

Emily Witt on Nollywood

SEASON 1
episode four

Nicholas Lemann

Hello, I'm Nicholas Lemann and welcome to Underreported, a podcast from Columbia Global Reports. This week I'm welcoming Emily Witt to our show. Emily is a writer whose work has been in the New Yorker, the New York Times, GQ, n+1, the London Review of Books and many more. Her first book, *Future Sex: A New Kind of Free Love*, was published last year by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. New York magazine named Emily one of America's foremost prose stylists under the age of 40. And we are so happy to be publishing her next book, *Nollywood: The Making of a Film Empire*. Welcome to the show, Emily.

Emily Witt

Thanks, Nick.

Nicholas Lemann

Let's start with just the basics. What is Nollywood?

Emily Witt

Nollywood is Nigeria's movie industry. It began in 1992 with people shooting very low budget movies on VHS and copying tapes and then selling them on the street. And now it's a full-fledged industry producing movies that have cinema releases and that reach not only all around Nigeria, but all around Africa and the rest of the world.

Nicholas Lemann

We know, at least some of us know about Bollywood, the Indian film industry that's been booming for a long time. Nollywood belongs, I think, in a sort of triad with Hollywood, Bollywood and Nollywood. Why is Nigeria the third nub of film production in the world as opposed to anyplace else?

Emily Witt

That's a good question. I think Nigeria's, first of all, is the large – first of all, Nigeria is the largest country in Africa in terms of population, the size of its economy. And so there's just more people there.

The second reason I think, is related to a cultural history of theater, literature, music, fashion, just strong cultural traditions and a lot of national pride that, not that other countries don't have that, too, but somehow the combination of Nigeria's size and that commitment to national culture converged when it came to making movies.

Nicholas Lemann

You know, here in the United States, there has been, and to some extent still is, a kind of idea that American pop culture is the world's pop culture. You know, it's particularly easy to think this if you're an American who doesn't travel a lot. But even if you do travel a lot, you know, you've read the columns by various pundits where they say, "Gee, I was, you know, climbing to the top of K2 in the Himalayas, and there was a guy with a Nike swoosh on his shoe." Or, you know, there was somebody in Tokyo listening to hip hop. So, you know, to the extent that we're kind of supposed to think, everybody everywhere is ingesting US pop culture. Why don't Nigerians want to do that?

Emily Witt

Hmm. Well, I think what happened with globalization was not just Hollywood, but a whole set of what you could call cultural nodes emerged. Hollywood is one of them. Bollywood would be another one. You have the action movie culture that came out of Hong Kong. You have soap operas from Latin America that have huge global reach.

And one reason that I think Nollywood in particular became one of those places has to do with – first of all, Hollywood did not even represent African-American populations very well. And certainly the same could be true for the Latin American novella industry. These are countries with lots of Black people, people of African descent, who failed to represent them well in their cultural industries.

And so there was a void for people of African descent when it came to seeing themselves on television and film. And Nollywood really stepped into that void. The movies are popular not only around Africa, but also with Caribbean populations, with African-American communities, and African diasporic communities all over the world.

Nicholas Lemann

But it seems to me there's another element here that I'm just, it's seeming this way to me, only because I've read your book, which is there are certain – it's not just

what the people look like in the movies, it's the thematics of the movies that are underrepresented in US pop culture that is supposedly universal and global.

I mean, just to give a few examples, and maybe this will prompt specific examples from the movies that that you're writing about. One is people for whom religion is a very active part of their life. It might be something they're struggling with, but, you know, it's not that religion is part of their lives because they're crazy or something like that. It's intimately in their life.

Urbanization is in their life. The, you know, fundamental move from the countryside and village, traditional life to the city, and everything that involves. These are people often who have large extended families that are part of the fabric of their everyday life in a way that is not the case for a lot of Americans, or at least if it is, they're not represented in, you know, movies and videos and so on. So a magic is, is in people's heads as, as a part of reality. There's a kind of, you know, almost obsession in a very kind of some ways uncomplicated, celebratory way with material goods and the chance to have them.

So I'm not a, you know, huge expert consumer of US pop culture, but these are things you don't see as much in US pop culture. So do you think that's also part of what's going on here?

Emily Witt

Definitely. When you are in Nigeria, when I was in Nigeria and I would watch a Hollywood blockbuster playing on TV in a bar, I would feel the dissonance. Even not being part of Nigerian culture, even as an outsider, it seemed often very violent, almost craven.

Certain things like romantic comedies and the idea of being a single person in a city living on your own and dating. Nigeria doesn't have that. Urban culture in Lagos is – there's no anonymity, even though it's a giant city with millions and millions of people living together. People know who lives on their street, they know, you know, they know where all their relatives are at. You know, you're getting phone calls every 10 minutes. It's a very communicative social culture. And the individualism in particular of American pop culture doesn't translate very well into Nigeria.

Nicholas Lemann

And then there's the theme. Well, I want to use this as a segue to you describing some of the movies specifically. There's the theme of, you know, the glorious past

of Nigeria, which you almost never see in American movies about Africa, you know, with respect to Nigeria or anywhere else. There's instead, you know, the sense of still, it's sort of primitive. You could say – well, anyway, I won't go into detail about that.

So if you could talk about some of the basic genres of Nigerian cinema, since it is by your account pretty generic, and what the key elements of each genre are and what they're trying to get to in the national consciousness.

Emily Witt

Mmhmm. Yeah. So the movies are very genre based. Even what you might call new Nollywood often has references to the kind of old set of tropes.

So then the main genres that I witness, there's a genre called a glamor movie, which will be urban, a kind of glorification of wealthy urban life, but in a kind of funny ersatz way. So the joke is that there will always be champagne bottles on the table, but nobody's ever opened them or drinking them. [laughs] So there's glamor movies.

There's family movies which are often about some kind of feud. So there might be a mother who has given birth only to daughters, and she wants to conceive a son. And so she goes outside the marriage, has a child, but then 20 years later, the sons are grown up and successful and go crazy. And the family realizes there's been a curse put on the family because of this transgression made by the mother, and a priest is called in to do an exorcism. So that's a kind of typical family story of fortunes won and lost, and marital infidelities, and moral lessons.

There are historical royal movies, I guess they would call them, that are set in a pre-colonial village where a dynasty – these kind of merge with the family movies. For example, a typical plot of that might be a king who disguises himself as a beggar and goes to find a wife or his son. You know, it's a very, almost fairy tale-like themes.

What else? What other movies were there? There's comedies, and there's very often the story of a country bumpkin who goes to the city and has to learn how to be savvy in Lagos or even a smaller provincial city. That's a very common theme of comedies in particular.

Nicholas Lemann

What's the general attitude? Or maybe there isn't a general attitude about, you know, if you start out in a village and move to Lagos and acquire material possessions like a

Cadillac Escalade and a big house. Is that to be celebrated or is that proof that you're corrupt, or what? How are we to think about that process?

Emily Witt

In the movies, the wealth is almost always misbegotten. Even if the character is a good and decent character, you're always meant to be a little suspect of how he or she comes into the money. And usually it depends on what the lesson of the story is. But a good character will come back to the village with that wealth and will show off that wealth and everybody will celebrate it.

But a good character will also share it, will come back from the city with bread to share and goods to give out, perfume, whatever. And a bad character will come back in the chauffeur driven Escalade, and will forget the importance of their familial relationships and will be sucked up in this material culture. And when you ignore your family in a Nollywood movie, it's always to your peril. Something bad will happen to you later for that.

Nicholas Leman

Let's talk about Nollywood as an industry. One of the things I really love about your book is you go through the entire, you know, chain of how it works as a business. So if you could talk a little about that. Who invented it? Where did it come from? Who are the players and what's the evolution look like?

Emily Witt

Yeah, it came out of a little bit of a perfect storm in the Nigerian economy. In 1992, after some structural adjustment programs that devalue the Nigerian currency and cut off funding to stuff like the national television station, there were a lot of not only television producers out of work, but also a shortage of foreign currency with which to import any movies.

And therefore, all the cinemas had closed down. And basically there was a marketer, a guy selling videotapes in Alaba Market in Lagos named Kenneth Nnebue, and he decided to start making movies on the videotapes and using that to sell the tapes.

So he made a movie called *Living in Bondage*. It was an Igbo language movie. It was about a man who sacrifices his wife to a cult in exchange for material riches, and then she comes back to haunt him. And it sold hundreds of thousands of copies. And all these out work television producers realized that they could also earn money

doing this, and so then they just started making movies.

At first, they thought they had to be in Igbo to sell because the Igbo population was maybe a little wealthier, they had VCRs, but they soon realized people were watching them subtitled in English or watching them in Yoruba. And so they started making them in English and all the different languages in Yoruba and Hausa and the industry just expanded. Soon they were copying the videos on DVDs instead, and video CDs.

But what's remarkable about how the industry grew is it never followed any formal channels of capital or distribution. Any of the traditional ways that a movie is funded and distributed abroad never applied to Nollywood. It was always just people making things and selling things in a very informal way.

Nicholas Lemann

Is the audience watching this stuff on – where are they watching it? Are they watching it in theaters, are they watching it on tape, or on mobile devices, or what?

Emily Witt

So movie theaters have only had a comeback in Nigeria for really the past 10 years, and they're still only available to a pretty elite audience. So most people watch, you know, originally watched Nollywood on VCRs at home or in a bar. There would be community viewing centers where somebody would have a TV with a VCR and charge people, you know, pennies, 10 naira, 15 naira to come in and watch a movie there in a communal setting.

Now that people have cell phones, they distribute, like one – data is expensive in Nigeria, but people Bluetooth files to each other or they use USB sticks and pass files around. So now people watch movies on their laptop, on their phones. If they have a good internet connection, a lot of the movies are now on YouTube. And for people who live abroad, there's now a Netflix type service called iRoko that you pay a subscription fee and get unlimited access to movies.

Nicholas Lemann

You know, I think people need to hear, because they have a picture in their head of what it takes to make a movie, how these movies are actually made, how much time it takes, what the budget is like, etc.

Emily Witt

So the range, the traditional Nollywood movie, the budget would be about \$25,000 to \$30,000. They would make the movie in anywhere between seven days to, you know, three weeks, but very, very fast. A producer could make 30 or 40 movies a year. Even more, in some cases. Actors will have hundreds of movies to their names.

But now that cinema culture has returned and Nollywood is trying to be more of a global player, the production values have improved and there are some movies that are now – probably never more than \$500,000 in budget, but for Nigeria, that's a big budget movie.

And they have higher production values they'll use. You know, you can go sometimes to a Nollywood shoot and they're just using a single-lens-reflex camera with a microphone taped onto it. Very rudimentary technology. But I went to a shoot where they were using a big – I forget what it's called. An Alexa Dragon, I think, was the name. You know, a really high-end digital camera. They had proper sound recording technology and lighting and all of that. So it ranges. Yeah.

Nicholas Lemann

What's the total number of films in a year that Nollywood is producing?

Emily Witt

I don't know.

Nicholas Lemann

Right. More than Hollywood.

Emily Witt

More than Hollywood. Thousands of movies. But the number is really difficult to tell because there's no centralized database. The best way that they've gotten numbers in the past is by, the movies have to pass through a censor, a government censor. So however many movies the censor watches in a year gives you some idea. I don't know the number. I'd have to look it up.

Nicholas Lemann

Is it enough that this is a way that people make their living, or are these people, you

know, just turning out a lot of movies and making their living doing something else? Or does it feel like an actual industry that provides full time employment to a bunch of people?

Emily Witt

I mean, almost nobody in Nigeria just has one job. So people are always doing different things. But absolutely, it's a real industry. There are people whose main career is Nollywood. I met makeup artists, I met costume designers, set designers, camera people, producers, directors, and definitely actors, who their primary source of income will be from Nollywood movies and who have worked on hundreds of movies.

And what's exciting is many of these people are just really self-taught. I met one guy who does special effects and he just found his way. He was a sign painter and they outlawed billboards in Lagos, and so he started doing special effects and makeup, just using different food at first, and then now he uses latex and everything. But people really just kind of taught themselves in many cases.

Nicholas Lemann

What would be the Nollywood equivalent of a movie mogul?

Emily Witt

Hmm.

Nicholas Lemann

Are there studios? Are there people who have gotten rich off of Nollywood?

Emily Witt

There are. I didn't necessarily meet those people. They are pretty difficult for an outsider to access, I think, because they're in the market.

So I met with a big production manager in a city called Asaba, where a lot of the low budget movies are now made. It's cheaper than Lagos. And his bosses are, I think, a pair of brothers. They're marketers, which means they sell movies in the big marketplace in Enugu or Asaba, and they fund probably 100 or so, even more, movies a year.

So I think there's three or four in that marketplace culture of Nollywood. Probably three or four really big players. But then in the cinema culture, it's still so new they're kind of figuring it out, but it tends to attract – a much wealthier Nigerian is making movies in that space.

Nicholas Lemann

But you can't go see a physical Nigerian studio with a backlot and all that stuff.

Emily Witt

No, there isn't a studio system, there's no studios. There are places, for example, in the city Asaba, there are rental houses that they just use. They're just always sets. There's even a village that is just a movie village. But one of the things Nollywood filmmakers would complain about was that the government hadn't given any encouragement in the form of helping them build a special studio system or that kind of thing.

Nicholas Lemann

Right now, is there a market for Nollywood films outside of Nigeria?

Emily Witt

It's mostly Nigerians living – Well, there's a big market for Nigerian movies around Africa, for sure. And then outside of Africa, there is the Nigerian diaspora and also people from other west African countries, and maybe other African countries also watch the movies, for sure. And then there's – in the Caribbean, there's a little bit of an audience and in some African-American communities, I think.

Nicholas Lemann

But if you're if you're sitting in New York City today, if you want to watch a Nollywood movie, are you better off going to an African immigrant neighborhood in the Bronx, or are you better off going to the Angelika or Film Forum, or where are you going to see these movies?

Emily Witt

Well, first on YouTube. Yeah. You would look online and find them. But if you wanted to buy a DVD, definitely you would go to a mom and pop store in the Bronx or on Flatbush Avenue. And that's where you would find copies of the movies for sale.

Nicholas Lemann

Thanks, Emily, that was terrifically interesting. And it's a wonderful book, congratulations for that. If our audience wants to follow you online, where do they find you?

Emily Witt

I'm at emilywitt.net. Or my Twitter handle [embot](#).

Nicholas Lemann

Okay, great. Well, that's our show today. Be sure to pick up a copy of Emily's book, *Nollywood: The Making of a Film Empire*, available now. We have a panel event coming up at Columbia on Wednesday, November 8th about Nollywood. Emily Witt will be there, of course, along with Brian Larkin, a professor of anthropology at Barnard College, and Daniel Oriahi, the director of the 2015 Nollywood film *Taxi Driver*. Details about that and all of our upcoming events can be found on our website at globalreports.columbia.edu. That's globalreports.columbia.edu. I'm Nicholas Lemann. Thank you for listening and we'll talk to you soon.