro's *Fabricated City* we seek to fill this void.

Yet another line of conceptualizing East African cinema narration draws on the notion of translation (Böhme 2018; Englert 2010; Ogone 2020, 5–6). And it is this line of theorizing we wish to expand by our study. “Imetafsiriwa Kiswahili” (translated into Kiswahili) indicated the labels on pirated copies of foreign films on VHS cassettes with voice-over narration by cinema narrators that Krings encountered in Dar es Salaam in 2006. The Kiswahili verb *kutafsiri* means to translate or to explain. It has an Arabic root and is also used to refer to the oral practice of Quranic recitation and exegesis which can be found among Muslim communities in East Africa (and elsewhere). During such events the performer assumes two different roles and often quite literally speaks with two different voices: the first enacts the sacred text in Arabic by reading or memorizing it from the heart, the second interprets the meaning sura by sura in Kiswahili. The similarity between this sacred form of *tafsiri* and its profane sister, cinema narration, is obvious, as in both cases the orator engages with pre-produced texts. Ignoring the difference in media (script vs. film) and ascribed cultural value (sacred vs. profane), which also frames the interpretive license of the performer differently, a major difference consists in the simultaneous appearance of the translation and the translated, which is only the case in cinema narration. This is possible because cinema narration involves two different modes of expression which are processed by different senses: moving images (eyes) and spoken words (ears). Quranic *tafsiri* performances, though evoking a holy script, rely only on one sensory channel—the acoustic—for both, recitation of the resource text and its exegesis, thus they can only be performed consecutively. With this in mind, we must slightly reformulate what we have said about the simultaneous appearance of

428 translation and translated for cinema narration. As film is an audio-visual medium, the soundtrack of the foreign film that serves as source material and the voiceover of the deejay are mutually exclusive and can never be heard at the same time. Therefore, it is only the visual dimension of the film narrative that is “translated” simultaneously by the voiceover of the film narrator. However, as we have pointed out in our analysis of DJ Afro’s *Fabricated City* deejays still make use of the film’s soundtrack for aesthetic purposes, rhythmically muting and unmuting it, when weaving their voiceover narration into the acoustic and visual texture of the film. One option to conceptualize this is to draw on the notion of remix (Gallagher 2018; Navas 2012). As suggested by Ogone (2020, 6), cinema narration is based on a particular kind of remix that “does not fragment and reassemble the source texts, but rather engages in a purposeful intrusion into and reworking of the text with a view to imposing some additional content.” Scholars have sought to capture this generative and transformative nature of DJ Afro’s performances as “remake” (Maageria 2018), “re-invention” (Njeri 2018), or molding “a new version of text ... out of the pre-existing material” (Ogone 2020, 10). However, the relationship between source material (the original film) and voiceover narration has perhaps never been conceptualized more appropriately than by late Tanzanian cinema narrator Derek Gaspar Mukandala, aka Lufufu, who referred to cinema narration as “turning rice into *pilau*” (Krings 2012, 11). This wonderful metaphor turns the cinema narrator into a cook of sorts: foreign films are like raw or unprocessed foodstuffs that need to be cooked and prepared according to principles of local cuisine to make them palatable for local audiences (*pilau* is a delicious rice dish in Swahili cuisine). The metaphor also helps to specify the nature as well as the limits of the film deejay’s creative agency. He has to make do with what he finds in the market, but he can enhance the taste of it (spice it up) or water it down (erotic scenes for example, Ogone 2020, 10–11).

Translation studies conceptualize the creative engagement of a translator with a source text as *transcreation*, if “the resulting text will display elements of innovative intervention designed to maximize impact while closely recreating the underlying essence and feel of the original” (Katan 2021). We believe that this notion of maximizing of impact captures the performance of DJ Afro quite well. In his voiceover he not only translates dialogue sequences and seeks to transfer cultural meaning through commentary and explanation, but also transmutes images into words and recreates the diegetic soundtrack with his own rhythmic sound interventions, thus hyping and enhancing the effect of the original film considerably (“Rrrrrrrrrr! / Kwon Yoo / soundtrack / Kwon Yoo / soundtrack / Asante!” DJ Afro’s *Fabricated City*, 4:30–34). As Waliaula learned through conversations with DJ Afro fans in Kenya in 2022, there is a considerable number among them who speak and understand English quite well and would also be able to read subtitles in English, but who nevertheless cherish DJ Afro’s interventions for their creative nature and enhancement of the viewing experience. According to Katan (2021, 2) the transcreator is an active agent, “in effect a co-author” (Cisneros 2012 in Katan 2021) and the notion of transcreation “clearly rejects the translator’s traditional subservient habitus.” Traditional conceptualizations of translation frame the translator’s job as migrating meaning from one language to another, being as faithful to the source text as possible. This idea of translation is thus based on what in a different context has been called “trans of migration” (Brubaker 2016). Transcreation, however, “grants license to flout the norms of fidelity to the content of the source text encoded in professional translator codes of practice” (Katan 2021, 2). However, as the transcreator still retains an obligation to the source text, transcreation is based on a “‘back and forth’ requirement ‘to produce a translation where signifier and signified are bound, to the greatest degree possible, in a similar way in the target language as in the source’” (Cisneros 2012 in Katan 2021, 3). Using Brubaker’s (2016) terminology once more, this notion of translation as transcreation may be

430 conceptualized as “trans of between.” As a transcreator, DJ Afro has his target audience in mind and knows how to adequately re-create certain elements of a foreign film in his performance to make the film work for his audience and to enable a viewing experience that is as pleasurable as possible. At the same time, however, he cannot depart too far from his source material. Looking at cinema narration through the lens of transcreation helps us to conceptualize cinema narration as a creative practice based on processes of negotiating meaning and the film deejay as a mediator who must divide his attention between the demands of the foreign source material and those of the local target audience.

## Conclusion

A Korean film remade by a Kenyan deejay's intervention is no longer just Korean but Kenyan and Korean at the same time. DJ Afro's transcreation of *Fabricated City* has turned the film into a cultural product that carries traits of both of its socially and culturally distinct locations of production. It thus illustrates a particular case of distributed productivity, which at present may be facilitated by digital technology but whose operational logic predates the digital age and goes back well into the analogue media age. The distributed productivity that forms the basis for the trancreated version of *Fabricated City* combines the consecutive efforts of cultural entrepreneurs who are economically, socially, culturally, and spatially far apart from each other. Moreover, the Korean cultural entrepreneurs involved in the production and marketing of the original version of *Fabricated City* are most likely unaware of the creative efforts that Kenyan co-creators such as DJ Afro invest in the transformation and adaptation of their products for the Kenyan market. Kenyan deejays access Korean and other foreign films either through the internet and its manifold legal or illegal downloading platforms or through the globalized piracy networks that date back to the cassette culture of the 1980s and that nowadays extend to

digital media, connecting Kenya to the world. By looking at the transcreation and consumption of a Korean film in Kenya we can thus get a glimpse of the unofficial shadow economy of the new world order of cultural production that is at least as important for instituting distributed productivity today as are official and legal distribution channels such as digital streaming platforms and social media.

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**Vinzenz Hediger, Matthias Krings, Bertram Lang,  
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World Order of Cultural Production

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**The contributions to this volume trace such transports across Africa, Asia, and beyond.**

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