CHAPTER 6

Inside the 'House of Ill Fame': Brothel Prostitution, Feminization of Poverty, and Lagos Life in Nollywood's *The Prostitute*

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Introduction

On Wednesday November 7, 2012, Elizabeth Balogun, a Nigerian college professor, while presenting a paper titled 'Prostitution on Our Campuses: Effects and Solutions,' at a symposium organized by the National Association of Nigerian Students made a startling revelation that 80% of prostitutes in Ogun State of southwestern Nigeria are students of higher institutions.[1] The biochemist moralized and painted the multiple identities of female college undergraduates in a manner that suggests a profitable use of time for upward socio-economic mobility—by day, they attended lectures and 'metamorphose in the evening into a call-girl or pimp.'[2] No member of college communities across Nigeria would deny the presence of student prostitutes (popularly called *aristo*)—indeed, newspapers regularly carried stories about their

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prosecution for breaking anti-prostitution laws.[3] What seems unique about Balogun's submission is the disproportional figure she gave to student prostitutes in the entire population of women involved in sex work in Ogun State.

Until the 1980s, when the Nigerian public began to pay increasing attention to campus prostitution, brothel prostitution was the most popular type of sex work in the country. It was the main symbol and face of the commoditization of sexual desire in the big commercial and administrative centers across Nigeria. International prostitution, another genre of sex work inserted transactional sexual services at the center of the new globalization of humans, capital, and resources in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[4] It proved clearly that global sex work contributes significantly to the sustenance of the broader world economy, despite the attempts by governments and international agencies to criminalize it. Such newspaper headlines as 'Police Raid Brothel, Arrest 54 Prostitutes'; 'Ten Undergraduates on Trial for Prostitution'; and '10,000 Nigerian Prostitutes in Italy, Says Envoy'; attach a criminal image to the three main types of prostitution in Nigeria, equating the commoditization of sex to such highly detested crimes as armed robbery, and drug and arms trafficking.[5]

But *Nollywood*, the Nigerian home video industry, which emerged in the 1990s, more than the newspapers and other visual media, and scholars like Balogun have brought the public and international community closer to the realities of the sub-culture of prostitution in Nigeria. From the 1990s, Nollywood films about prostitution began to engage the intersections of class, ethnicity, gender, and location in the life and times of men and women whose livelihood consists of transactional sexual services. Indeed, they have rendered the most vivid artistic and visual impression of much of the core issues about women's social mobility and the attempt by powerful institutions and people to criminalize sex work, drawing from conflicting secular and religious ideologies about 'decent' and 'immoral' use of leisure, time, and the body.

In this chapter, I will focus on the construction of brothel prostitution in *The Prostitute* (Fred Amata 2001), a Nollywood classic, which, in conjunction with other films, helped put the Nigerian film industry on the global map. I supplement film data with historical and ethnographic sources to contextualize the topic and bridge the gap between reality and fictional representation of the fallen women in Nollywood films.[6] This study investigates how space (a brothel in this regard), shapes identity. A brothel, both in filmic rendition and real life, positions itself as a crucial site in the everyday practice of survival and as a victim of a fractured political system. These contrasting identities of the brothel speak to an all-inclusive narrative of the paradox of the postcolonial society, where the signs of progress co-exist with failure. Unlike existing works that focus generally on Lagos or on sexual-moral degeneration in Nollywood films, the present study extends the scope of investigation by zeroing in on brothel prostitution.[7] The culture, politics, and economy of brothel prostitution connect a small entity (a brothel) to a superstructure (the city). In fact, the symbiotic relationship between the brothel and the city validates the systematic character of the urban space as the location where every component functions to hold up the strength of the whole.

I argue that the portrayal of brothel prostitution in Nollywood films built on pre-existing visual media, and literary and artistic rendition dating back to the 1910s or earlier. The change and continuity in artistic illustration of sex work cannot be understood outside the context of the broader transformation in the society's perception of prostitution, which is deeply shaped by the colonial past and postcolonial realities. Hence, a particular historical moment characterized by the unprecedented attention on transnational prostitution, sexual exploitation of minors, and the scourge of HIV/AIDS, from the 1990s fueled the efflorescence of films about sex work in Nollywood. In addition, the type of prostitution women practice and the way they are depicted in Nollywood films are influenced by the method of solicitation for sex, the location of sexual acts, and the salient notions about female criminality, victimhood, and normality. Indeed, more than any other visual media, Nollywood films on brothel prostitution have opened up new ways of understanding Nigeria's complex sexual economy, and its intimate connection to the core infrastructure of politics and nation-building. The films have established that the secret lives of women who sell sex, and men who buy it are intricately linked with the expansive culture of leisure and expression of desire, which manifests in multiple domains—from the dilapidated brothels serving poor-working class Nigerians in the over-crowded slums of Lagos, to the most beautiful resort and elite neighborhoods in Abuja, the nation's capital. Location matters—as in real estate—in both the filmic impression of prostitution and the true-life experience of prostitutes.

This chapter does not counter the popular argument among scholars that Nollywood is a crucial site through which negative stereotypes of African women are formed, reinforced, and circulated.[8] Rather it argues—with particular reference to *The Prostitute* and drawing from ethnographic and historical data—that the story of prostitution in Nollywood films goes beyond the depiction of women as objects of sexual pleasure. In other words, there are alternative ways of reading the representation of sex and sexuality beyond the question of women's victimhood and gender stereotype. Embedded in Nollywood's representation of prostitutes and prostitution are significant insights into the big issues related to social mobility, migration, and accumulation of capital. Both the texts and the subtexts; the spoken and the unspoken narratives; and the plots and sub-plots of Nollywood films on prostitution provide first-rate insights into the socio-economic, political, and cultural circumstances that placed sex work at the centre of everyday life in Nigeria.[9] I argue that reading the life and times of prostitutes in Nollywood films beyond the narrative of negative gender stereotype provides another way of looking at the role of men, the state and its infrastructure of political power in Nigeria's sexual economy across location and time. Indeed, Nollywood films place the image of sexual promiscuity and commoditization of sex alongside important political statements that compel audiences to reflect on the structures that undermine the status of Nigerian women. Put together, *The Prostitute* offers a unique insight opportunity into the political economy of brothels. It probes the paradox in the narratives of women as the object of sexual pleasure on one hand, and the deep-rooted inequalities that placed women at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder on the other. Thus, the movie makes a lot of political statements that could be adopted in the fight for gender equality and women's socio-political and economic empowerment.

Writing and Theorizing Nollywood: Academic Thoughts on Africa's Most Prolific Movie Industry

A short excursion into the existing literature on Nollywood is crucial for coming to grips with the main arguments and contributions of this chapter to African sexuality and film studies. The birth of Nollywood in the 1990s has been matched by serious scholarly interest in the diverse aspects of one of the world's most prolific home video industries. Early

research focuses on how the demise of the postcolonial Nigerian cinema culture and the Yoruba traveling theatre troupes, and economic recession paved the way for the rise of Nollywood in the 1990s. Scholars, deploying literary, popular culture, postcolonial, and anthropological discursive tools among others, generally pay attention to the intersections of globalization, technology transfer, the changing landscape of leisure, and parallel global modernity in the making of Nollywood.[10] The transformation of the culture of film consumption helped Nollywood to establish itself across the Nigerian social spectra. In his interesting article on Nollywood spectatorship, Onookome Okome makes an overlapping distinction between two major sites of public consumption of Nollywood films—'street and street corner' and 'video parlour' audiences—weaving the peculiar postcolonial reality of the city into a much bigger narrative of the multicultural environment that made Nollywood a peculiarly African art. It is the 'acute notation of locality,' he opines, that gives Nollywood an 'unprecedented acceptability as *the* local cinematic expression in Nigeria and indeed in Africa.'[11] The intersectionality of space and spectatorship/consumption of Nollywood films is emblematic of the deep-rooted social economic inequality that manifests in town planning policies, urban management, and aesthetics of living—especially in the country's big cities.

Yet, the representation of a rainbow of 'modern and traditional African culture' in Nollywood has also attracted the attention of writers. Africanist scholars have established that Nollywood's success is partly attributed to the Nigerian-centeredness of its stories.[12] Not only do they treat Nollywood as a significant arm of postcolonial studies that seek to reverse the Western hegemonic gaze on Africa and its people, scholars have suggested that it has helped to decolonize the minds of African audiences with empowering self-representational images of local cultural formation close to their real and imagined existence. The discourse of the creativity of Nollywood producers and directors, the entrepreneurial versatility of the predominantly local financiers, and the democratic mode of distribution of films, all counter the assumption that nothing works in Nigeria. Although the poor technical qualities of Nollywood films have attracted some debates over time, critics of Nollywood films, especially the academic class, generally agree that the home video industry is a truly Nigerian success story that validates the possibility of an indigenous/local path to sustainable development in Africa.[13]

Nollywood rarely makes a political statement like the Francophone African cinema celebrated at the *Festival Panafricain Du Cinema et De La Television de Ouagadougou* (FESPACO). However, in a study titled 'Political Critique in Nigerian Video Film,' Jonathan Haynes attempts to revise 'the conventional wisdom about the apolitical character' of Nigerian movies, focusing on a couple of films that attempt to instill 'popular political consciousness' after the end of military dictatorship in 1999 when filmmakers began to feel safer to produce polemical works.[14]

Newer scholarship on such themes as the intersections of Nollywood and youth culture have demonstrated that the film industry creates alternative avenues for some young and marginalized citizens to construct non-state structures to express themselves and highlight their own relevance against the odds imposed by limited resources for a decent life.[15] The burgeoning works on the transnational processes that globalized Nollywood are important for two complementary reasons. Not only do they demonstrate that Nigeria has an enviable place in global cultural production in the neo-liberal world, they complicate the aesthetic impact of human movement across geopolitical borders and socially constructed international space.[16] As Matthias Krings and Okome have shown in their co-edited collection, *Global Nollywood,* the transnational aesthetics of Nollywood have created new ways of framing the changing face of the new African Diaspora and cultural globalization in the twenty-first century.[17] Drawing on the works of Achille Mbembe and Moradewun Adejunmobi, among other scholars, they complicate core themes such as cultural and phenomenological proximity, which give Nollywood films a transnational/pan-African appeal, and highlight the controversy associated with naming Nollywood an 'African cinema' given the presence of celluloid filmmaking culture still in vogue in many French West African countries.[18]

Other genres of scholarship have been critical, looking beyond the euphoria of the celebration of Nollywood as an entrepreneurial success, its global recognition and display of Africanity, and the transnational processes it has unleashed. Inherent in the depiction of Afromodernity in Nollywood films is the misrepresentation of African cultural mores (especially the depiction of occultism, cultism, fetishism, witchcraft, devilish) in a way that validates Euro-centric notions of Africa's primitivity and racial backwardness. Nollywood films such as *Osuofia in London* (Kingsley Ogoro 2003), depicting the folly of an African villager encountering Western modernity for the first time, with all the barrage of

idiosyncratic visual language, critics have argued, fed into the prevailing notion of Africans' otherness, which has sustained the unequal geopolitical power relations between Africa and the Euro-American world for centuries. Such films, to some scholars, are not only anachronistic, they are also a spanner in the wheel of the project to create a world of mutual respect for global cultures and nationalities. After a careful review of the struggle by nationalists and radical social activists against injustice, Akinwumi Isola, a leading Yoruba poet and scholar, gives the following comment about the content of Nollywood films: 'The worry about the Nigerian Film Industry, therefore, is that many filmmakers seem not to care about the necessity to struggle against the economic, cultural and psychological exploitation of Africa by the West in conjunction with the oppressors at home. An objective look at the type of stories we tell, the language we use, the appearance of the characters—costume, hair-do, and make-up, tends to indicate that many filmmakers are mindless copycats and shameless imitators.'[19] In a nutshell, Akinwumi wants Nollywood to be 'radical in the defense of sustainable human society' or to have an 'ideology,' critical of Africa's past and mindful of its present postcolonial predicaments. Nollywood films, for Isola and other critics, must go beyond entertainment and the quest to make money—they must instill some African-centered consciousness.

The gendered dimension of the critique of Nollywood is the most important for this chapter. Drawing from a wide range of disciplines—critical feminism, media and film, and cultural studies—some academic critics including Mfon Ekpootu have found Nollywood films problematic in their portrayal of women as objects of an erotic gaze for men, strategically deployed to uphold a normative male-dominated cultural, economic, and political order.[20] Two elements of the conflicting framing of women in Nollywood have been identified. One sought to demonize women's place in established indigenous cultures as 'wicked' wife and mother-in-law, witch, and an embodiment of the evil that befalls a prosperous family and community. The other sexualizes women as 'fallen' beings and 'lazy whores,' who shamelessly use their bodies for economic survival. The commoditization of sex in Nollywood films, scholars contend, is a vicious cycle—not only does it mirror a Nigerian patriarchal hierarchy, it also helps to sustain the disempowerment of women. Nollywood is a significant cultural artefact in contemporary Nigeria, and to underestimate its role in shaping or dictating the tempo of social change, and perceptions across ethnicity, gender, and social class

is to miss a vital element of postcolonial transformation in Africa's most populous country.

While all these critiques of Nollywood films are in order, it is also important to consider other dimensions—such as the perspectives of female actresses—in order to bridge the gap between theoretical exposition and reality. Many female actresses (including Funke Akindele, Omotola Jolade-Ekeinde, and Genevieve Nnaji, among others), have reached the peak of their careers playing provocative roles like prostitute, witch, and wicked mother-in-law. Women in Nollywood have played significant roles as directors, actresses, producers, and distributors. This is a radical departure from the celluloid cinema culture, which was openly biased against women. It is crucial to consider the following questions: Do female actresses feel empowered or disempowered when they play stereotypical gender roles? Do they even think that their movie roles have any implication for the ways women are treated in real life? To what extent does a scholastic interpretation of female degeneration in Nollywood films effectively connect with lived experience on the ground? Who should determine the content of films—the film producers who want to make money and their enthusiastic audience on the one hand, or the government censor board and scholars who read the script beyond entertainment, on the other?

The Brothel, Sexual Pleasure, and Everyday Life in *The Prostitute*

What we know as brothels today—buildings where prostitutes live on short- and long-term bases—began to emerge in big Nigerian cities like Lagos around the 1910s. From this period, Nigerian educated elites and the British colonialists labelled brothels 'houses of ill fame,' inhabited by women who broke the moral code of 'decency,' luring men into the life of sin, and spreading venereal disease (VD).[21] Yet, the term 'house of ill fame' is not of Nigerian origin; it was borrowed from the global anti-prostitution and moralist literature on 'white slave traffic'—the international network of sex work traversing many countries in the first half of the twentieth century. This literature, including the classic, *Fighting the Traffic in Young Girls* by Albert Bell, render agonizing images and drawings of young girls trafficked into brothels across Europe and South America while calling on religious bodies to fight the atrocities of traffickers.[22]

Before the advent of electronic media in Nigeria, print media was the main site through which the images of brothels and prostitution were framed. By the 1940s, it had been turned into a critical site for debating the medico-moral implication of prostitution through news reports, editorials, and correspondence in the advice manuals on love and relationships.[23] Indeed, Nigerian urbanites enjoyed debate over prohibition or regulation of brothels in the newspapers because it allowed them to express contrasting views on the intersection of the parallel forces of modernity, colonial progress, and decolonization. One feature of the print media's representation of prostitution was the overwhelming number of male voices. Indeed, with the exception of Miss Silva, the pseudonymous editor of *West African Pilot's* advice column (Milady's Bower) and very few others, virtually all the stories published about fallen women were written by men. This is not accidental—men, because of the lead they had in acquiring Western education, monopolized the print media's letter-writing and correspondence culture, which featured the life and times of brothel prostitutes. An important transformation in the print media's portrayal of fallen women came in 1967 when the *Daily Times*, a leading Nigerian newspaper published the 'self-confession' and photos of an unnamed prostitute for three weeks—between February 2 and 16.[24] This story set the tone for much of the postcolonial self-representation or self-profiling of prostitutes. The last sentence of the prostitute's interesting account of life on the street and in the brothels challenged the dominant perception about women who sold sex for a living: 'I regard myself as a normal member of any society that claims to be decent. I am aware that I am in a situation which is a part of human life. If tomorrow diverts my course, I will take it as a natural sequence of life.'[25] This statement humanizes the identity of a prostitute and renders her work a vital element of daily life.

Aside from print media, the cinema and television were popular visual media through which the images of prostitution were rendered from the 1940s to the 1980s.[26] However, the cinema rarely told African stories from the perspective of Africans; in fact, much of the cinema films about prostitution featured European stories, and actors and actresses. They were also set in Europe and America. Even cinema films with African themes (produced and directed by Nigerians) rarely engaged the subject of prostitution—partly because of an anticipated unfavorable response from the public. Most of these cinema films were financed by Euro-American firms who also determined the story line.[27]

A significant change in the visual media's construction of prostitution took place in the 1990s when Nollywood arrived. The advent of Nollywood marked a significant revolution in the culture of film viewing and socialization. It is a home video culture, which allows families and communities to congregate in the comfort of their living room/open space to collectively enjoy stories they can relate to. It is a far cheaper and more accessible form of entertainment than going to the cinema. Nigerian film producers are willing to experiment with new stories, including those of sex, because Nollywood films are self-financed, low-budget projects with limited government interference or censorship. One of the least acknowledged advantages of the inroad of Nollywood into mainstream Nigerian popular culture is the opportunity it gives women to assume the primary role of telling gender-specific stories. The era when men monopolized the narrative about women disappeared completely. Nollywood films about prostitution paved the way for the rise of first-rate African female actresses whose talent brought audiences closer to the secret life of sex work and the paradox it created in a postcolonial society.

One such film is *The Prostitute* directed by Fred Amata and released in 2001. It is based on the 'true-life' story of one Ugonma, an ex-prostitute. *The Prostitute* has an established legacy in the history of Nollywood—it is among the first Nigerian films to provide detailed insight into the culture and economy of brothels, and more importantly the career of women who ply their trade in it. The film has a multidimensional plot structure, but the core plot revolves around Veno, played by Jolade-Ekeinde, one of Africa's most influential movie stars, listed in '*Time*'s 100 Most Influential People in the World' (2013). Veno's entry into the brothel mirrors the conventional stories of how poverty leads to moral degeneration, regularly told in Nollywood films. Hence her story did not start from the brothel, but from a rural community in eastern Nigeria. The first scene of the film depicts a family sobbing over the loss of Veno's father's business. The family's financial distress would lead to two complementary crises—Veno's father becomes an alcoholic and unable to contribute to the running of the home, while her studies suffer because of a lack of money. Here, the core features of a broken home come to light. Veno seeks the help of a family member to get a job in order to escape from poverty. Instead of helping her to get a job, the relative arranges for men to rape Veno. However, Veno resists the sexual violence, killing one of her potential rapists. She is then arrested and remanded in jail for weeks because she could not hire a defense attorney. When one of the policemen opens her jail cell in an attempt to rape her, she escapes in the middle of the night and endures a difficult road journey to Lagos, the nerve center of the Nigerian economy and social life. She becomes a 'fugitive criminal' in a city big enough to accommodate all shades of humans and lexicons of identity. The popular Yoruba statement, *Eko gbo' le, o gbo' le* (Lagos accommodates the thief, the lazy) is definitely shrouded in the long-standing reputation of Lagos as a container of all kinds of people, who like its superfluous social and economic reputation.

Life in Lagos, Africa's most populous city, is far from easy. Newcomers must contend with inadequate job opportunities and navigate cultural integration. They can find themselves living in the slums or makeshift structures if they do not have friends and relatives in the city. Lagos life can be bright or dark, depending on which side of the divide an individual occupies in the fractured city where wealth and poverty coexist along diametrically opposing, yet socially normalized lines. The contrasting duality of the quintessential postcolonial city of Lagos as a site of opportunity and untold hardship presents itself to Veno. As the narrative progresses, Veno narrowly escapes rape by another policeman, when she enters a police station to seek help. She naively thinks that the popular slogan 'The Policeman is Your Friend' is true. 'I was scared. It was my first encounter with the hard realities of Lagos,' Veno reflects, as she wanders around at night after her sad experience at the police station. After six days of roaming the streets of Lagos, begging for food and water, luck begins to shine on the teenager when she gets a job at a restaurant. The restaurant owner promises to shelter and feed her in exchange for her services. No salary or other financial remuneration. Veno accepts this offer, with appreciation and a powerful relief. She gets down to a multitasking routine—cleaning the floor while washing plates and cooking—characteristic of most restaurant work in Lagos. Here, the audience is presented with a very hardworking teenager, who has internalized her present status; deplorable as it is, it is still better than her immediate past of vagrancy and hunger. In keeping with her narrative of poor luck, sexual harassment from her boss's boyfriend forces her out of her temporarily settled life and she finds herself back on the street for the second time.

Veno's journey from the street of Lagos into a brothel reflects the common text in most Nollywood films that prostitution is one of the last

options for women encountering poverty. For Nigerian feminist scholars and activists, an image of this type is distasteful for it reduces women to sexual objects or objects of sexual desire; it is also an obstacle in the struggle for gender equality.[28] Yet, sex work in *The Prostitute* is not some innate inclination, but environmentally induced. It is framed as an alternative mode of survival and as a consequence of a corrupt criminal justice system, sexual violence, and irresponsible government that could not guarantee free education nor protect an endangered teenage girl from her social adversaries. The facelessness and anonymity of Lagos are comparable to what obtains in most first-class cities in the world; but the criminality of the police and inefficient justice system gives the narrative in *The Prostitute* a tone that is 'unique' to Nigeria and many African countries in the twenty-first century.

The Prostitute then takes its audience into the political-economy of a brothel and the everyday life of Veno and other residents. '*Ashawo na work*' (Prostitution is work), the brothel's madam and manager emphasizes in Pidgin English, as she explains the brothel culture to Veno, who is expected to make a weekly payment for her room. The madam's emphasis that 'prostitution is work' seeks to de-moralize the prevailing perception of sex work as a 'lazy' woman's means of escaping the rigor of 'conventional' job. This statement could inadvertently ease Veno's apprehension about her uncertain future and a fearful reality. This particular scene, although short, is also able to convey a provocative political message about social class, poverty, and corruption, which Nigerians believe is responsible for the underdevelopment of their country. Another statement by the madam, *Abi you think say government money na everybody de chop? Make I tell you, poor man pikin no de chop government money* (Do you think everybody is spending government's money? Let me tell you, a poor man's child does not have access to government's money), while justifying the economic reason for prostitution also affirms the public knowledge that only rich Nigerians have access to the nation's wealth, mostly through embezzlement of public funds. The majority of the citizens and the economically marginalized youth must devise survival strategies in coping with poverty.

The scene that follows sheds light on the process of initiation into brothel prostitution. Lola, the head of the prostitutes (with noisy interjections of disagreement from her colleagues) reads the following rules as prerequisites for a successful career in a brothel to Veno: 'Rule No.1: always insist a customer uses condom before he can service you, except

your boyfriend...; Rule No. 2: Don't ever snatch anybody's boyfriend or customer, it is a taboo...; Rule No.3: always insist on pay before service...'

Veno goes into action—she solicits in front of the brothel, receives the attention of a male customer who follows her into her modestly furnished small room. She pulls out a condom. The remaining portion of the scene depicts the semi-nude couple having what appears like a mutually-satisfying sex. Scenes like this worry critics of Nollywood films who believe that it further corrupts the Nigerian society, which rarely enforces age restriction for movie viewing. But the actions of the couple before sex appear to show a typical brothel interaction—a transient and a one-round sexual encounter with mostly anonymous men. The brothel room is made for one main purpose—sex. Any pre-sex conversation and socialization mostly take place at the bar or other solicitation areas, not in the room. We do not know if Veno is sharing her room with other residents but it is clearly not unusual in real life for prostitutes to share rooms. Thus, to extend the utility of a brothel room beyond sex is to deprive other potential co-users of the space (Fig. 6.1).

Ethnographic and historical evidence support the filmic impression of the intersection of location and the clientele of brothel prostitution in *The Prostitute*. A newcomer into prostitution like Veno attracts a lot of male attention because each brothel maintains a pool of customers who could easily identify a new resident for patronage. The ambiance of the brothel in *The Prostitute* is consistent with the general organization of brothels in real life. The main entrance of the brothel has a solicitation space and a bar. Sex is therefore not the only activity that takes place in a brothel. The bar and dancing space are expected to aid the business of sexual pleasure and complement the income accruing from the weekly rent that prostitutes pay. Prostitutes dance to attract their drunken customers. The bar allows prostitutes and men to socialize, share drinks, and stories before proceeding to the room for sex. Not all men would follow this predictable progression—some would simply drink and leave. Yet the dancing space provides young and upcoming artists and DJs the opportunity to experiment and perfect their skills before a friendly brothel crowd. Admission into the brothel shows is usually free. Hence, young people in the slums of Lagos who could not afford the entry fees for the expensive clubs in the rich neighborhood patronize the brothel for free entertainment and affordable alcoholic beverages. In fact, to see a brothel as mainly a location for sex is to underestimate the resilience and

Fig. 6.1 A Brothel 'Makossa Hotel' and a Mosque at Osodi, Lagos. Photo by Saheed Aderinto. Summer 2013

creativity of a teeming population of Nigerian youth. However, illegal activities, such as trade in controlled substances (like marijuana), dominated by men who congregated in and around the brothels, intensify the public stereotyping of them as the 'dens of unsavory elements.' Brothels flourish in Nigerian cities, not only because they serve the needs of the numerous urban youths, but also because of the official perception of them. In strict legal terms, brothels are illegal. However, they are tolerated. The police would only raid a brothel during the day if its manager did not fulfill an informal arrangement for regular bribes or for the police to exploit the prostitutes themselves. Night raids of brothels, for any reason, are very rare.

The ambiance of the brothel works well for Veno. She meets Segun Arinze (as Razor), while he is having beer and puffing cigarettes in the bar. Like her colleagues, Veno practices prostitution 'without emotions.' But meeting Razor, 'the only man [she] ever loved' would

change everything. Razor is an armed robber, whom she describes as 'mysterious' and 'dangerous.' Falling in love with Razor goes against the grain in brothel prostitution, which is constructed mainly around the love of money. During Veno's initiation into the brothel, all the residents agree that money is the true essence of prostitution. '*Na that one be ash-ewo*' (that is real prostitution), one of the residents pontificates over the significance of money in sex work. However, they disagree over the prospect of falling in love with and getting married to one of their customers. A true prostitute, some of them believe, does not fall in love with a customer.

The spoken language of the film conforms to the changing space, theme, and character of the brothel prostitution. Veno speaks 'regular' Nigerian English, which would pass her for a 'decent,' 'properly' raised, and 'educated' young girl. However, the dominant language of the brothel is Pidgin English, a 'corrupted' version of 'conventional' Nigerian English mixed with local African words, sayings, and statements. Pidgin English is socially constructed as the language of the street, spoken by the uneducated and low-class Nigerians. In reality, this social construction is flawed because many highly educated Nigerians, including college professors, speak Pidgin English fluently. Yet, it provides the opportunity for Nigerians across ethnicities to break language barriers, especially in public spaces such as markets. Veno joins her colleagues in speaking Pidgin English to customers. But she speaks 'regular' Nigerian English most of the time. One could argue that this is a deliberate agenda of the film producer and director to position Veno as an 'alien' in the brothel—or an individual struggling to fit into an environment she does not belong to.

In a comparative context, language is one of the distinctive differences between brothel, and campus and international prostitution—it points to the question of class and self-defined identity, framed by the location where sexual acts take place or the method of solicitation for sex. Campus prostitutes are expected to speak 'regular' Nigerian English because they are deemed 'educated,' 'clean,' and 'cosmopolitan.' The linguistic diversity of *The Prostitute*, therefore, contrasts with films about transnational prostitution such as *Glamour Girls, 2* (Onu 1996).[29] Campus prostitution is constructed as a 'decent' and 'respectable' type of sex work, not only because the *aristos* provide services to rich and politically powerful men, but because they are assumed to be 'presentable.' Campus and international prostitutes are adjudged as girls with a future,

unlike their brothel counterparts who assume the identity of 'poor and disease-stricken' women, struggling tenaciously to survive in the most impoverished neighborhoods where brothels are located. Yet the social construction of both the space where prostitution takes place and the identity of prostitutes reproduced in Nollywood films is very fluid. It is not unusual for non-students, including former brothel prostitutes, to live permanently in campus hostels for the purpose of practicing prostitution. Certainly, language and location shape identity—identity and social grouping determine social privilege and political capital.

Exiting the Brothel: Violence and the Moral Pedagogy of Nollywood in *The Prostitute*

Competition for customers in the well-defined brothel space is very common and all the rules self-imposed by prostitutes cannot prevent conflict. The hallmark of brothel prostitution, effectively captured in *The Prostitute*, is that of constant strife among prostitutes, between the prostitutes and the madam/brothel manager, and among male customers who compete for sexual love. Conflict and resolution go hand in hand, for a violent brothel would lose much of its customers to rivals within the same neighborhood.

Lola, the head of the brothel residents, is angry that her former customer dumps her for Veno. Instead of addressing the transgression with a physical fight, she places a diabolical *juju* (charm) on Veno's underwear. Veno becomes seriously ill, collapsing in public to the bewilderment of passerby. Three white-garmented Christian preachers, not an ambulance or a hospital, bring her back to life after a fervent on-the-spot prayer, characteristic of Nigerian Christianity. She finds out that Lola was responsible for her sickness and an inevitable fight takes them to the madam's office where Lola receives additional warnings. The scenes depicting Veno's hypnotization and revival by the white-garmented Christian preachers all reinforce what Jean and John Comaroff have termed 'occult economies' of urban Africa.[30] Much of the criticism of Nollywood films has centered on the (mis) characterization of a fearful existence with the aid of occult power unleashed in the endless struggle for basic survival. The manifestation of the occult as a component of 'traditional' African culture remains relevant in a postcolonial society, where spiritual explanation for failure helps fill the void of social alienation, poverty, and marginalization of the masses.

So, when Lola eventually dies, Veno becomes the main suspect. The police arrest all the prostitutes and start an investigation that reveals that two other prostitutes poisoned Lola for being troublesome. Lola's death represents a turning point in Veno's life—the brutality of brothel prostitution shows itself in a completely different light. It is not just about the usual conflict over customers and jealousy among prostitutes, but death—the ultimate sacrifice for the adversaries of living. As Veno rethinks her lifestyle, Razor returns from a robbery operation with 250,000 naira ($800) and attempts to fulfill his promise to marry and take Veno out of the brothel. However, the operation has left a deadly trail and a gun duel with the police leaves Razor severely hurt. In his defenseless state, he falls into the hands of an angry mob who lynch him. Veno takes the 250,000 naira and returns to her village to reunite with her family and 'start a new life.'

The story of Veno and brothel prostitution necessitates an engagement with the moral pedagogy of Nollywood films. Nollywood films about moral infringement—such as the social aberration of a prostitute and a wicked mother-in-law—usually end with a moral message in which the victim is avenged, and the villain rebuked. Indeed, this is one of the central elements of African visual art and expressive culture dating back centuries before the advent of cinema. This moral teaching of Nollywood films suggests that both the film producers and actors and actresses are conscious of the negative impact the stories and prototypes portrayed in their films could have on gender and social relations. The moral teaching of Nollywood is expected to create what Brian Larkin has termed, 'aesthetics of outrage,'—the audience are expected to be provoked, stimulated, and vivified.[31]

The moral pedagogy of Nollywood is reinforced at the end of the narratives in *The Prostitute* through an environment-centered interpretation of vice. 'Unknown to many,' the last text of the film opines 'most young girls fall into prostitution through no fault of their own. This is a call for parents, teachers, and society at large to please help and assist such ladies who fall into such situations. Say no to prostitution.' If the film turns Veno into a hero, it gives Razor a villain's end. Razor's lynching, as horrific as it is, is justified because armed robbers are the enemies of the public. Razor deserves to die because he was also a killer. However, the statement that 'most young girls fall into prostitution through no fault of their own' also deprives women who voluntarily practice prostitution of their self-assured agency. In addition, the

scenes depicting the use of a condom by Veno feed into a major public campaign against HIV/AIDS in the first decade of the twenty-first century. It is definitely a way of gaining some patronage from government and non-governmental institutions involved in the HIV/AIDs eradication. But the religious audience of the film sees it as another way of encouraging sex outside wedlock. The use of a condom, for them, indirectly encourages sexual promiscuity.

Conclusion

Aside from being among the top three home video industries in the world, Nollywood has registered as a strong cultural force both in Africa and globally. The death of cinema culture in the late 1980s paved the way for the rise of Nollywood in the 1990s. People patronized Nollywood films, not because of their technological or artistic perfection or high-quality films, but because they spoke to their daily struggles. Indeed, the distortion or exaggeration of everyday life in Nollywood films could not negatively affect its patronage, largely because the industry fills a vacuum created by the limited choices available for affordable leisure and recreation.

Still, the emergence of Nollywood coincided with the new wave of campaigns against domestic and international prostitution in Nigeria. Nollywood not only began to produce films about sex work in increasing number from the late 1990s, it helped shaped popular and institutional consciousness about changing gender roles and political power relations across ethnicity, place, and class. The main agenda of this chapter has been therefore to examine the representation of brothel prostitution in *The Prostitute*, a Nollywood classic released in 2001. As we have seen, the film provides an unusual perspective on diverse themes including poverty, underdevelopment, and corruption, all of which broader Nigerian society has constructed as responsible for tensions in Nigeria's recent nation-building narratives. Thus, the story of brothel prostitution goes beyond sex and sexual services—it extends to a broad array of themes central to everyday life in Nigeria.

Notes

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PART III

Transgressive Women?