

THE MAKING OF This Is Nollywood

Kathryn Mora

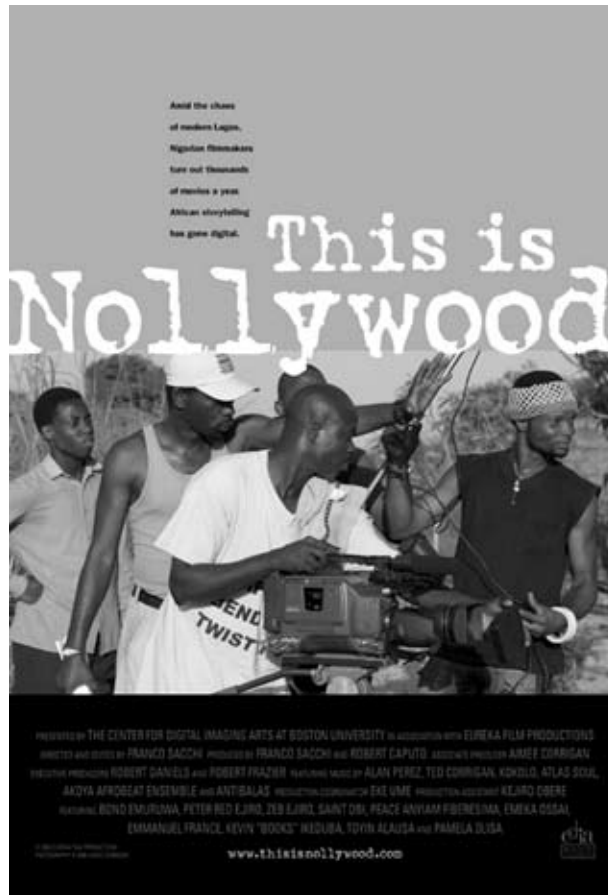
Early in 2003, in Boston, Franco Sacchi opened the *New York Times* to the business section. Filmmakers are always on the hunt for new ideas for their next film. Immediately, a story caught his eye. Nollywood, as the African film industry is called, had created thousands of jobs and made hundreds of millions of dollars in Lagos, Nigeria. Sacchi tried to imagine what it was like to make movies in Nigeria but found it difficult.

"My Uncle lived in Africa all his life—owned a house in Zambia in the '70s and '80s and worked in Lagos, Nigeria. When I was a teenager I remember my uncle and cousins visiting us in Italy and shared all these wild stories about Lagos. I had all these images and memories of this crazy place—Lagos," Sacchi says. "Then I really understood that this is a really, really interesting story . . . It's not just that they [African film industry] make 2,000 films a year, but that they make them in Nigeria."

Sacchi was born in a small town in Zambia and when he was only three, he moved with his family back to their homeland in Trieste, Italy. "I don't remember Africa, but my family always talked about Africa. Most people who haven't lived there on a day-to-day basis learn about this country through films or from what they read," says Sacchi. "This promotes more stereotypes. Africa to us was a real place, not an exotic place, not a scary place or too beautiful—but it was always just a place. I have these stories about going to the grocery store, and hanging out on the weekends . . ."

He continues, "I happened to grow up to become a documentary filmmaker. I was interested in seeing how Africans went about creating the third largest video industry in the world. Even if I hadn't lived in Africa with my family, I would have probably been attracted to this story anyway because this is a story about filmmaking and how technologies impact the ability of making films."

Compelled to make the documentary about Nollywood, Sacchi approached Howard Phillips, associate director of the Center for Digital Imaging Arts (CDIA) at Boston University, where Sacchi teaches and is also Artist in Residence. Phillips suggested that he pitch the idea to CDIA. Immediately he started to work on the proposal.



Sacchi wanted to dispel the stereotypes Americans have conjured up in their minds about what Africa is and what it isn't. Equally important, he wanted to show how today's technology contributed to its success in filmmaking. According to Sacchi, the Nollywood story is an African story that is different from what people have heard about Africa, such as HIV/AIDS, famine, government corruption, and civil war. Nollywood is not a story that will fit these stereotypes, but is instead about making movies and living in Africa like any other place in the world.

The Filmmaker

Except for a few months in his twenties, Sacchi had not been back to Africa since the 1980s. In the meantime, he graduated with a degree in Political Science from the University of Bologna in Italy and earned an M.A. in Visual Arts from Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts. As a freelance producer, director, and editor, he made several documentaries that explored a variety of cultural,

political, and social interpretations of reality. The best known of these was *American Eunuchs*, aired in 2004 on the Sundance Channel and on Channel 5 in the UK. He was the cinematographer as well as the producer, co-director, and editor. The film, which depicts the bizarre and often tragic world of eunuchs, was shown at several national and international film festivals, including the prestigious International Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam (IDFA).

Sacchi collaborates on an ongoing basis with two news magazines and with the international branch of Italian Public Television as a broadcast journalist/producer. He has worked for over six years in the Department of Educational Services at Avid Technology. His clients included ABC, 20/20, ESPN, NBC Dateline, and Telemundo.

In 2005 Sacchi returned to Nigeria to do a positive story about this country. Though filled with anticipation and optimism, he had a tremendous amount of work to do before *This Is Nollywood*, his story in film, would become a reality.

The History of Nollywood

A variety of factors influenced the birth and growth of Nollywood. Some believe that it started in 1992 when a Nigerian distributor

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found himself with thousands of blank VHS tapes that were not selling very well. The businessman invested \$2,000 to make a movie on one of the tapes and called it *Living in Bondage*. The movie sold over one million copies. Today, digital cameras are used with digital non-linear editing software that dramatically reduces the time it takes to make movies.

Another factor that influenced the growth of Nollywood was that videos imported from the West and India, primarily for home viewing, were not particularly popular. This motivated Nigerians to make their own videos. Also, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, many movie theaters closed because of the high crime in Lagos and other Nigerian cities, especially after dark.

The Nollywood film industry, centered in Lagos, is the third largest producer of feature films in the world. The differences between Nollywood, the center of the Nigerian video feature film industry, Hollywood, the center of the American film industry, and Bollywood, the center of the Hindi-language film industry in Mumbai (Bombay), India, are that Nollywood films are shot in an average of ten days.

The cost for making each Nollywood film is approximately \$15,000 to \$20,000. The money to finance Nollywood films comes mostly from local businesses. Nollywood has grown from nothing to a \$250 million dollar a year industry in 13 years and employs thousands of people. In 2006, two thousand full-length feature films were released.

Nigerians are able to make so many films because non-linear editing has become an inexpensive process through computers, and a high quality video camera now only costs about \$5,000. These films are not shown in theatres, but instead are recorded on VCDs, video compact discs that can store a motion picture with sound up to 700 MB and costs only a few dollars to buy or a few pennies to rent. In contrast, a DVD (digital video disc) stores from 4 GB to 9 GB of data but is more expensive. A VCD can be played on a DVD player, but a DVD cannot be played on VCD player.

Thirty new titles are delivered to Nigerian shops and market stalls every week. On average, a film sells 50,000 copies. Since each disk costs only a few dollars, they are affordable for most Nigerians. In Lagos, there are film markets and video shops in shopping malls as well as shops in small villages. Since piracy is a big problem, the films are made for immediate use. People can also rent or view films in video parlors.

The Project Draws Collaborators

When Aimee Corrigan, a freelance photographer and writer and director of the Practicum Program at CDIA, heard about the *This Is Nollywood* project from Sacchi, she knew she wanted to be part of it. She felt that her love of Africa, experience as a still photographer, and producer of her own projects could be invaluable as a member of the filmmaking team.

As part of the Practicum Program at CDIA, Corrigan coordi-

nates web, photo, video, and 3D productions that capture the spirit of dozens of non-profit companies in the Boston area. One of the core missions of CDIA is to create media that serve the community. The Practicum allows students to use their skills to make a real impact in the world.

"I've always had a camera. I remember when I was eight and we had a day at school when we were supposed to bring in our hobby. And all these kids—their desks were covered with old recipes, cookies, ballet shoes, a tutu, and the whole works," says Corrigan. "And I didn't have anything, no decorations, nothing, just a camera sitting there, and it was a Polaroid camera. People would come by and say, 'What's on your desk?' And I'd say, 'Nothing, just a camera.' I'd take their picture and by the end of the day, I'd have all their pictures—and that was my hobby."

Educated at Colorado College with a B.A. in Philosophy and a minor in African Studies, Corrigan completed parts of her degree at the Center for European Studies in The Netherlands and at the University of Zimbabwe. *The Village Heals: HIV/AIDS in Rural Zimbabwe*, Corrigan's first documentary project, was presented at the University of Zimbabwe in 2001.

Since then she has produced media for several organizations in Boston and London. They include Life Is Good, Inc.; Action for Southern Africa; Project Joy; and The Panos Institute. Corrigan is currently producing a documentary called *After the Storm*, about Hurricane Katrina's impact on Mississippi's poorest children

"I always want to be a part of something that shows the other side, the colors, vibrancy, the hope, the brilliance, the optimism. I think that's why I'm here at CDIA. I want to be a vehicle for stories that inspire people. I want to show the world that people are doing wonderful and innovative things in the face of so much," says Corrigan.

About the time Corrigan met Sacchi at CDIA, he was pitching the Nollywood project to the school. They both felt a strong connection with Africa. Originally Sacchi had another partner in mind who couldn't get a visa to Nigeria.

"Do you think Bob Caputo would be interested in this story?" Sacchi asked Corrigan.

"If you include me in the project, I'll connect you to Bob," Corrigan said.

Freelance photographer, writer, and producer Robert Caputo, a regular contributor to *National Geographic* since 1980, wrote and took photos for stories in the United States, Africa, Asia, and South America. When Corrigan first began to work and study at CDIA, Caputo was the director of photography at the school.

Caputo's first job as a cameraman was in Tanzania for the *Jane Goodall and the World of Animal Behavior* TV series.

Later he worked in Kenya as a wildlife photographer and photographic string for *Time*, *Life*, and other popular magazines between 1976 and 1979.

"I've spent most of my adult





In the village of Badagry, Nigeria, the cast and crew of Director Bond Emeruwa's feature-length action film *Check Point* take a break from the afternoon heat.

life covering Africa for *Time*, *National Geographic*, and other magazines. Unfortunately, most of the news that attracts our attention in the West is bad news—famine, war, corruption,” Caputo says. “I jumped at the chance to work on a positive story about Africa, and Nollywood is about as positive as it gets. The Nigerians have used digital technology not only to create a viable industry and provide African audiences with films they can identify with, but also they have kept alive the long and rich tradition of African storytelling.”

Caputo also has published works that include two children's photographic books about wildlife and two photographic essay books, *Journey up the Nile* and *Kenya Journal*, and he was the associate producer and writer for *Glory & Honor* (1998).

The three filmmakers did not know at the time that they would form an award-winning team for *This Is Nollywood*. Caputo came into Boston to meet with Sacchi and Corrigan and to talk business. Afterward, they returned to CDIA to Campus Director Norm Brzycki's office. Corrigan asked for a month off, and Brzycki said, “Absolutely, that's what you're born to do.” And it was a go, dependent on funding.

Sacchi was driven to get this film made and to get it produced by CDIA. In his pitch, he made a strong link between the school's philosophy that media can make a difference and its relationship to Nollywood. Corrigan reported that after Caputo's 30 years of covering Africa for *National Geographic*, he felt that the *This Is Nollywood* project was the most positive story he'd ever been given the opportunity to tell.

“The synchronicity was incredible,” says Corrigan. “From that first lunch meeting and until today, for the three of us, this has been a really powerful dynamic experience that I'm lucky and forever grateful to be a part of.”

“I wanted to go to Lagos because I hadn't been there in many, many years, and because it is often held up as an example of the twenty-first century mega city, with all the problems that concept implies,” Caputo says. “That Nigerian filmmakers should be able to

produce such a vibrant homegrown industry in such a setting adds to the importance of what they have done.”

Caputo joined the team as co-producer and cinematographer; Sacchi as director, co-producer, cinematographer, and editor; and Corrigan, as an associate producer and a still photographer.

CDIA wanted documentation by the filmmakers of how digital photography had changed the face of African filmmaking. The school also sought information on the genesis of Nollywood and how it became possible for this country to have a thriving film industry despite the monumental problems it faces on a day-to-day basis. Sacchi pitched the documentary idea to the technical people at the school, who immediately understood the magnitude of the idea. At that point, CDIA executive director Robert Daniels and director Robert Frazier officially became the executive producers of the project.

With the beginnings of funding arranged and the crew already in place, Sacchi needed to plan the best way to travel to Lagos. However, there was still one major task—to find a protagonist, a Nollywood filmmaker.

A friend of Sacchi's knew a Nigerian researcher in the Harvard School of Public Health and arranged for them to meet to discuss travel to Nigeria. This researcher was the first Nigerian Sacchi spoke with about how to get a visa. While they had lunch in front of the School of Public Health in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Sacchi explained why he wanted to travel to Nigeria. The researcher had both an enormous interest in Nollywood films and a side business in distribution. Even better news, the researcher was a good friend of Bond Emeruwa, the Nigerian-born filmmaker who lives in Lagos and is president of the Director's Guild of Nigeria.

The award-winning director, who also has a degree in economics, started his career in television and film and went on to write and co-direct movies. He tells African stories to African audiences and always includes social messages. *Mortal Inheritance* (1995), a story about the incidence of sickle cell anemia, won in ten categories at



the Nigeria Movies Award in 1997. Recent films he directed include *With God* (2004), *Sleeping with the Enemy* (2004), *21 Days with Christ* (2005), and *Check Point* (2007).

Emeruwa makes his full-length feature films in approximately nine days, with a digital camera, two lights, and about \$20,000. He succeeds even though the challenges are unimaginable.

“The strength and will power that went into creating and building Nollywood was overwhelming. As a pioneer, it gave vent to all my trapped mental and physical energy. It consumed me just like it has continued to trap all who have come in contact with it. When a movie I wrote, co-directed and co-produced, *Mortal Inheritance*, became a trailblazer in the campaign on sickle cell anemia, I realized Nollywood’s enormous ability to change and affect lives. I found a medium to carry on my brand of social crusade,” Emeruwa says. “Since then, every movie I have been involved in has had a social message rubbed in. I’ve touched issues like spinal cord injuries, child labor and abuse, faith in God, etc. Today it is an all out war against gender-based violence/discrimination and maternal mortality. Now I am more interested in passing the passion onto a younger generation of filmmakers all over Africa and to concentrate on training them.” He adds, “The great thing is that it has been fun.”

When Sacchi first telephoned Emeruwa in 2003, he felt an immediate camaraderie. “If you come when I’m making a movie, you can make it with me, otherwise I will set you up with someone else,” Emeruwa said.



Toyin Alausa, a star actress in Nollywood.

Sacchi had found his protagonist. Sight unseen, the two men arranged to meet and work together. They didn’t know at the time, but it wouldn’t be until 2005 and wouldn’t be until the day of the shoot.

The Filmmakers in Nigeria

The three filmmakers outfitted themselves with two Canon HDV cameras, some lights, boom mics, miscellaneous accessories, a lot of hope, and no guarantees. On the morning of October 10, 2005, they took off from Boston Logan International Airport for Lagos. Once they arrived, “Just the ride in from the airport took two hours to go only a few miles in snarled horn-blaring traffic, and eyes aching from the smog. It gave us a small taste of the conditions Nollywood directors face daily,” Sacchi says. “Our admiration for their determination began at that moment.” “In Nollywood, we don’t count the walls. We learn how to climb them,” Emeruwa responds.

Before the first day of filming, “[t]he team agreed that African actors, directors and producers should tell their own story in our film without commentary from us or other Westerners,” Sacchi recalls. “Of course, we filmed and edited the Nollywood story with our own sensibilities, but our greatest hope is that the authentic voices of the Nigerian filmmakers will be heard.” The day after they landed, production began on *Check Point*, Emeruwa’s most recent film project, an 11-day shoot in Badagry. For the next several days, the three filmmakers joined the director and his crew to capture the essence of Nollywood. “Being in Nigeria to work on the film enabled me to get to know Bond and other Nigerians in ways that we usually don’t get access to. And having friends in other cultures is one of the best life-enrichers I know,” Caputo says.

The crew of three from the United States shadowed Emeruwa and his crew as they filmed *Check Point* on location. Sacchi and Caputo were on camera, and Corrigan held the boom and took still photographs whenever possible in between. “There was this whole other movie that I was watching—these two production crews working side-by-side, both making their movies,” Corrigan says. “At first, we



Cast and crew prepare for a hospital scene on the set of Bond Emeruwa's feature film *Check Point* in Badagry, Nigeria. From left to right: Production Assistant Patience Oghre, Key Grip Joshua Moses, Actress Toyin Alausa, and Camera Operator Lawal Daniel.

were cooperating independently of each other and then we kind of merged and became such good friends. I'd have my boom doing sound for our documentary and next to me would be Josh, a crewmember for *Check Point*, with his hands up holding his boom. The camaraderie was just great—it made it exciting every second.”

“My favorite part of making the film was being on location with Bond and his cast and crew. They took us in, made us feel like part of the family they had put together for the production. And in Bond, I found a life-long friend,” Caputo says. “The most challenging part was trying to capture the spirit with which all the Nollywood directors, producers, and others make their films.” Emeruwa says, “Crews were separate at the beginning, but by the end of the day, they were walking together.” He added that he was comfortable with how everything worked between the crews—the immediate closeness and cooperation. However, at first he wasn't used to being in front of the camera. That was new for him—but ceased to be a problem in no time.

“I think in the U.S. sometimes the movie business gets polluted by this ego-driven attitude which tends to put people on edge, and on some of the film crews there's a lot of competition, not a healthy competition, a negative competition,” Corrigan says, “whereas in Nollywood, there's a sense of support and camaraderie between producers, directors and actors, even those who are in competition with each other.”

“My feelings are that Bond and the other filmmakers have persisted against great odds (and continue to persist) to tell African stories in an African way. That we could show people outside Nigeria some of that spirit and energy is a great satisfaction,” says Caputo. “Bond always has another script or a movie in the back of his mind—the kind of guy telling stories, sharing ideas till four o'clock in the morning and then up at seven ready to work. He doesn't ever stop,” Corrigan says. “He's just this incredible force and he's doing great things for Nollywood. He's the guy you want to know—the guy you want to be friends with.”

There are challenges for Nollywood that filmmakers in Hollywood and Bollywood rarely, if ever, have to face—such as the loss of electricity and local street thugs, or “touts,” who demand money for “protection” before they will allow filming in their territories. Lead actors often work on several films at one time and frequently don't show up when they're supposed to. It is difficult and sometimes dangerous to stay on schedule when such things happen. During *Check Point*, a story about an innocent man gunned down by bad cops at a police checkpoint, the electricity went out, and at times the production halted because the prayers of worshippers blasted from the loudspeakers of a nearby mosque.

Realizing a Dream

Emeruwa describes his mission in making films: “As a child, I loved to read and the books I read had a great impact on me. I also grew up seeing myself as a social crusader of sorts. I mean, I didn't lack anything, yet there was so much lack and poverty around me. Then I discovered that poverty was more mental than physical . . . Over the years, it has gone beyond poverty to include many other social and moral issues. I guess I am just trying to recreate my world. Make it a happier and better place. That's what drives me. Every time I see imperfection in life, I feel partly responsible. Makes me want to do something.”

“Nollywood was a wonderful experience; it showed me how universal the desire is to tell stories. The technology can enable more people to find a voice, but the desire to tell a story is at the core and this desire is all that matters,” Sacchi says. “I think that Nollywood is a great positive and uplifting phenomenon that has come out of Africa in the recent years. We should encourage it and collaborate with Nollywood. Too many people are too judgmental of Nollywood styles and techniques but doing so they miss the point. Nollywood has shown that Nigerians are resilient and can organize a grassroots movie industry that reaches million of people across the entire continent. I am optimistic.”

“We are telling our own stories in our own way, our Nigerian way, the African way,” Emeruwa adds. “I cannot tell the White man's story. I don't know what his story is all about. He tells me his story in his movies. I want him to see my stories, too.”

Four years after Sacchi first read the article about Nollywood in the *New York Times*, the film is now a reality and the winner of the 2007 Audience Award at the Abuja International Film Festival in Nigeria. Sacchi, Caputo, and Corrigan were especially touched that they were given a reception when they returned to Nigeria for the festival and everyone greeted them like long-lost relatives.

“I was flattered that *This Is Nollywood* won the Audience Award at the Abuja International Film Festival. We made the film for the people who make movies in Nigeria, and of course hoped that they would like it,” Caputo says. “Often, our portrayal of Africa leaves something to be desired. That the people the film was about would like it so much was probably our greatest reward.”

The Editor's Shelf editor for *MultiCultural Review*, **Kathryn Mora**, recently graduated from a documentary filmmaking program in Boston. For more information on *This Is Nollywood* and its filmmaking team, visit the web site, www.thisisnollywood.com. 📺



At the Abuja International Film Festival in Nigeria. From left, Aimee Corrigan, Franco Sacchi, Bond Emeruwa, and Robert Caputo.