



East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences

eajass.eanso.org

Volume 7, Issue 1, 2024

Print ISSN: 2707-4277 | Online ISSN: 2707-4285

Title DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/2707-4285>

EANSO

EAST AFRICAN
NATURE &
SCIENCE
ORGANIZATION

Original Article

Female Filmmakers in Nigeria: Breaking Barriers and Shaping Narratives

Summer Okibe^{1*}

¹ University of Victoria, 3800 Finnerty Rd, Victoria, BC V8P 5C2, Canada.

* Author for Correspondence ORCID ID; <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8253-4265>; Email: summerokibe@gmail.com

Article DOI : <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.7.1.2088>

Date Published: **ABSTRACT**

07 August 2024

Keywords:

Indigenous Women
Filmmakers,
Nigeria,
Nollywood,
Gender Equality,
Feminist Themes.

This paper explores the significant contributions of Indigenous women filmmakers in Nigeria, highlighting their roles in breaking barriers and shaping narratives within the Nigerian film industry, known as Nollywood. Indigenous women have made remarkable strides in an industry traditionally dominated by men, using their platforms to challenge societal norms and advocate for gender equality. This paper discusses the historical context of Indigenous women in Nigerian cinema, profiling key figures such as Genevieve Nnaji, Kemi Adetiba, Mildred Okwo, and several others. Additionally, it examines the cultural and feminist themes prevalent in their work, the impact of their films, and the challenges they face. Special attention is given to the emerging trend of female filmmakers leveraging platforms like YouTube to produce and distribute their content. Through a detailed analysis of films such as "Lionheart," "King of Boys," and others, this paper illustrates how Indigenous women in Nigerian cinema reshape narratives and contribute to a more inclusive and diverse representation of African experiences. Including visual materials from the films discussed will enhance the understanding of the cultural and thematic elements these filmmakers bring to the screen. This paper aims to underscore the importance of supporting Indigenous women filmmakers and promoting gender equality within the film industry.

APA CITATION

Okibe, S. (2024). Female Filmmakers in Nigeria: Breaking Barriers and Shaping Narratives. *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 7(1), 474-483. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.7.1.2088>

CHICAGO CITATION

Okibe, Summer. 2024. "Female Filmmakers in Nigeria: Breaking Barriers and Shaping Narratives". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences* 7 (1), 474-483. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajass.7.1.2088>.

HARVARD CITATION

Okibe, S. (2024) "Female Filmmakers in Nigeria: Breaking Barriers and Shaping Narratives". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 7(1), pp. 474-483. doi: 10.37284/eajass.7.1.2088.

IEEE CITATION

S., Okibe "Female Filmmakers in Nigeria: Breaking Barriers and Shaping Narratives". *EAJASS*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 474-483, Aug. 2024.

MLA CITATION

Okibe, Summer. "Female Filmmakers in Nigeria: Breaking Barriers and Shaping Narratives". *East African Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, Vol. 7, no. 1, Aug. 2024, pp. 474-483, doi:10.37284/eajass.7.1.2088.

INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian film industry, popularly known as Nollywood, has grown to become one of the largest film industries in the world, producing a vast array of films that reflect the diverse cultures and experiences of Nigeria. Within this burgeoning industry, Indigenous women filmmakers have begun to carve out significant spaces for themselves, challenging traditional gender roles and bringing unique narratives to the forefront. This paper seeks to explore the contributions of these trailblazing women, examining how they have navigated the male-dominated landscape of Nollywood to produce films that not only entertain but also provoke thought and inspire change.

Historically, the representation of women in Nigerian cinema has been limited, often relegating female characters to secondary roles or stereotypical portrayals. However, the emergence of female filmmakers has started to shift this dynamic. By drawing on their own experiences and cultural backgrounds, Indigenous women filmmakers are creating stories that resonate deeply with audiences, both within Nigeria and internationally. Their films often address critical issues such as gender inequality, cultural identity, and social justice, providing a platform for marginalized voices.

Prominent figures such as Genevieve Nnaji and Kemi Adetiba have garnered international acclaim for their work, paving the way for other women in the industry. Nnaji's "Lionheart" (2018) and Adetiba's "King of Boys" (2018) are prime examples of films that have challenged conventional narratives and showcased the talents of Indigenous women. These filmmakers not only excel in storytelling but also in their ability to produce, direct, and manage film projects, demonstrating the multifaceted roles women can play in the industry.

Furthermore, the rise of digital platforms such as YouTube has provided new opportunities for female filmmakers in Nigeria. Women like Ronke Oshodi-Oke and Bukola Awoyemi, among others, have leveraged these platforms to reach wider

audiences and gain recognition for their work. This democratization of film distribution has enabled more women to participate in filmmaking, bringing a diverse range of stories and perspectives to the screen.

In examining the contributions of Indigenous women filmmakers in Nigeria, this paper will delve into their historical context, highlight key figures and their works, and discuss the cultural and feminist themes prevalent in their films. Additionally, it will address the impact of their films on Nigerian society and the challenges they continue to face in the industry. By providing a comprehensive overview, this paper aims to celebrate the achievements of Indigenous women in Nigerian cinema and underscore the importance of supporting and promoting their work.

Historical Context of Indigenous Women in Nigerian Cinema

The evolution of Indigenous women in Nigerian cinema can be traced back to the early days of Nollywood in the 1990s. Initially, the industry was predominantly male-driven, with women mostly appearing in front of the camera as actresses. However, the landscape began to change as more women started taking on roles behind the scenes, driven by a desire to tell their own stories and challenge the status quo.

Amaka Igwe stands out as one of the pioneers who laid the groundwork for future generations of female filmmakers. Her work in the 1990s, including classics like "RattleSnake" (1995) and "Violated" (1996), showcased her exceptional storytelling abilities and her commitment to addressing societal issues through film (Nwachukwu, 2013). Igwe's success inspired many women to pursue careers in filmmaking, demonstrating that it was possible to excel in a male-dominated industry.

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw a gradual increase in the number of women taking on directorial and production roles. This period marked a pioneering shift in the industry, as female filmmakers began to gain recognition for their work and contribute to the diversity of

narratives in Nollywood. Films like "Keeping Faith" (2002) by Steve Gukas, which featured a strong female lead, highlighted the potential for women to take on more substantial roles in filmmaking.

As the industry evolved, so did the themes and stories being told by female filmmakers. Indigenous women began to incorporate their cultural heritage and personal experiences into their films, creating stories that resonated with audiences on a deeper level. This approach not only enriched the storytelling in Nollywood but also provided a platform for addressing critical social issues such as gender inequality, domestic violence, and economic empowerment.

Figure 1: Genevieve Nnaji: A Trailblazer in Nollywood



Genevieve Nnaji's transition from actress to filmmaker marked a significant milestone in Nigerian cinema. Her directorial debut, "Lionheart" (2018), was a groundbreaking film that gained international acclaim and became the first Nigerian film to be acquired by Netflix. "Lionheart" tells the story of a woman navigating the male-dominated business world, reflecting broader societal challenges faced by women in Nigeria (Nnaji, 2018). Nnaji's success with "Lionheart" not only showcased her talent as a filmmaker but also opened doors for other female directors in the industry.

In her role as both the director and lead actress, Nnaji broke new ground by highlighting the resilience and determination of women in a patriarchal society. The film's portrayal of strong female characters resonated with audiences globally, earning praise for its authentic depiction of Nigerian culture and the struggles faced by

women in leadership roles. Nnaji's ability to blend cultural elements with universal themes of empowerment and resilience made "Lionheart" a significant contribution to Nollywood's evolving narrative.

Kemi Adetiba: Redefining Power Dynamics

Kemi Adetiba is another influential figure in Nigerian cinema, known for her dynamic storytelling and compelling characters. Her film "King of Boys" (2018) and its sequel "King of Boys: The Return of the King" (2021) delve into themes of power, corruption, and gender dynamics within Nigerian society (Adetiba, 2018). The protagonist, Eniola Salami, is a powerful female character who navigates the treacherous world of politics and organized crime, challenging traditional gender roles and showcasing women's strength and resilience.

Figure 2: Kemi Adetiba



Adetiba's work is notable for its intricate plotlines and strong character development, which have earned her a loyal following and critical acclaim. "King of Boys" stands out for its portrayal of a complex female lead who embodies both vulnerability and power, providing a nuanced depiction of women in positions of authority. Adetiba's films have been praised for their bold storytelling and for pushing the boundaries of what is expected in Nigerian cinema.

Figure 3: Kemi Adetiba with cast on King of Boys premiere



Mildred Okwo: Blending Humor and Social Commentary

Mildred Okwo has also made significant contributions to Nollywood, with films that blend humour and social commentary to address the complexities of modern Nigerian life. Her works, such as "The Meeting" (2012) and "Surulere" (2016), explore themes of love, ambition, and societal expectations, often through a comedic lens (Okwo, 2012). Okwo's storytelling is characterized by its relatable characters and witty dialogue, which have resonated with audiences and critics alike.

In "The Meeting," Okwo addresses the bureaucratic challenges and societal pressures faced by individuals in Nigeria, using humour to highlight serious issues. Her ability to tackle social themes with a light-hearted approach has made her films accessible and engaging, contributing to the diversity of narratives within Nollywood. Okwo's work underscores the importance of representation and the power of film to reflect and critique societal norms.

Figure 4: Mildred Okwo on set with cast making The Meeting



Cultural and Feminist Themes in the Films of Indigenous Nigerian Women

Indigenous women filmmakers in Nigeria often incorporate cultural heritage and feminist themes into their films, creating stories that resonate deeply with audiences and provide a platform for discussing critical social issues.

Genevieve Nnaji's "Lionheart": Cultural Pride and Gender Equality

"Lionheart" is a prime example of how Indigenous women filmmakers blend cultural and feminist themes in their work. The film celebrates Igbo culture through its language, customs, and setting, while also addressing the challenges faced by women in leadership positions. The protagonist, Adaeze, must navigate a male-dominated business environment, reflecting broader societal issues of gender inequality and the struggle for women's empowerment (Nnaji, 2018).

The film's emphasis on family and cultural pride is evident in the portrayal of Adaeze's relationship with her father and her determination to uphold the family business. This narrative underscores the importance of cultural heritage and the role of women in preserving and advancing their communities. Nnaji's use of humor and relatable characters makes the film both entertaining and thought-provoking, providing a compelling commentary on the intersection of culture and gender.

Figure 5: Scene depicting cultural music and pride: Chief Obiagu's retirement party



Kemi Adetiba's "King of Boys": Power and Patriarchy

"King of Boys" explores the complexities of power dynamics and the role of women in Nigerian society. The film's protagonist, Eniola Salami, is a powerful and ruthless character who challenges traditional gender roles by taking on a position of authority typically reserved for men (Adetiba, 2018). Adetiba's portrayal of Eniola's rise to power and the obstacles she faces highlight

the systemic barriers women encounter in their quest for leadership and influence.

The film's exploration of corruption, loyalty, and betrayal provides a nuanced depiction of Nigerian politics and societal norms. Adetiba's ability to create complex, multi-dimensional characters who defy stereotypes is a testament to her skill as a storyteller and her commitment to addressing feminist themes. "King of Boys" serves as a powerful critique of patriarchy and an affirmation of women's capacity for strength and resilience.

Figure 6: Eniola Salami as King of Boys



Mildred Okwo's "The Meeting": Humor and Social Commentary

Mildred Okwo's "The Meeting" uses humour to address serious social issues, making it accessible to a broad audience while still providing insightful commentary. The film's protagonist, Makinde

Esho, navigates the bureaucratic complexities of securing a business contract in Abuja, encountering various challenges along the way (Okwo, 2012). Through witty dialogue and humorous situations, Okwo highlights the inefficiencies and absurdities of the bureaucratic

system, offering a critique of societal norms and expectations.

The film also touches on themes of gender dynamics and the role of women in professional settings. Female characters in "The Meeting" are portrayed as competent and ambitious, challenging traditional stereotypes and showcasing the potential for women's empowerment. Okwo's use of humour to address these themes makes the film both entertaining and thought-provoking, contributing to the broader discourse on gender equality in Nigeria.

Figure 7: The Meeting cover photo depicting both humour and woman's confidence



Funke Akindele, also known as Jenifa, is a trailblazing Nigerian filmmaker, actress, director, producer, and politician. She rose to fame with her iconic role in the sitcom "I Need to Know" (1998-2002) and solidified her status as a leading lady with her award-winning performance in "Jenifa" (2009). The character Jenifa became a cultural sensation, spawning a successful television series, "Jenifa's Diary" (2015), which earned Akindele multiple awards for Best Actress in a Comedy. In addition to her acting prowess, Akindele made history as the first Nigerian female director to gross over a billion naira at the domestic box office with "A Tribe Called Judah" (N1.4 billion), the highest-grossing film of 2023.

"A Tribe Called Judah" is a riveting and thought-provoking film that explores the intricacies of identity, culture, and belonging. The movie's diversity shines through its carefully cast characters, representing the rich cultural heritage of Nigeria's Western, Southern, Eastern, and Northern regions. With a skilful blend of humour and powerful themes, the film masterfully entertains its audience while delving into the relatable struggles of a single mother, making it a truly captivating cinematic experience.

Figure 8: Scene Jedidiah defending a woman from her abusive husband



Figure 9: Behind the scene: a teenager lady sacrifices for her loved one as against the usual norm of a man sacrificing for a woman



YouTube Female Movie Producers in Nigeria

The rise of digital platforms like YouTube has democratised film production and distribution, providing new opportunities for female filmmakers in Nigeria to reach wider audiences and gain recognition for their work. Several Indigenous women have leveraged YouTube to produce and distribute their films, showcasing their talent and creativity.

Ronke Oshodi-Oke: Pioneering YouTube Filmmaker

Ronke Oshodi-Oke is one of the prominent figures who have successfully used YouTube to share her films with a global audience. Known for her engaging storytelling and strong female characters, Oshodi-Oke has produced several films that address social issues and celebrate Nigerian culture. Her ability to connect with audiences through relatable narratives and authentic portrayals of Nigerian life has earned her a loyal following on YouTube.

Figure 10: Ronke Oshodi-oke casting in Osun Sengese



Bukola Awoyemi: Bridging Traditional and Digital Media

Bukola Awoyemi, also known as Arugba, has made significant strides in both traditional and digital media. Her work on YouTube includes a variety of films and web series that explore themes of love, family, and societal expectations. Awoyemi's ability to bridge the gap between traditional Nollywood and digital platforms has

expanded her reach and influence, allowing her to connect with a diverse audience.

Other Notable YouTube Female Filmmakers

Other notable female filmmakers leveraging YouTube include Abimbola Ogunnowo, who produces films that address contemporary social issues, and Yewande Adekoya, known for her captivating storytelling and strong female leads. These filmmakers are using YouTube to challenge traditional distribution models and create content that reflects the diverse experiences of Nigerian women.

Impact and Achievements of Indigenous Female Filmmakers

Indigenous female filmmakers in Nigeria have achieved significant milestones, impacted various aspects of society and paved the way for future progress.

Legislative and Policy Influence

One of the most notable achievements is the influence on legislative and policy changes. Indigenous feminists have successfully advocated for laws and policies that address gender-based violence, economic inequality, and political representation. For instance, the passage of the

Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act in 2015 was a significant victory for women's rights advocates, providing legal protection against various forms of violence (Alabi, 2016).

Social and Economic Advancements

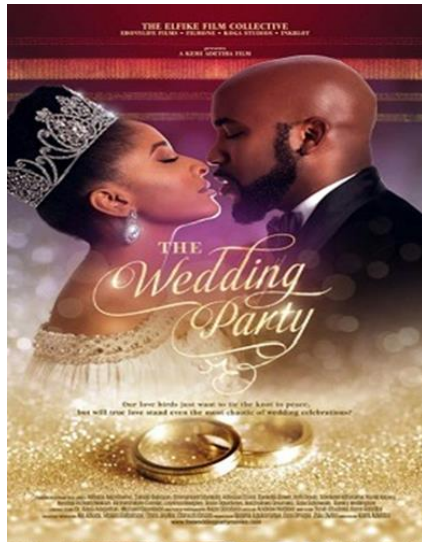
Social and economic advancements are also evident. Indigenous women have made strides in education, healthcare, and economic empowerment, contributing to their communities' overall well-being. Initiatives that support women's entrepreneurship and access to resources have helped reduce economic disparities and enhance women's independence and agency (Mama, 2001).

Cultural Impact

The cultural impact of Indigenous female filmmakers cannot be overstated. Their films celebrate Indigenous identities, traditions, and languages, while also challenging patriarchal norms and advocating for women's rights. By bringing Indigenous stories to a global audience, these filmmakers are not only preserving their cultural heritage but also promoting a more inclusive and diverse representation of African experiences (Wane, 2008).

Figure 11: Cover images of movies depicting culture and challenging patriarchy.





DISCUSSION

The evolution of Indigenous women in Nigerian cinema is a fascinating story of resilience, determination, and creative excellence. From the pioneering work of Amaka Igwe to the trailblazing efforts of Genevieve Nnaji, Kemi Adetiba, and Mildred Okwo, these women have shattered glass ceilings and redefined the landscape of Nollywood. In the early days of Nollywood, women were largely confined to acting roles, but they soon began to take on roles behind the camera, driven by a desire to tell their own stories and challenge the status quo. Amaka Igwe's exceptional storytelling and commitment to addressing societal issues paved the way for future generations of female filmmakers.

Genevieve Nnaji's directorial debut, "Lionheart," was a groundbreaking film that gained international acclaim and opened doors for other female directors. Her portrayal of strong female characters resonated with audiences globally, earning praise for its authentic depiction of Nigerian culture. Kemi Adetiba's dynamic storytelling and compelling characters in "King of Boys" and its sequel redefined power dynamics, challenging traditional gender roles and exemplifying women's strength and resilience. Her work stands out for its nuanced depiction of women in positions of authority. Mildred Okwo's films, such as "The Meeting" and "Surulere," blend humour and social commentary, addressing

the complexities of modern Nigerian life. Her relatable characters and witty dialogue have made her films accessible and engaging, contributing to the diversity of narratives within Nollywood.

These women have not only excelled in a male-dominated industry but have also enriched the storytelling in Nollywood, providing a platform for addressing critical social issues and showcasing the potential for women to take on more substantial roles in filmmaking. Their legacy continues to inspire future generations of female filmmakers, solidifying their place in the history of Nigerian cinema.

The films of indigenous Nigerian women filmmakers are a testament to the power of storytelling, cultural heritage, and feminist themes. Genevieve Nnaji's "Lionheart" celebrates Igbo culture while addressing gender inequality, showcasing the importance of family and cultural pride. Kemi Adetiba's "King of Boys" explores the complexities of power dynamics, challenging traditional gender roles and patriarchy. Mildred Okwo's "The Meeting" uses humour to address social issues, highlighting bureaucratic inefficiencies and gender dynamics.

Funke Akindele's "A Tribe Called Judah" is a cultural phenomenon, exploring identity, culture, and belonging while representing Nigeria's rich cultural heritage. These films not only entertain but also provide a platform for discussing relevant

social issues, making them a significant contribution to Nigerian cinema.

The rise of YouTube has empowered female filmmakers in Nigeria to showcase their talent, creativity, and unique perspectives, reaching a global audience and gaining recognition for their work. Ronke Oshodi-Oke, a pioneering YouTube filmmaker, has built a loyal following with her engaging storytelling and strong female characters, addressing social issues and celebrating Nigerian culture. Bukola Awoyemi has successfully bridged traditional and digital media, exploring themes of love, family, and societal expectations.

Other notable female filmmakers on YouTube include Ruth Kadiri, Yewande Adekoya, and Toyin Abraham, all challenging traditional distribution models and creating content that reflects the diverse experiences of Nigerian women. These women are paving the way for a new generation of female filmmakers, leveraging digital platforms to share their stories and shape the future of Nollywood.

Indigenous female filmmakers in Nigeria have made a profound impact on their industry and society. Through their work, they have successfully advocated for legislative and policy changes, such as the Violence Against Persons Act, providing legal protection against gender-based violence. These trailblazing women have also driven social and economic advancements, empowering women through education, healthcare, and entrepreneurship. Their films celebrate Indigenous identities, challenge patriarchal norms, and promote a more inclusive representation of African experiences. By amplifying Indigenous women's voices and stories, they have contributed to a more diverse and equitable representation of Nigerian culture, leaving a lasting legacy in the film industry and beyond.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous women filmmakers in Nigeria are making significant strides in the film industry, using their unique perspectives and voices to

shape new narratives and challenge societal norms. Their contributions not only enrich Nigerian cinema but also provide powerful commentary on cultural and feminist issues. As they continue to thrive and inspire future generations, the impact of their work will undoubtedly be felt for years to come.

Supporting and promoting the work of Indigenous female filmmakers is crucial to ensuring their continued success and the advancement of gender equality within the film industry. By recognizing and celebrating their achievements, we can help create a more inclusive and diverse cinematic landscape that reflects the rich cultural heritage and diverse experiences of Nigerian women.

REFERENCES

- Nwachukwu, F. (2013). Nollywood and the Development Question: A Historical Survey. *Cinej Cinema Journal*, 2(1), 71-85.
- Nnaji, G. (Director). (2018). *Lionheart* [Film]. Netflix.
- Adetiba, K. (Director). (2018). *King of Boys* [Film]. Kemi Adetiba Visuals.
- Adetiba, K. (Director). (2021). *King of Boys: The Return of the King* [Film]. Netflix.
- Okwo, M. (Director). (2012). *The Meeting* [Film]. The Audrey Silva Company.
- Alabi, T. (2016). The Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act 2015: Challenges and Prospects. *African Journal of Gender and Development*, 3(2), 43-59.
- Mama, A. (2001). Challenging Patriarchy: The Case of Nigeria. *Gender and Development*, 9(2), 24-30.
- Wane, N. N. (2008). Mapping the Field of Indigenous Knowledges in Anti-Colonial Discourse: A Transformative Journey in Education. *Race, Gender & Class*, 15(1-2), 187-205.