

Anchor Baby (2010)

Claudia Hoffmann

dir. Lonzo Nzekwe; prod. Lonzo Nzekwe, Jeremy Hood; screenplay Lonzo Nzekwe; photography Ricardo Diaz; music Sean Baillie. Red One Camera, color, 95 mins. Alpha Galore Films, distrib. Urban Home Entertainment.

The massive success of Nigeria's popular film industry, Nollywood, has been widely documented over the past few decades. As the world's most successful grassroots film industry, Nollywood has not only taken the country but also the continent and the African diaspora by storm and has joined Hollywood and Bollywood as one of the world's three largest film industries. Nollywood's success is generally attributed to its localized and relatable stories and distinctive style, characterized by »rough-and-ready production practices, stylistic mélanges, humdrum soundtracks, stilted dialogue [...] and proclivity for melodrama« (Akudinobi 133). However, the excessive drama and amateur rapid-fire production of the early films has led way to »New Nollywood«—films for which »the standard is spectacular and the production process is more or less formal« (Uwah 65). Many of these New Nollywood-style films are produced by expatriate filmmakers but continue to tell stories that are relevant for Nigerian audiences and feature a style that, while more restrained, remains unapologetically and recognizably Nollywood. Regardless of when and where Nollywood films are produced, however, melodrama »is a major component of Nollywood films and has been its primary aesthetic and narrative focus since the industry's beginnings« (Arthur 5).

The dramatic emotionality that plays out in soap-opera style through big gestures, facial expressions, and dramatic dialogue and underscores narratives that are often about moral failures and their punishments, make up Nollywood's most recognizable features: »Extremes of fortune, emotion, and moral character are classic melodramatic elements« (Haynes 2000, 22). In *Anchor Baby*, a story about an undocumented Nigerian couple by Canadian-based Nigerian producer and director Lonzo Nzekwe, this typical emotionality maps out contemporary immigration concerns: the pressures of living without documents, the lack of funds for lawyers, the constant threat of Immigration and Customs Control (ICE), the vulnerability to exploitation.

Like many Nollywood films made abroad, *Anchor Baby* is more subdued in style than is typical for domestic Nollywood films (see Haynes 2013), but it nonetheless re-



tains the genre's proven signature elements. Here, Nollywood's typical melodramatic appeal lies in the heavy reliance on dialogue to move the story forward, the central themes of morality and betrayal, and the punishment for not adhering to Nigerian societal expectations: »[Her] zeal for America results in Joyce's punishment because she refuses to return to her African home nation where she is obligated to take care of her husband and household« (Arthur 20).

Joyce Unanga (played by Omoni Oboli) and her husband Paul (Sam Sarpong) live undocumented in Chicago and are expecting their first child when Paul is arrested and deported to Nigeria. He urges Joyce to stay behind in the U.S. until the baby is born as an American citizen. Left to her own devices and with very little money, Joyce accepts the help of Susan (Terri Oliver) and her husband Tim (Colin Paradine), who offer to take her in until she can return to Nigeria with her baby. In order to secure prenatal care for Joyce, the women acquire fraudulent health cards under Susan's name. When Joyce gives birth, she does so under the identity of Susan Backley, thereby assigning her baby Susan's last name. When she realizes that she will not be able to leave the country with a baby she cannot prove to be her own, she and Susan decide that Joyce will turn herself in to immigration to be put on a plane to Nigeria while Susan and the baby board the same plane as regular passengers. Only after she is detained by immigration officials and Susan disappears with her baby does Joyce realize that, all along, she was the victim of an elaborate scam for Susan to steal her baby. The film ends with Joyce's deportation back to Nigeria without her son.

Joyce's betrayal by her close friend is a common trope for both domestic and diasporic Nollywood films: »Betrayal of or by intimates is the most prevalent of all Nollywood themes« (Haynes 2013, 89). The excessive nature of Susan's elaborate betrayal is also quite typical. *Anchor Baby* relies »heavily on melodrama's signifying practices, even if put to work on foreign soil« (Ryan 68). The film is not interested in a »realistic« portrayal of immigration challenges. Rather, *Anchor Baby* emphasizes emotions. At the end, the film lingers on Joyce's suffering as she walks through the airport, flanked by two immigration officers. Her anguish, grief, and guilt are emphasized through close-ups of her face. Her slow, defeated walk through the gate door to the plane that is to take her back to Nigeria, without her baby, evokes feelings of sympathy for her utter desolation and hopelessness. The people around her barely acknowledge her debilitating sadness. These final scenes mirror what Jonathan Haynes calls the »alienation/hardship sequence« that so often occurs in Nollywood diaspora films. »The protagonists trudge disconsolately, carrying their shoulder bags, through the streets of the foreign city« (2013, 82). *Anchor Baby's* hardship sequence brings home the moral of the story: »*Anchor Baby* alerts viewers about what life in America can become for those who abandon their cultural morality« (Arthur 20).

However, while Joyce's sad story leaves some room for sympathy, another portrayal of moral transgression in *Anchor Baby* is less sympathetic to the perpetrator. In true Nollywood tradition, the film features a loosely connected, parallel storyline about the ICE agent, Mark Castello (played by Michael Scratch), who apprehends Joyce's husband, Paul, at the beginning of the film. Towards the end, Castello once again leads an effort to fulfill deportation orders. This time, he and his team enter the home of an undocumented Mexican couple. In the ensuing gunfire exchange between the agents and the couple's teenage son, both Castello and the boy die. The morality tale is particularly overt here: The Mexican father was also the man who earlier provided Joyce with the

fake health card. Not only is the man punished for his crimes, but his son becomes the innocent victim, while he has to live with the knowledge that his material greed killed his child—thus emphasizing that the violation of social norms is harmful not only to the perpetrator but to society as a whole. In this way, *Anchor Baby* continues the Hollywood tradition of presenting a »tale of greed and moral transgression« (Okome 179).

Rather than being concerned with the justice or injustice of the American immigration system, the film acts as a cautionary tale about the temptations of abandoning cultural values and community in search of greener pastures. However, while *Anchor Baby* ruthlessly punishes the sidestepping of social expectations, the film nonetheless allows us to feel sympathy for Joyce as a mother whose primary concern is her baby's future.

References

- Akudinobi, Jude. 2015. »Nollywood: Prisms and Paradigms.« *Cinema Journal* 54 (2): 133-40.
- Arthur, T. Omega. 2017. »Glocal Nollywood: The Politics of Culture, Identity, and Migration in African Films Set on American Shores.« *Glocalism: Journal of Culture, Politics and Innovation*, no. 2, 1-28.
- Haynes, Jonathan. 2000. »Introduction.« In *Nigerian Video Films*, edited by Jonathan Haynes, 1-36. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- . 2013. »The Nollywood Diaspora: A Nigerian Video Genre.« In *Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry*, edited by Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome, 73-99. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Okome, Onookome. 2012. »Nollywood, Lagos, and the *Good-Time Woman*.« *Research in African Literatures* 43 (4): 166-86.
- Ryan, Connor. 2015. »New Nollywood: A Sketch of Nollywood's Metropolitan New Style.« *African Studies Review* 58 (3): 55-76.
- Uwah, Innocent. 2018. »New Nollywood (Diaspora) Films and the Concern for Social Issues.« *Journal of African Films & Diaspora Studies*, no. 1, 63-78.

