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The Afrocritik Report 2025



CULTURE | FILM | MUSIC | LITERATURE

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EDITORIAL TEAM

Editor-in-Chief

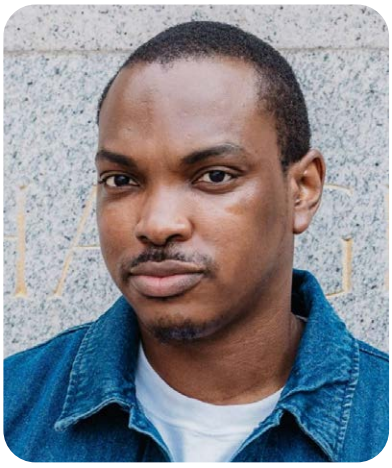


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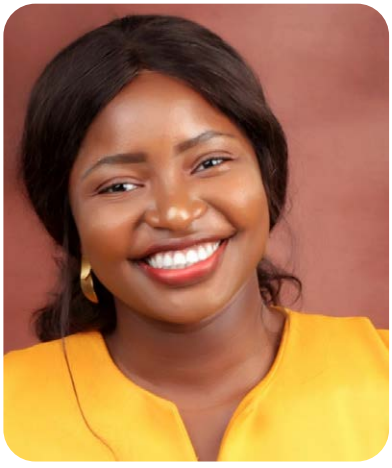


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FOREWORD

At the very substrate of society lies perhaps its greatest catalyst: culture—the one force responsible for the ebb and flow of civilisation through time. This universal trigger works at various micro levels and is the key determinant of social transformation across eras. Value systems, norms, habits and sanctions, all particulars of this phenomenon, constitute the core driver of social reality, without which we are nothing. Its importance at this moment in time is further amplified in the wake of global social upheavals that place a burden on the African intellectual and critic, who is tasked with understanding the raison d'être of societal patterns across the board.

This is why Afrocritik, Africa's authoritative cultural voice, is compiling a yearly collection of critical essays that seek to assess these nuances shaping the continent daily.

We reckon that culture, popular or otherwise, does not operate in a vacuum. Disciplines, institutions and industries exist which act as funnels through which society is configured. The ubiquity of these institutions necessitates inquiries into how culture affects them and is formed by them, one way or the other. It is therefore pertinent to have an appraisal, an exploration of the manner in which these phenomena interact and, in some cases, intersect, seeing that they are the biggest drivers of social cohesion or change, as the case may be.

The Afrocritik Report 2025 details the nuances of culture and its drivers across multi-disciplinary divides—media, arts, film, music, literature, photography, and much more—keenly considering how they have affected the collective behaviour and ascent of Africans and the black diaspora for the year in review.

It is hoped that this Report serves not just as a historical compendium but as a prompt that spurs readers to reflect on patterns in their respective fields and instigates the charting of more viable pathways for the near future.

Owanate Max-Harry
Co-founder,
Afrocritik



NOTE FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

As Editor-in-Chief, I have often asked a simple question while curating this project: after all the noise settles, what are the thinkers thinking?

Beneath the rush of releases, debates, breakthroughs, and disruptions lies a quieter question: what did this moment mean, and how will we remember it?

Culture rarely moves in straight lines. It advances through experimentation, contradiction, and dialogue—through the interplay of artists, industries, audiences, and institutions. In 2025, we witnessed this dynamism across multiple fronts: shifting creative economies, evolving aesthetic sensibilities, new technological pressures, and renewed debates about identity, power, and representation.

The Afrocritik Report 2025 is conceived as an annual cultural record that brings together critics, scholars, and practitioners to examine the forces that shaped the creative and intellectual life of Africa and its diaspora over the past year.

Rather than offering a simple chronology of events, this Report seeks to map patterns—to trace connections between seemingly disparate developments and to situate them within broader historical and social contexts. Our contributors do not merely recount the year; they interpret it, asking what these moments reveal about where we are and where we might be headed.

This approach reflects a core belief at the heart of Afrocritik: that cultural criticism is itself a form of infrastructure. When we document thoughtfully and analyse seriously, we create a body of knowledge that artists, policymakers, scholars, and audiences can return to, not just today, but years from now.

The essays in this edition represent a range of perspectives, disciplines, and geographies, but they share a common commitment to depth. Together, they form a mosaic of insights into a year that was at once turbulent, generative, and instructive.

As Editor-in-Chief, I see this Report not as a definitive account, but as an invitation—to think more critically about the cultural currents that shape our societies and to recognise the importance of preserving intellectual memory in a fast-moving world.

To our contributors, thank you for the seriousness of thought and generosity of spirit you brought to this project. To our readers, we hope these pages offer not only reflection, but perspective—a chance to step back from the immediacy of the present and engage with the deeper narratives unfolding around us.

If culture is the archive of how we live, then criticism is how we understand that archive.

This Report is one step in that ongoing work.

Samson Jikeme
Co-founder/Editor-in-Chief,
Afrocritik



Section I

YEAR IN CULTURAL POWER



Moments that Explained the Year

A selection of key cultural moments that clarified what mattered, and why

By Abioye Damilare Samson

2025 was a defining year for Africa—a year in which the continent's creativity and cultural influence shone both at home and on the global stage. From music and literature to cinema, fashion, technology, and sport, African creators and institutions produced moments that shifted narratives, broke records, and expanded the continent's presence in global conversations.

Yet, the year was not without friction. Political instability, resurgent military rule, and youth-led protests shaped parts of the continent's political climate in 2025 and revealed both the fragility of democratic institutions and the urgency of generational demands for reform.

This comprehensive report returns to the moments that crystallised that complexity: the breakthroughs, the ruptures, and the milestones that together mapped Africa's trajectory in 2025.



Coups, Democratic Fractures, and the Rise of Gen Z Protest

If 2025 proved anything politically, it is that Africa's democratic project remains deeply contested. Across the continent, the year was marked by coups, disputed elections, youth-led protests, and the gradual consolidation of military authority, threatening to reverse hard-won democratic gains that took decades to build.

The most visible trend was the continued rise of military governments, particularly across West Africa's Sahel region. Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, each having experienced coups in recent years, formally broke from the regional bloc ECOWAS in January, forming their own alliance of military-led states. By the final weeks of 2025, Guinea-Bissau had joined the growing list of military-led governments on the continent, following a coup on 26th November, 2025, led by Brigadier General Dinis Incanha, Head of the Military Office of the Presidency. An attempted coup in Benin, swiftly repelled by ECOWAS, offered a rare sign of institutional resolve, but also

underscored how fragile that resolve remains.

Where elections did take place, the results were mixed. In Malawi, former president Peter Mutharika returned to power after a period in opposition. Seychelles saw its long-ruling party return after five years out of office. Both results were shaped significantly by voter frustration over inflation and the rising cost of living, a pattern that has become one of the defining forces in African electoral politics. In Cameroon, however, 92-year-old Paul Biya, the world's oldest sitting president, was sworn in for an eighth term following elections widely condemned as neither free nor fair, triggering days of protests from the youth.

That generational tension, between Africa's overwhelmingly young population and its ageing, entrenched leadership, emerged as one of the year's most urgent political themes. In Madagascar, weeks of youth-led protests over poor service delivery forced President Andry Rajoelina to dissolve his entire cabinet, but when that proved insufficient, the protests continued, and in October, he was removed in a coup led by Colonel Michael Randrianirina. In Kenya, thousands of young people took to the streets to signal their continued discontent with the authorities over the country's spiralling debt, state corruption, government scandals, rising prices, and most critically, the treatment of protesters themselves. In Tanzania and Cameroon, similar demonstrations reflected a generation no longer willing to accept broken social contracts in silence.

Tems' Historic Grammy Win

When Tems won the Grammy for "Best African Music Performance" at the 67th Grammy Awards in February, it was her second time winning the award. But the significance of this win lived not just in the achievement itself, but also in the song.



Photo: Leon Bennett/Getty Images for The Recording Academy

"Love Me Jeje" is a canonical Nigerian love song, originally recorded by Seyi Sodimu and released in 1997. During Grammy weekend in Los Angeles in 2004, Sodimu recalled—in an old interview with entertainment consultant DJ Abass—attempting to market the record to major American labels before its release. "I didn't release 'Love Me Jeje' for about two years because I tried to market it in New York," he said. "I went to major labels, but the problem they told me is that I sound African." The song would go on to become one of the most beloved records in Nigerian pop history.

Two decades later, in 2025, Tems reimagined it and won a Grammy for it. The full-circle

weight of that is almost impossible to overstate. Even more intriguing is the thread that runs between the two artistes beyond the song itself. Tems housed her version on her debut album Born in the Wild—a title that, perhaps unintentionally, mirrors Sodimu's own 1999 album, Born in Africa.

What this moment clarified about 2025 is that African artistes are no longer constructing their international careers by sounding less African. The more specific, the more rooted, the more culturally honest the work, the more the world leans in.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Returns to Fiction with Dream Count

More than a decade after Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah—her acclaimed 2013 novel that won the National Book Critics Circle Award—she returned to fiction in March 2025 with the release of Dream Count. The novel marked her first full-length work of fiction in ten years, ending a long period of anticipation from readers and the literary world alike.



Source: X/Chimamanda_Adichie

Dream Count follows four women navigating questions of identity, social expectation, and immigration, a thematic territory familiar to Adichie's audience, yet rendered with renewed depth and emotional precision. As with her earlier work, she probes the intricacies of culture, belonging, and human connection.

The impact was immediate. Dream Count made the Women's Prize for Fiction longlist on the day of its release and went on to receive multiple recognitions. It was met with critical acclaim, prompting broader conversations about storytelling, sociocultural politics, and the shifting landscape of contemporary African literature.

Tunde Onakoya, Hilda Baci, and Nigeria's Guinness Moments

In 2024, Nigerian chess master and founder of Chess in Slums Africa, Tunde Onakoya, completed a 60-hour chess marathon in New York's Times Square to raise $1 million for out-of-school children. Although the record was surpassed two months later by a Norwegian chess duo who pushed it to 61 hours, Onakoya's mission extended beyond the clock.


Photo: Chess in Slums Africa/X

In April 2025, he returned to Times Square and played for 64 hours alongside US chess master Shawn Martinez, surpassing the Norwegian pair's record and claiming the Guinness World Record for the longest chess marathon. Through Chess in Slums Africa, Onakoya has spent years organising chess training sessions in some of Nigeria's most underprivileged communities—including the now-demolished waterfront slum of Makoko—where children with little or no access to formal education are taught chess alongside literacy and numeracy. Some of those children have gone on to win local and international tournaments, earn scholarships, and attract global media attention for their remarkable turnarounds.

Five months after Onakoya reclaimed his record, chef Hilda Baci returned to the record books to prepare 8,780 kg of Nigerian-style jollof rice—the largest ever recorded—claiming the Guinness World Record for the largest pot of jollof rice. It was her second Guinness title, following her 2023 record for completing a 93-hour, 11-minute cooking marathon, a feat that had similarly captivated the world and sparked a global conversation about Nigerian food culture and its place on the world stage. The event was a massive, public celebration of Nigerian identity, showcasing the country's unique, spicier, and smokier jollof style on a global stage.



Photo: Instagram/ hildabaci

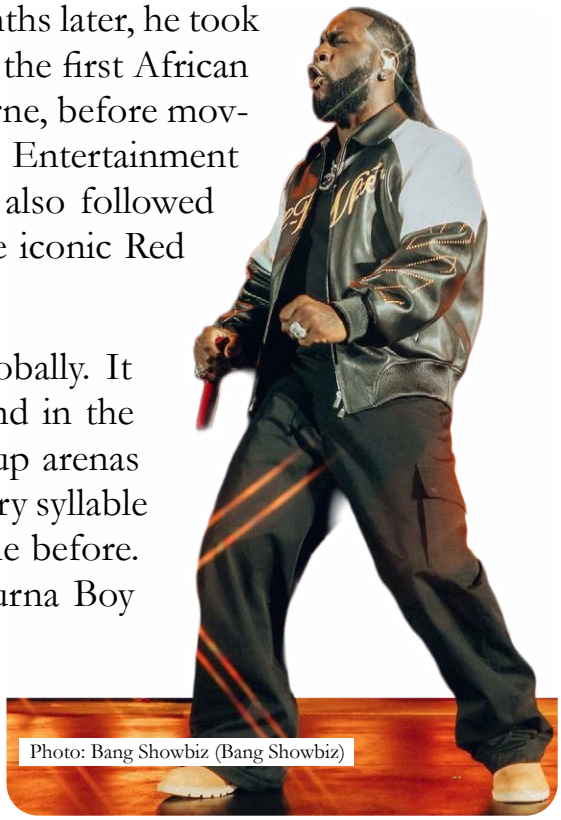
Collectively, Onakoya and Baci's record-breaking achievements are, more than anything, a symbol of hope and perseverance for all who dare to dream beyond limitations.

Burna Boy's Unstoppable Run on the World's Most Iconic Stages

On 18th April, 2025, Burna Boy became the first African artiste to headline the 80,000 capacity Stade de France, as part of his I Told Them world tour. This achievement was not accidental. It was the culmination of years of consistently raising the bar. From Madison Square Garden to Paris La Défense Arena to London Stadium, each show proved bigger than the last, showing that African music belongs on the world's biggest stages.

The Stade de France night was iconic in so many ways. Guest appearances from Senegalese legend Youssou Ndour, British rapper Dave, French-Congolese artist Dadju, Nigerian rapper Shallipopi, and Fireboy DML turned the evening into a cross-continental gathering.

France, however, was not the final destination. Six months later, he took the No Sign of Weakness tour to Australia, becoming the first African act to sell out the Sidney Myer Music Bowl in Melbourne, before moving through Qudos Bank Arena in Sydney, Brisbane Entertainment Centre, and Perth's RAC Arena. The Australian run also followed his becoming the first Nigerian artiste to headline the iconic Red Rocks Amphitheatre in Colorado, USA.


Photo: Bang Showbiz (Bang Showbiz)

It is one thing for African music to be streamed globally. It is another thing entirely for an African artiste to stand in the centre of an 80,000-capacity stadium in Paris, or fill up arenas across Australia. In 2025, the African Giant earned every syllable of that title by doing what no African artiste had done before. From Stade de France to the arenas of Australia, Burna Boy was, as he once sang, "Sittin' on Top of the World', and this time, the whole world could see what an African artiste at the peak of his powers looked like.

My Father's Shadow: Nigeria's Cannes Debut and a New Era for African Film



Photo: Victor Boyko/Getty Images

British-Nigerian filmmaker Akinola Davies Jr. made history at the 2025 Cannes Film Festival when his UK-backed semi-autobiographical debut feature, My Father's Shadow, became the first Nigerian film officially selected for the prestigious festival, premiering in the Un Certain Regard section in May.

The film is a family affair in the most meaningful sense. Co-written by Davies Jr. and his brother Wale Davies—better known as Tec, one half of celebrated rap duo Show Dem Camp and co-manager of Grammy-winning superstar Tems—My Father's Shadow is produced under their shared banner, Fatherland Productions. That a film of this cultural weight emerged from brothers who have spent years bridging Nigeria's music, fashion, and film worlds is no accident. It is the product of long-term vision, craft, and a deep investment in telling Nigerian stories on their own terms.

Set in Lagos in 1993—a politically charged and pivotal moment in Nigeria's history—the

film follows two young brothers spending a rare day with their estranged father, who takes them on a journey across the city while seeking to collect six months' worth of unpaid salaries. At Cannes, it earned a Caméra d'Or Special Mention, recognising Davies Jr. as one of the most promising debut voices in world cinema. From there, the film continued its remarkable run, selected for the Centrepiece section of the Toronto International Film Festival and chosen as the United Kingdom's official Oscar submission for Best International Feature Film at the 98th Academy Awards.

The film's journey marked a significant milestone, announcing Nigerian cinema's arrival at the highest table of world filmmaking and encouraging African filmmakers to trust that the full complexity of their stories can travel.

The Earthshot Prize, Global Runways, and a Landmark Year for African Fashion



Photo: Kola Oshalusi/Insigna Online

In 2025, African fashion moved from participation to prominence on the global stage. The 2025 edition of the Met Gala, held in May and themed Superfine: Tailoring Black Style, became a powerful showcase for African design excellence. British-Ghanaian tailoring legend Ozwald Boateng stood out as one of the evening's most visible figures. Nigerian design duo Deji & Kola, founded by Ayodeji Adebayo and Kolapo Olabintan, dressed high-profile guests, including NFL player Jonathan Owens and media entrepreneur Claire Sulmers. They were joined by creatives such as Ugo Mozie, Chuks Collins, Anifa Mvuemba of Hanifa, and Adebayo Oke-Lawal of Orange Culture, as well as South African designers like David Tlale, Thebe Magugu, and MMUSOMAXWELL.

If global visibility defined one milestone, sustainability defined another. On its 15th anniversary, in November, Lagos Fashion Week received the prestigious Earthshot Prize, securing £1 million to advance its sustainability initiatives through 2030. The award was received by Omoyemi Akerele, founder of Stylehouse Files, reinforcing Lagos Fashion Week's position as a leader in environmentally conscious fashion across the continent.

Beyond headline moments, 2025 was also a year of institutional recognition. In January, IAMISIGO, founded by Bubu Ogisi, won the 2025 Zalando Visionary Award for its ethical sourcing practices, community engagement, and distinct aesthetic. In March, Ghanaian

label Boyedoe was named a semi-finalist for the 2025 LVMH Prize, with founder David Boye-Doe later presenting at the TRANOÏ/CANEX showcase during Paris Fashion Week, further cementing African designers' presence within the global fashion establishment.

These milestones marked 2025 as a year in which African fashion asserted itself not only as culturally influential, but institutionally recognised and globally competitive.

Fela and the Grammy Hall of Fame

In May 2025, the Grammy Recording Academy inducted Fela Anikulapo-Kuti into the Grammy Hall of Fame for his landmark 1976 album Zombie, making him the first Nigerian artiste ever to receive the honour, and placing him alongside Jay-Z and the late Michael Jackson in one of music's most exclusive circles. To be enshrined in the Grammy Hall of Fame is no small feat, and for Fela, whose music carried the weight of an entire people's struggle, the recognition felt as monumental as the man himself.

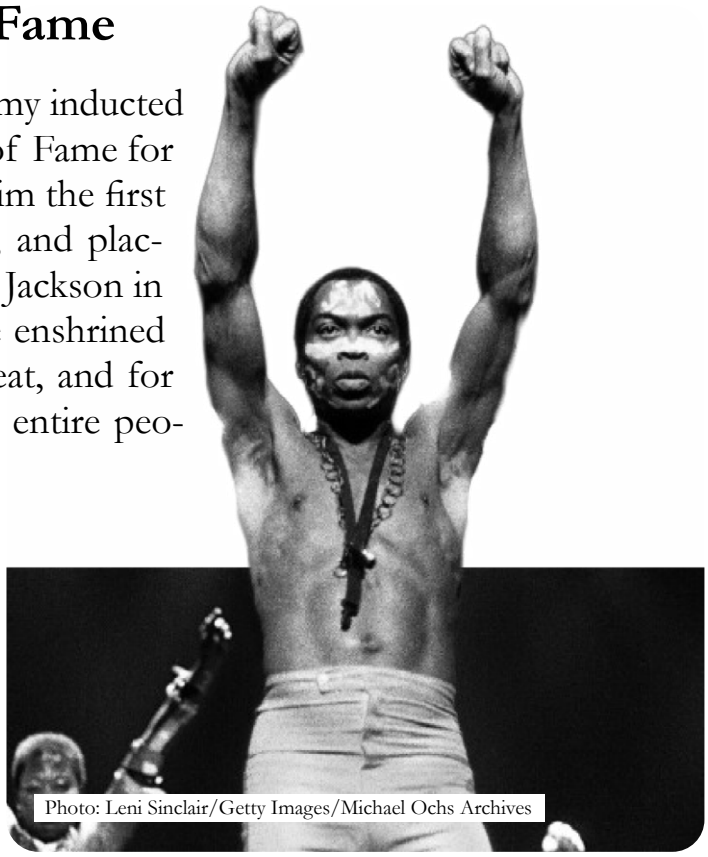


Photo: Leni Sinclair/Getty Images/Michael Ochs Archives

Zombie, released in 1976, was a direct and unflinching indictment of military rule in Nigeria. Tracks like "Zombie", "Mister Follow Follow", "Observation Is No Crime", and "Mistake" gave the album its enduring identity as one of the boldest protest records ever made.

The induction arrives at a pivotal moment. As global conversations about Black freedom, resistance, and artistic autonomy continue to evolve, this honour underscores both the urgent relevance of Fela's message and the timelessness of his music.

Wizkid's Long Live Lagos: An Intimate Portrait of a Global Icon

When Wizkid's long-awaited documentary, Wizkid: Long Live Lagos, had its world premiere at the 2025 Tribeca Film Festival in June, it made the case that African music's global rise deserves not just to be heard, but to be documented and understood on its own terms.

Directed by Karam Gill, the documentary uses Wizkid's preparation for his groundbreaking performance at London's Tottenham Hotspur Stadium in July 2023 as its lens, tracks his journey from the streets of Surulere to the world's biggest stages, and interrogates what that



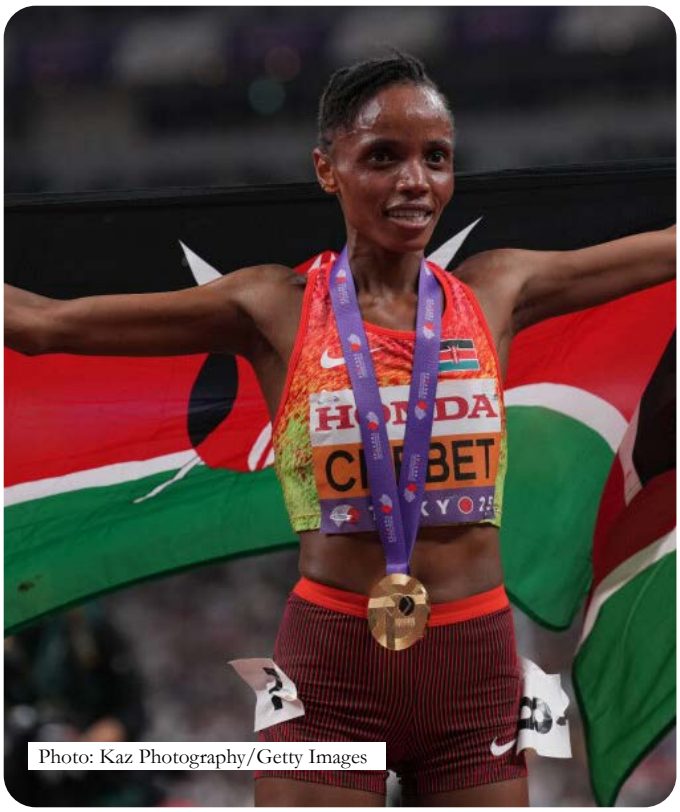
Photo: Gettyimages/Arturo Holmes

journey has meant for both the African music ecosystem and global perception of African music. Through appearances from Femi Anikulapo-Kuti, manager and partner Jada Pollock, and Seni Saraki, CEO of The Native, the film builds an intimate portrait of an artiste whose journey from Surulere to the world's biggest stages permanently altered the global perception of what African music could be and where it could go.

Wizkid: Long Live Lagos eventually premiered on HBO Max on 11th December, bringing that story to a global audience. It became available to African audiences via Showmax on 26th December. Beyond the viewership figures, the documentary marked a moment of institutional recognition and proof that the story of Afrobeats' global ascent, and of Wizkid's role within it, belongs firmly within the mainstream archive of contemporary music history.

World Athletics Championships, Historic Wins, and Continental Dominance

In 2025, African athletes left a mark on the global sporting stage. At the World Athletics Championships hosted by Tokyo in September, Kenya led the medal haul with seven golds, while Botswana captured two golds and a bronze. The southern African nation made history with a gold in the 4×400m relay, its first-ever world championship gold, while South Africa finished third. Nigeria's Kanyinsola Ajayi ended an 18-year drought by reaching the men's 100m final, a milestone for the nation's sprinting history.


Photo: Kaz Photography/Getty Images

Kenya's Faith Kipyegon further cemented her legacy by claiming her fourth 1,500m world title across five championships, while Beatrice Chebet won her first world title in

the 10,000m. Tanzania's Alphonce Simbu earned his nation's first major marathon gold in Tokyo, demonstrating that African endurance and middle-distance excellence remain unrivalled on the global stage.

Beyond athletics, Morocco solidified its status as a continental sports hub by hosting both the CAF AFCON and the women's WAFCON, cementing its recognition as a powerhouse of African sport.

Meanwhile, the Nigerian women's basketball team, the D'Tigress, continued their unprecedented run in African basketball. By defeating Mali 78–64 in the final, they became the first team to secure five consecutive FIBA Women's AfroBasket titles, cementing Nigeria's dominance in the continental sport.

Across the year, African athletes demonstrated that the continent's sporting influence is global and serves as a testament to the talent and rising investment in sports infrastructure across Africa.

Taking the Music Home: Odumodublvck, Llona, and Davido's Local Touring Movement



Source: The Plug Entertainment

In 2025, some of Nigeria's most prominent musical voices made a deliberate move by embarking on local tours that brought them face-to-face with the audiences closest to home. At a time when the global stage was more accessible than ever, Odumodublvck, Llona, and Davido each launched tours that prioritised local presence, fan intimacy, and physical connection over international spectacle. Their efforts marked a significant shift in how African artistes understand their responsibility to the audiences that made them and to build a deeper, more personal connection with them.

Odumodublvck took his Greatest School Tour Ever through Nigerian university campuses—OAU, OOU, ABUAD, Unilag, and beyond. Llona, following the powerful reception of his 2024 Homeless album, embarked on the Homeless Tour through Nigerian cities and towns.

Perhaps the most symbolically loaded of the three was Davido, whose 5IVE Tour kicked off in October and traversed Nigeria from south to north at a time when 2025's macroeconomic factors had significantly reduced Nigerians' disposable income. With tickets starting

as low as N5,000, the pricing kept the shows within reach for a wider audience. Collectively, the three tours point to a significant resurgence of artiste-led local touring in the Nigerian music landscape.

Blaqbonez vs Odumodublvck: The Feud and the Resurgence of Nigerian Hip-Hop

For much of the past decade, Nigerian Hip-Hop has wrestled with questions of relevance. As Afropop expanded into global dominance, rap was frequently positioned as commercially sidelined, overshadowed by melody-driven hits and streaming-era algorithms.


Source: Instagram/entdaily001

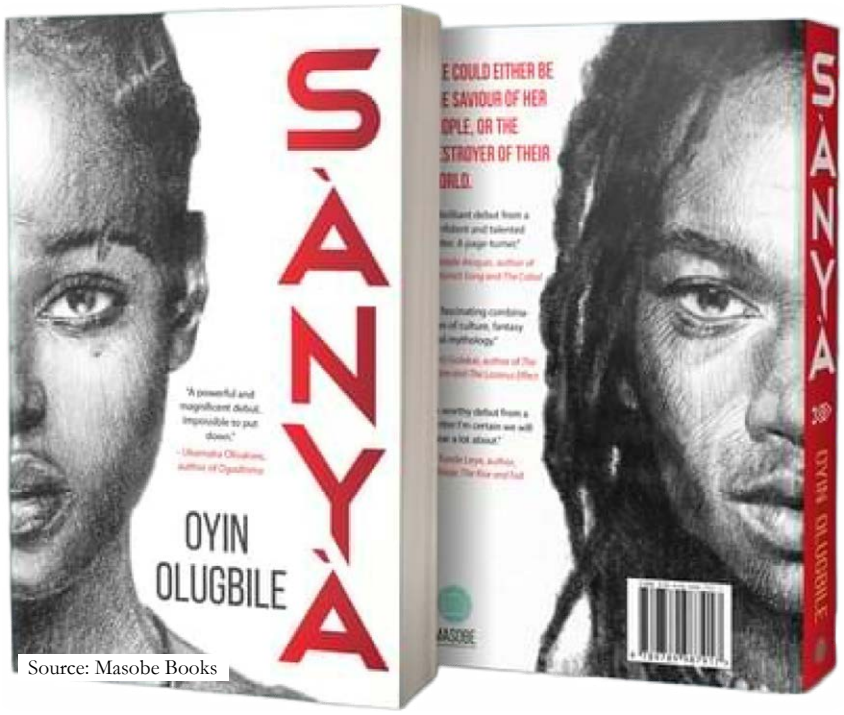
Even internationally, the genre had faced questions about creative fatigue. The sparks of 2024—most notably Kendrick Lamar's incendiary "Not Like Us"—set the stage for a renewed global conversation. In 2025, that conversation grew louder. Kendrick's Super Bowl halftime performance elevated the track from diss record to global cultural event, while Clipse's long-awaited return with Let God Sort 'Em Out—their first album in sixteen years—reminded audiences that Hip-Hop's craft and competitive edge remained very much alive.

In 2025, Nigeria experienced its own version of that resurgence. At the centre of it stood Blaqbonez and Odumodublvck, two of the most visible figures in the country's contemporary rap landscape. Their feud—played out through diss records, social media jabs, and pointed subliminals—pulled audiences back into the foundational elements of Hip-Hop: wordplay, punchlines, delivery, cadence, and competitive bravado. What made the clash culturally significant was the quality of the craft on display. Odumodublvck's "Pussy Niggaz" signalled open confrontation. Blaqbonez, on the other hand, approached the feud in layers: first with subtle lyrical jabs in "Go Crazy" before delivering a decisive strike in October with "ACL," a pointed, full-throttle diss targeting both Odumodublvck and his Abuja-based collective, Anti-World Gangstars. The record dominated timelines, animated debate, and shifted discourse away from streaming numbers and back toward skill. For months, fans dissected bars and conversations centred on flow patterns, metaphors, and technical precision.

Beyond the high-profile feud, 2025 hinted at a broader renaissance. A new generation

of genre-blurring artistes—Zaylevelten, Eggerton, Wave$tar, Artsalghul, Luwa.MP4, and Monochrome—fused trap percussion, 808-driven bounce, and cyberpunk aesthetics into distinctly Nigerian expressions. Influenced by figures such as Juice WRLD, XXXTentacion, Trippie Redd, NLE Choppa, Playboi Carti, and Lil Uzi Vert, they localised these sounds through Nigerian slang, street cadence, and cultural specificity.

Oyin Olugbile's NLNG Prize Win and the Power of Indigenous Storytelling



Source: Masobe Books

In October 2025, Nigerian writer Oyin Olugbile won the Nigeria Prize for Literature for her novel Sanya, a reimagining of the story of the Yoruba god Sango through a bold female protagonist. The win underscored a renewed literary interest in indigenous myths and oral traditions, positioning them as living frameworks for contemporary storytelling.

Widely regarded as Africa's most prestigious literary prize, the award comes with a $100,000 cash prize and celebrates excellence in Nigerian writing. Established in 2004 by Nigeria LNG Limited, the prize has become one of the continent's most influential cultural institutions.

Sanya emerged ahead of strong contenders, including The Road to the Country by Chigozie Obioma and This Motherless Land by Nikki May. Olugbile's victory signalled not only individual achievement but also broader validation of indigenous storytelling and affirmed African mythmaking as fertile ground for contemporary literary innovation.

Asake and Red Bull Symphonic: African Music on Its Own Terms

On 8th November, Red Bull Symphonic made its New York City debut at Kings Theatre, bringing together Nigerian Afrobeats artiste Asake and the Glenn Alexander II Symphonic Orchestra in what marked Asake's maiden foray into a full symphonic experience. The evening was elevated further by appearances from Wizkid, Central Cee, Gunna, Tiakola, and Fridayy, culminating in one of the most ambitious and culturally charged live productions. The sold-out performance reflected an expanding thirst for bold, boundary-crossing mu-

sical experiences that the performance met without hesitation.

Beyond the scale of the production, what made the night truly significant was the deliberate care taken to ensure the culture remained at its centre. The fusion of Afrobeats and American orchestral instrumentation never allowed the classical framework to overwhelm the culture at its core. Traditional dancers moved across the stage, talking drums held their ground beside the strings, and Fuji-styled choreography anchored the spectacle in something deeply rooted and specific. That distinction captured something essential about where African music stood in 2025. It demonstrated that African sound does not require dilution to command grand venues. It only needs the confidence to arrive whole.



Source: © Faith Nguyen / Red Bull Content Pool



African Creators Embrace Twitch

In 2025, Africa's live streaming scene experienced a significant surge, with Nigeria leading the charge. Local creators gained ground on global platforms, driven by a growing hunger for real-time, personality-driven content. According to Statista, the continent's broader streaming market was projected to reach US$5.4 million by year's end, with an annual growth rate of 7.46% through 2029—clear evidence that digital creativity was becoming a serious economic force.

On Twitch, Nigerian creators, CarterEfe, Shanks, and Enzo, claimed the top three spots among Africa's most-followed streamers, while CarterEfe set a new benchmark: over 83,000 live viewers during a December stream with Davido, becoming the first African streamer to surpass 20,000 subscribers.

African creators' rise on Twitch showed that African creativity was no longer limited to

music, film, or traditional media. On Twitch, creators across gaming, music, lifestyle, and other niches were building audiences live, in real time, and on their own terms, proving that African culture could thrive digitally, innovate boldly, and reach millions across the continent and the world.

African Tech's Turning Point: Consolidation, Capital, and Global Recognition



In 2025, African tech entered a defining phase of consolidation and strategic maturity. Startups recorded 67 merger and acquisition deals during the year, a 72 % jump from the 39 deals recorded in 2024 and the highest annual total ever documented on the continent. The surge marked the clearest pivot yet from survival to structural realignment.

In one of such consequential acquisitions, Flutterwave, Africa's largest fintech company, acquired Mono, a leading Nigerian open banking startup, in a deal valued between $25 million and $40 million, as reported by TechCrunch. Though announced in early January 2026, the acquisition is said to have taken place in late 2025, as TechCabal notes.

This sharp rise in M&A activity signalled a decisive move away from "growth at all costs" toward efficiency, defensibility, and long-term scale. Well-capitalised startups and incumbents used acquisitions to enter new markets, secure regulatory licences, deepen infrastructure, and consolidate fragmented value chains. Rather than chasing aggressive expansion, companies pursued durability.

Geographically, acquisitions remained concentrated in Africa's "Big Four" markets—South Africa, Kenya, Egypt, and Nigeria—which accounted for approximately 75 % of acquired startups, reflecting the continued dominance of these ecosystems in infrastructure, capital access, and regulatory depth.

Funding patterns reinforced this shift toward maturity. According to data tracked by Intelpoint, African startups raised $3.499 billion across 275 funding rounds in 2025. Overall, it was a year marked by capital concentration, infrastructure bias, and increased funding discipline.



Trump's Travel Ban and Africa's Constrained Mobility

In early 2025, the Trump administration closed the US Agency for International Development, cutting billions in aid, and in June, it implemented a sweeping travel ban that fully barred citizens from twelve countries, seven of which are African countries—Chad, Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Libya, Somalia, and Sudan—and imposed heightened restrictions on seven more, including three African countries—Burundi, Sierra Leone, and Togo.

In December, the Trump administration expanded the list, bringing Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, and South Sudan under full bans, and moving Sierra Leone from partial restrictions to full ban. Additional countries, including Angola, Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Gabon, The Gambia, Malawi, Mauritania, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, became subject to partial restrictions. Consequently, by the end of the year, roughly half of Africa had become subject to partial or full bans from the United States.

While framed as a security measure, the ban had tangible consequences for students, professionals, and families seeking access to education, work, and global networks. Across the continent, the policy sparked urgent debate about Africa's dependence on external systems, the fragility of international mobility, and the broader inequalities embedded in global governance. Most significantly, the moment served as a stark illustration that while African creativity, enterprise, and influence surged in 2025, the continent remained at the mercy of geopolitical decisions made elsewhere.

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The Popularity, Tensions and Criticisms of Live-Streaming in Contemporary Nigerian Pop Culture

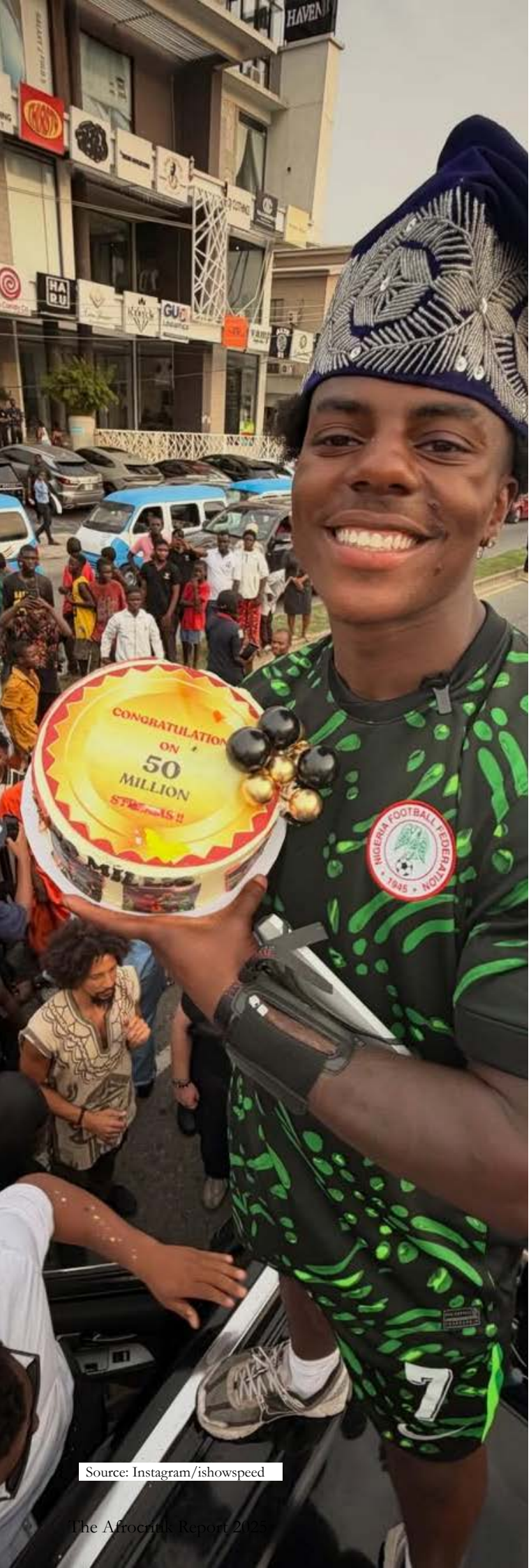
By Michael Aromolaran

At some point during Carter Efe's stream with Afrobeats artiste Davido, the streamer got into fisticuffs with another streamer, Rynenzo. The image of the two young men, outfitted in boxing gloves and duelling in jest while egged on by a room full of weed-puffing and liquor-sipping men, fit with the night's theme—a three-hour romp featuring spontaneous dancing, bouts of physical comedy, and the occasional off-kilter joke. (In a fit of fanboying, one fellow, for instance, would joke about wanting Davido's urine as a souvenir.)

The stream, which was hosted on Twitch and took place in December 2025, would become Carter Efe's greatest achievement as a streamer, a glorious nightcap to a year during which many of his videos went viral online. This stream had about 80,000 concurrent viewers, and by the end of it, Carter Efe had gained about 140,000 new Twitch followers, bringing his total tally to about 400,000 followers, making him the most followed African on the Amazon-owned platform. Viewers may have learned very little about Davido's life and artistry, as he was frequently interrupted by Carter Efe, who cut in ad nauseam to either show gratitude for a new subscription or to yell "Ws in the chat," a frequent command he gives to viewers that highlights the interactivity of the livestreaming form. But what was hard to miss, even amid the furore and thick clouds of weed smoke, was the impact that livestreaming has had on Nigerian culture.

Carter Efe, whose birth name is Oderhohwo Joseph Efe, is a part of a small but growing group of Nigerian streamers that includes Rynenzo, Shank Comics, Peller, Ojo and Lord Lamba—digital creators





Source: Instagram/ishowspeed

who earn a living by livestreaming content to audiences using platforms such as Twitch, Kick, Rumble, YouTube and TikTok. They, in turn, are a part of and have been influenced by a broader group of in-real-life (IRL) streamers from across the world, including Spain's Ibai Llanos, Morocco's Ilyas El Maliki, and America's Kai Cenat, Fanum, Duke Dennis, Adin Ross and IShowSpeed. When IShowSpeed, for instance, visited Lagos in January as part of his inaugural Africa tour—an event that not only confirmed the appetite of young Nigerians for foreign streamers, but also generated conversations around a range of topics, from Lagos' tourism infrastructure to ethnic bigotry and Nigeria's "begging culture"—Carter Efe admitted to being influenced by the 21-year-old.

Streamers, who are mostly Gen Z Nigerians, have combined force of personality with youth, humour and shock value to cultivate a large following of mostly young Nigerians, a laudable feat in a country whose high data costs and flaky internet connectivity makes livestreaming the proverbial stretch of land that even angels fear to tread. A home studio set on fire, episodes of slapstick violence, streamers disguising themselves as elderly taxi drivers and interacting with the unsuspecting public: these are common features in a livestream, as demonstrated in a recent stream by Carter Efe and Peller, who destroyed each other's cars seemingly for sport—one of many collaborations between streamers that show how much livestreaming has been organised into an industry since first taking its current shape around 2020.

Even Nigerians who have just encountered livestreaming will not find it entirely strange. A big part of the form's appeal comes from the fact that audiences can watch streamers in their natural element, reacting to situa-

tions in real time sans prefabricated script. But this kind of unscripted disposition is familiar to Nigerians raised on reality TV shows such as Big Brother Naija and Gulder Ultimate Search. The real-time commentary by streamers recalls sports broadcasting, bringing to mind broadcasters such as Ernest Okonkwo and Emeka Odikpo. The humour, music, interviews, live reactions, and guest appearances carry echoes of game shows and variety shows. And the relationship between streamers and audiences mirrors the parasocial bonding observed between talk radio hosts and their audiences.

What sets off livestreaming from these other forms is that it is a one-person show. While variety shows, for instance, require multiple hands on deck, the roles of host, producer and network are collapsed into one person—the streamer. More importantly, livestreaming is differentiated through direct audience interaction, particularly through its live chat feature that not only allows streamers to pose questions to audiences, but also allows audiences to dictate the flow of events on the screen. Talk radio hosts also interact directly with audiences through phone calls, but it is nothing compared to the live chat feature that makes thousands of comments readily available to streamers.



When IShowSpeed visited Lagos... it confirmed the appetite of young Nigerians for foreign streamers.

Livestreamed content, in the style of contemporary IRL streams, has existed since the mid-2000s. Creators, with webcams mounted to baseball caps, or with cameras feeding into compact laptops in backpacks, livestreamed their daily lives. One such creator was the American Justin Kan, who, in 2011, co-founded Twitch with fellow American Emmett Shear to provide a platform for video game livestreaming. The early years of livestreaming, on Twitch and elsewhere, would be dominated by competitive gaming, thus contributing to its association with nerd culture. The era also saw little monetisation, as livestreaming was largely a hobbyist's pastime.

Technological and cultural changes from the mid-2010s through to 2020 would take livestreaming from the fringes and make it a central part of American digital culture. Bulky webcams were replaced by smartphones that not only removed the need for technical expertise but also made it easy to broadcast from anywhere. The rollout of 4G and 5G, and high-speed home fibre, eliminated the lag that bedevilled livestreams in the mid-2000s.

By the late 2010s, streaming started to move away from its gaming core and become the personality-driven shows it is now best known for. Collaborations with pop culture icons, from athletes to music stars, would also help streaming shed its nerd tag and become cool. In 2018, for instance, Canadian rapper Drake joined American streamer Ninja on a Twitch stream to play Fortnite, an event that was also graced by American rapper Travis Scott. The launching of streaming platforms, which introduced monetisation through subscriptions and donations, helped turn streaming into a full-time career for many young people. By 2020, livestreaming had moved beyond the bedrooms of creators and had become productions with the budgets of small Hollywood movies, such as IShowSpeed's Africa tour and Kai Cenat's "7 Days in Prison" stream.

The early days of livestreaming in Nigeria, in the early 2010s, were also defined by competitive gaming, but the expensive gadgets needed to participate made it the preserve of a small group of upper-middle-class Nigerians. The country's relatively low internet penetration, poor internet connectivity and high data costs put streamers at the mercy of the buffer wheel and high latency, making livestreaming develop at a much slower pace than, say, in the United States. But over the years, with internet connection improving, low-cost smartphones becoming more available, and data costs becoming relatively more affordable, livestreaming would begin to take form. The COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, which opened the eyes of many Nigerians to previously untapped digital possibilities, would also drive many young Nigerians toward livestreaming, as they saw in it a viable and reliable source of income in a country where, as at the second quarter of 2020, the unemployment rate was 27%, according to the National Bureau of Statistics. The introduction of social media features such as Instagram Reels, as well as features on stream-



Source: Instagram/peller089

ing platforms that allow the sharing of short clips from longer streams, would also help make streamers digitally ubiquitous.

The growth of streaming also owes a debt to strategic associations with established cultural institutions, particularly Afrobeats, much like how American creators collaborated with music icons and IShowSpeed engaged with football culture in cultivating an audience. It also helped that a handful of Nigerian creators began livestreaming only after building a large audience in a different industry, thus kicking off their streaming careers with an established support system. Carter Efe and Shank Comics, for instance, were accomplished skitmakers before pivoting to livestreaming. And Cruel Santino's "Subaru World" stream on Twitch benefits from his career as one of Nigeria's most successful alternative artistes.

In the last three years, livestreaming has made significant forays into Nigerian mainstream culture. Creators have become celebrities in their own rights and gained legitimacy through endorsement deals from important brands: Shank Comics, for instance, has collaborated with Nike, and during his Davido stream, Carter Efe secured a deal with Martell, the cognac brand. More importantly, streamers have influenced popular culture, not the least in lexicon: it has become increasingly common, for instance, to hear non-streamers use streamer lingo like "Ws in the chat." But livestreaming would achieve unprecedented levels of success in 2025, a year during which many streaming clips went viral across social media platforms. Conversations were had, for instance, over clips of Peller's apparent suicide attempt and of Carter Efe's slapstick banter with Kolu, a frequent collaborator who plays Judy to Carter Efe's Punch. The year also featured many significant collaborations between streamers and Afrobeats acts, including Shank Comics' stream with rapper Olamide. Incursions made by streamers during the year helped introduce more Nigerians to livestreaming content, claiming significant ground for the form in an attention economy that's constantly in a flux, and establishing it as a sustainable form of digital entertainment.

Days after Carter Efe's stream with Davido, the streamer was temporarily suspended from Twitch, supposedly for violating the platform's guidelines, a mood-dampener that underscored the fragility of the position of streamers. It became clear that their success hinges on the continued success of whichever platform they choose to hawk their wares. But Nigerian streamers also contend with the challenge of inconsistent electricity, high data costs, and poor internet connectivity that limits both their reach and performance—challenges that have also affected the performance of streaming platforms such as Netflix and Showmax. Significant portions of Shank Comics' stream with Olamide, for instance, was affected by poor internet connection.

The relatively low amount of money that Nigerian audiences pay in subscriptions also means that Nigerian creators earn considerably less than, say, their American counterparts. And when an X user illegally broadcast Carter Efe's stream with Davido and got over 400,000 views, it became clear that creators also face the risk of intellectual property theft.

But all these perhaps pale in comparison to the direct opposition that streamers face from a significant part of the Nigerian public. Many Nigerians do not see any value in livestreaming, viewing livestreamed content, particularly those of the extreme variety, as degenerate fruits of an internet



Source: Carter Efe Stream

culture that encourages and rewards virality, however it is attained. Among thousands of flattering laugh-out-loud emojis in the comment sections of viral streaming clips, one will likely find a person asking, "How do people even enjoy this?"

A version of this question was asked by Nollywood actor Ini Edo, who, during a stream with Carter Efe last December to promote her movie A Very Dirty Christmas, confessed to having been initially put off by his streams. The negative attitude many Nigerians have toward livestreaming perhaps explains why, despite the form driving public discourse in 2025, not one streamer featured in end-of-year culture shapers lists by important publications, such as the one published by Zikoko.

A bulk of the criticisms seem to be driven by classism, such as the comments asking why a high-profile figure like Davido would associate himself with characters like Carter Efe. But many of the criticisms, particularly those calling out the excesses of streamers, carry a valid logic that even creators may find use for. The road-rage-fuelled vehicular onslaught by Carter Efe and Peller, for instance, generated widespread disapproval, even among fans. The public dissent likely stemmed from the fact that wilfully destroying expensive cars feels like the action of a bored, debauched elite and departs radically from the working-class solidarity that both streamers have leaned on in building their audiences. (Both streamers, for instance, famously take pride in and derive humour from their basilectal Nigerian English). But the public condemnation also sent a message to streamers, showing them that even Nigerians with a vast appetite for excess can only take so much.

Criticisms of livestreaming will never go away, but more and more people will likely embrace streaming as a veritable form of digital entertainment the more it embeds itself in Nigerian culture, the more it shapes



popular culture and impacts industries within the Nigerian creative economy, and even beyond it. Ini Edo's appearance on Carter Efe's stream despite her initial reservation, for instance, suggests the kind of unlikely alliances that streamers will forge if they can continue to command a large audience. It's too early to say if Nollywood will shadow Afrobeats by investing significantly in livestreaming as a marketing outlet, given how much that declining earning power in the country has contributed to depleting cinema attendance. But Ini Edo's and IK Ogbonna's promotion of their movie on Carter Efe's stream points to a direction that Nollywood players might take to not just drive up box office sales but also engage intimately with movie fans.

> Audiences can watch streamers in their natural element, reacting to situations in real time.

It is expected that the partnership forged between creators and Afrobeats will deepen, with artistes, record labels, and music executives possibly launching streaming channels as a way to connect with fans but also as an additional source of revenue. During his stream with Carter Efe, Davido, for instance, alluded to investing in livestreaming. Other artistes have also expressed both surprise and curiosity after learning how much money top streamers earn, suggesting potential future investments.

The economic value of streaming will also drive more young Nigerians to set up ring lights and perform in front of cameras in the years to come. As Nigeria's internet connectivity grows, streamers can also expect to create in more conducive environments and reach more audiences. Though broadband expansion in Nigeria is still short of the 70% target set under the National Broadband Plan 2020-2025, it crossed the 50% mark for the first time ever in November 2025, representing the kind of technological advancement that can positively impact livestreaming in the long run. Government initiatives, such as Project Bridge, an initiative launched by the Federal Ministry of Communications in August 2025 that aims to deploy 90,000 kilometres of fibre optic cables nationwide, also hold promise for creating a better digital environment for livestreaming to reach newer heights.

Advances made by livestreaming will likely impact several other industries, and in some cases, have already done so, from edu-tech to traditional media to e-commerce, with traders using livestream as a means of building trust among potential customers. Not only has the success of livestreaming caused Nigerians to

rely even less on traditional media, but traditional media outlets may also choose to incorporate livestreaming into their programming, such as in the mid-2010s when media organisations used the now-defunct Twitter-owned Periscope to livestream content. It's also not far-fetched to imagine that the revenue-sharing disparity affecting Nigerian streamers, in relation to their foreign counterparts, may inspire the creation of homegrown streaming platforms promising better pay.

As his stream with Carter Efe drew to an end, Davido praised the streamer's consistency and hard work in building his Twitch platform. He also advised the streamer to avoid negativity, seemingly alluding to the creator's rivalry with Shank Comics and Peller. As the artiste waxed philosophical, a new subscription came in, one of many on a night where Carter Efe would gain about 28,000 new subscribers. The streamer could barely contain his excitement, yelling "Ws in the chat," cutting into Davido's words. The artiste smiled with avuncular understanding. The men in the room, fully loosened by weed and drink, shuffled about. Music played in the room, an old Davido song. The men broke into a dance.

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Internet Afrocentrism and the Social Media Economy

By Chimezie Chika

Centuries ago, the first Europeans who came to Africa told outrageous stories about it. Disregarding their own physical experiences, these adventurers went back to Europe to further reinforce myths already long-held by their kinsmen about a continent they knew little about. Various accounts described baffling grotesqueries.

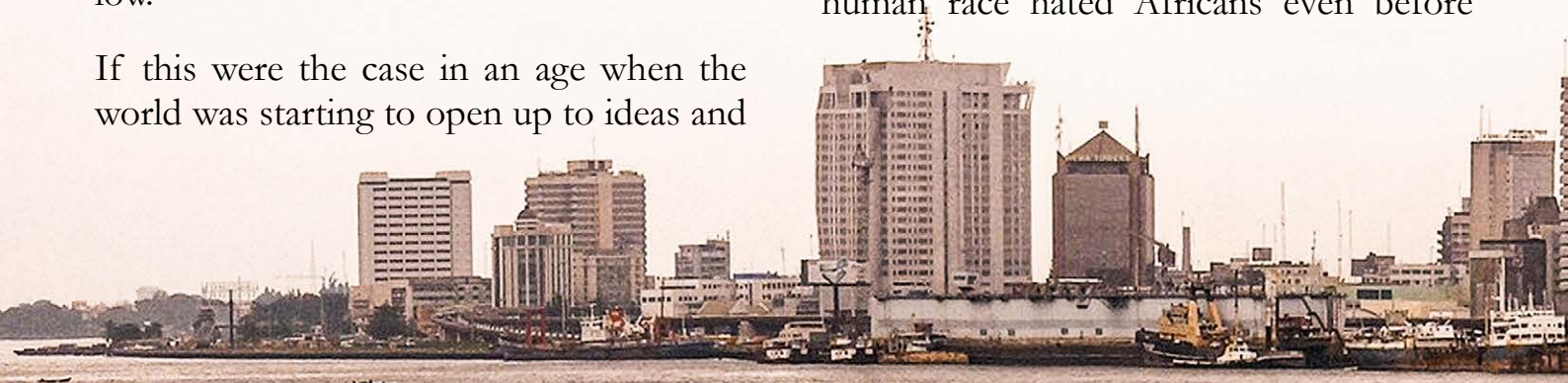
One Portuguese explorer cited in Frank M. Snowden Jr.'s "Blacks in Antiquity" (1970) told his fellow Europeans that Africans were not exactly humans. "[They have] no hair," he wrote, "except for a few bristly strands on their head." Another, Robert Baker, who was an English explorer, claimed in 1563 that Africans were "a beastly savage people". This was the age of exploration, and it was possible these explorers were exploiting the ignorance of their fellow countrymen and continentals who knew nothing about the continent below.

If this were the case in an age when the world was starting to open up to ideas and foreign lands and cultures, imagine what hideous ideas must have circulated about Africa in European antiquity. And yes, there is evidence to show the utter fantasies that were hawked and, no doubt, told and retold under lamplight in the manner of Marco Polo's adventure stories.

One Roman author, Pliny the Elder, wrote authoritatively that sub-Saharan Africa was populated by "animal and human monstrosities". Not wanting to snipe at his colourful imagination, he went into greater detail, describing distant tribes that bore no noses or tongues, and others who had a single eye in the middle of their foreheads and yet others whose king was a dog. Pliny was admittedly living in a time when beliefs about Africa south of the Sahara was fantasy fete. People genuinely believed that the Africa they knew nothing about was filled with people who had their heads on their bellies or their legs on their heads.

So much was the widespread falsehood and subsequent hatred of anything resembling African that we can find its particulars reflected in pre-modern European literature. Shakespeare wrote a number of plays—including Othello and The Tempest—that illustrated a smidgen of the prejudices that entrenched themselves in the imagination of the Europeans of his time. The hatred we speak of here was, however, not only the zeitgeist of Shakespeare's or Pliny's time; it was (and is) almost transcendental.

Thus, the question of why a branch of the human race hated Africans even before



they encountered them excavates centuries of misinformation, engendering psychological complexities such as have been explained in academic research. Theories around hatred posit that the reason people hate in absentia—that is, the reason people hate what they do not understand—can be as simple as perceived difference in appearance, mannerism, or culture.

While some researchers have theorised that hatred is innate in human beings (that when the brain cannot identify something, it automatically categorises it as threatening), others have followed, quite plausibly, that prejudice is the result of fear.

Now, anyone would suppose that—with the advent of print media, television, and subsequently the internet—the othering of Africa would die a natural death. Instead, our so-called woke, enlightened, liberal, info-heavy, racially self-aware Age simply turned a corner and reinvented ways to project hatred and utter ignorance on Africa and its peoples with the same endpoint as their European forebears.

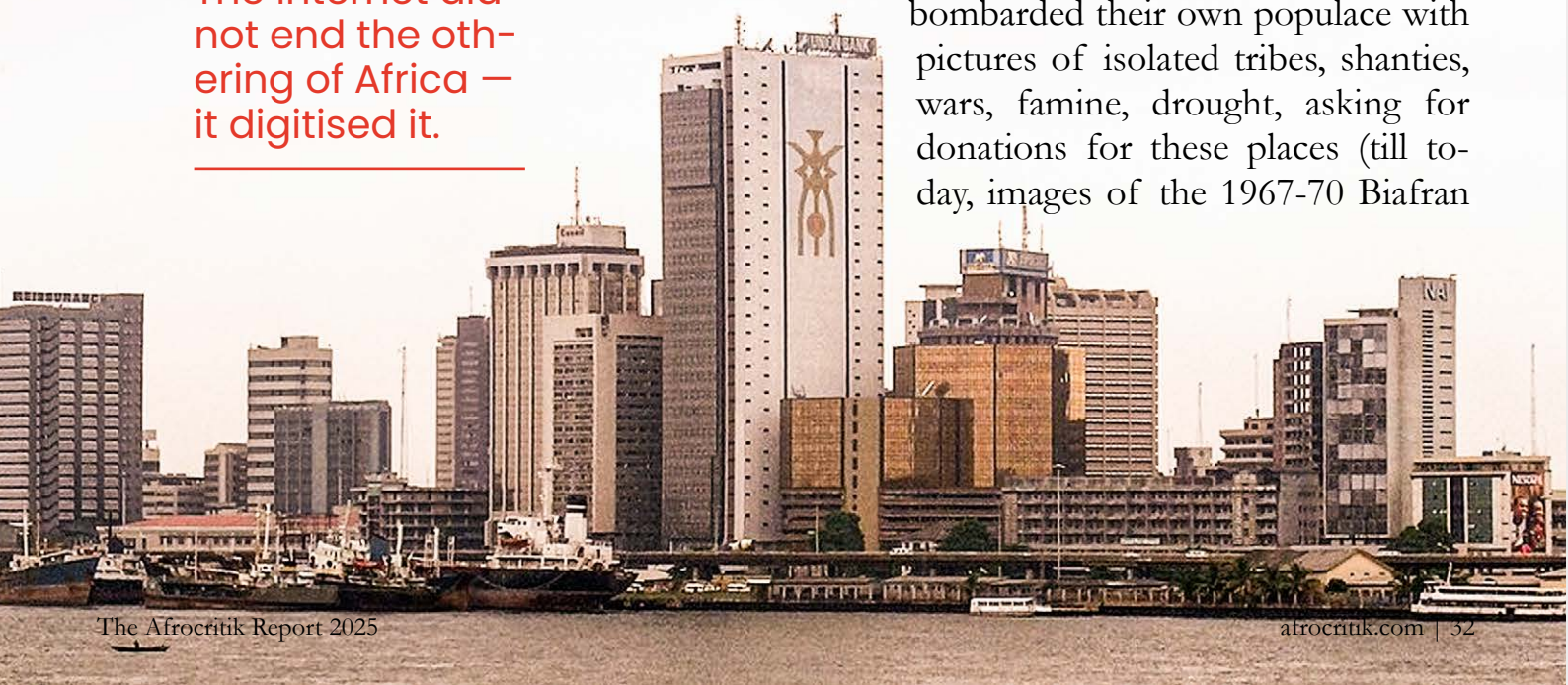
This time, it is being done in real time, with live broadcast, travel blogging and commentary to boot! Which means it is less imaginative but clearly better orchestrated in visual terms. The vehicles are the internet and mass media, and the weapons are misinformation and carefully chosen media images.

> The internet did not end the othering of Africa — it digitised it.

The Workings of the Aid Economy

For a long time, the image of Africa outside Africa was predicated on a series of opinions by people who knew nothing about it. By the dawn of the 19th and all through the 20th centuries—after Europeans had gone a-hiking across the continent and discovered rivers, treasures, and thriving civilizations for their kinsmen, and promptly began colonisation—the perception of Africa was carefully built around images of need: They are primitive, let us bring God and the light of civilisation to them; We now own these lands, these resources are ours to extract; etc.

On the one hand, Western literature depicted stories of hapless, animalistic, zombie-like peoples in dire need of the West's civilising influence (Achebe was vehemently critical of these kinds of inhuman portrayals). Western media, on the other hand, bombarded their own populace with pictures of isolated tribes, shanties, wars, famine, drought, asking for donations for these places (till today, images of the 1967-70 Biafran



War are still being used to raise funds for contemporary wars). What developed afterwards was an entire complex chain of its own, built and handled by people whose interests can be both genuine and self-promotional or, simply, desperately self-enriching.



What we may call the aid economy today is propped by people who, by their actions, do not want those wars, famines, etc, to end, because it appears to be in their financial best interests to make sure that those places never develop or know peace, considering that people commit their lives, study courses, and build successful careers on the infrastructure of the aid economy.

We will not go into the internal logistics of fundraising and its subsequent disbursement (or the tailored inadequacies thereof), supported by just the right number of paparazzi philanthropic foundations, which are virtue-signalling tools of wealthy countries or scions who sometimes continue to entertain degrading views of the continent and its peoples while extending such benevolence. In short, one sees a spectacular complementarity between various tiers of the aid economy, from individuals to organisations, to governments, to the media.

The media's role is to continue an inflow of the same kind of images, which are shunted around persuasively to coerce the developed world to donate to "humanitarian causes in Africa". The rationale for this is to continue to convince donating patrons that no progressive developments whatsoever have happened on the continent.

One can even project that the subterranean hope here is that stoking feelings of schadenfreude towards Africa would elicit condescending donations (sometimes from a somewhat derisive we-are-better-than-them mentality). Altruism and pretenses towards altruism—they both exist alongside each other—is at the heart of the aid economy's contradictory motives in Africa: to heal and ameliorate humanitarian disasters, but also to do other things such as laundering dirty clothes or inadvertently distributing ambiguous non-food aid or dangerously keeping aid careers safe (for that safety is predicated on the perpetuity of African instability). Other aspects of the aid economy moonlight as conflict resolution and, in essence, orchestrate the very opposites of the liberations which its rhetoric often professes.

The point is that it's never really about Africans but about how donors want to be seen across the world. Africa has unwittingly, by historical or even epistemic circumstance, become a site where projections of the messianic complexes of peoples, countries, and organisations are made.

No one is really interested in solving problems here: it is not about the political cartels who have captured sovereign states across Africa; it is not about wars which are sometimes being run concurrently with military and food aids commandeered to feed soldiers; it is not even about the people about whom not much is still known today in the West (as reactions to Ishowspeed's recent Africa Tour reveal).

In real economic terms, it is not even about helping grow African economies like, say, in the manner of the US-led Marshall Plan for postwar Europe. It is more about resource

gain and self-image. Some of the worst regimes (the Jean Bokasas and Mobutu Sese Sekos) that have impoverished countries in Africa are validated in Western power corridors. Once these regimes have completed the project of their own countries' dismantling and destruction, Western Jesuses and their much-needed aid (lately in exchange for resource extraction) can now come in with triumphant confidence. Go figure, as they say in America, of all places.

The Social Media Economy and Internet Afrocentricism

The internet was a revolutionary invention for Africans. Among the many things the coming of social media did was that it allowed Africans to tell their own stories in real time, responding to the centuries-old prejudices projected on them. The internet's democratising effect did not make that task any easier, for there were legacy organisations working assiduously against whatever stories Africans were telling about themselves.

It became a war of images and content (which we will come to soon enough). If Africans were telling positive stories about their lives, they were placed in opposition to a plethora of negativities. If Africans provided nuanced criticisms of the failures of their own countries, other narratives sprang around them by vested interests which aimed to prove the one-dimensional point that the Black race is inherently stunted.

The result of this for Africans and their diaspora was a frantic internet-aided effort to recuperate their self-image, like a person who must tell himself at all times that he is beautiful in order to believe it. The positive barrage of information that came from that resolution became itself a soup of truths and untruths cooked and presented as a whole meal. Afrocentric channels (the likes of Africa is Powerful) run by Africans and the African diaspora sprang up across YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and other social media, speaking of Africa in sometimes superlative alien language.

Some history "Kemet" (Know Thyself, The King's Monologue, Mr Imhotep, etc) channels on YouTube, run mostly by African-Americans and other African diaspora with the aid of elaborate AI graphics, seem fixated on proving that ancient Egypt was

> The problem with this internet Afrocentrism is that it is essentially Wakanda Afrocentrism.



an African civilisation (the need itself arose from certain misguided doubts elsewhere that Egypt could not have been).

Other channels take on other aspects of ancient history or simply choose to show AI videos of ideal Africa, which they discuss in such language that we who reside in Africa begin to question whether these people, however noble their purpose, know even the slightest thing about Africa and Africans. Some of them appear to have completely ignored (or perhaps they have no knowledge of) the current political makeup of Africa, with 54 developing countries and thousands of ethnic groups existing and confronting different challenges.

The problem with this internet Afrocentrism is that it is essentially Wakanda Afrocentrism. It romanticises the continent, and is thoroughly far removed from its reality; to wit, its purpose might even serve up utopian versions of Africa, not as escapism, but as something close to religious belief. Some would argue that this optimism is necessary, but I say that it is rooted in something more insidious. The diaspora is projecting ideals of their own chequered history on the continent. Those social media defenders, for all their valour, do not express any interest in the life of Africans today; their social footprints show instead that they are primarily interested in Africa as an entity, as an ideal, as The Motherland. It is, again, a kind of religious fervour, for it is built on faith and a singular ideal.



> Afrocentrism online is often Wakanda Afrocentrism — romantic, utopian, and dangerously detached from reality.

I recognise the more enlightened individuals in the African diaspora (such as Dr. Bunmi Oyinsan's Sankofa Pan African Series) who are more humanely and intellectually interested in the continent, but whose voices are drowned in the din of Afrocentric internet content.

In short, the result of the content-making capitalism that arrived with the social media economy is a barrage of both well-meaning and malicious content on Africa, with the scale tipped slightly towards the latter. The well-meaning aspect of it, which I have touched on to a small degree, might still end up projecting myriad misinformation about the continent. The other malicious content, which I will come to, is simply an immoral attempt to continue the age-old dehumanisation of Africa.

Once the world realised that much profit could be extracted from an Africa-focused branding in a social media economy that rewards content and algorithms, everyone wanted a piece of the cake. Western travel YouTubers were rushing to Africa to make content about slums, wars, primitive tribes, and culinary cultures they disparage—it was, in short, 1500 again in disguise.

The content creators—a new occupation that didn't exist two decades ago—would arrive in nice airports in certain African countries, lodge in nice international brand hotels in nice neighbourhoods of these countries and then promptly go into the less-desirable areas (Makoko, Kibera, etc) to shoot content for their specialised viewership who, it would seem, unfailingly expect only terrible things to be said about Africa: the content creator, being after the views-reward mechanism that pays on so-



cial media, gives his audience exactly what they want. Some of the most viral of these kinds of videos over the past year came from YouTube channels such as Fearless and Far, Harry Jaggard, Go With Ali, and others.

Now Africans themselves have joined the fray. Many are focused on the Afrocentric optimism movement, with a different modus: showing that African cities can match up to anything elsewhere in the world or that Africans are equally innovative (and this is where some of Africa's biggest YouTubers and social media personalities feature: Wode Maya, Tayo Aina, Stephen Ndukwu, etc).

Superlative thumbnails read something like "The Real Africa They Don't Show You", etc, usually with images of skyscraper CBDs and the face of an open-mouthed fellow who apparently can't contain his awe. It is well-intentioned, it is a response, but it is also about making money, make no mistake. The irony is that Western YouTubers and others have keyed into this type of content (Davud Akhunzada, Dudy Travelling, etc), so social media is littered with content and counter-content about the continent, proving and disproving, as it were, the information that circulates even within the same social media boundaries. However one looks at it, Africa is being treated as a social media content goldmine, being divided, à la 1885, by resource-chasing individuals and organisations.

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Ishowspeed's recent tour of Africa, positive as it is, further exposed the



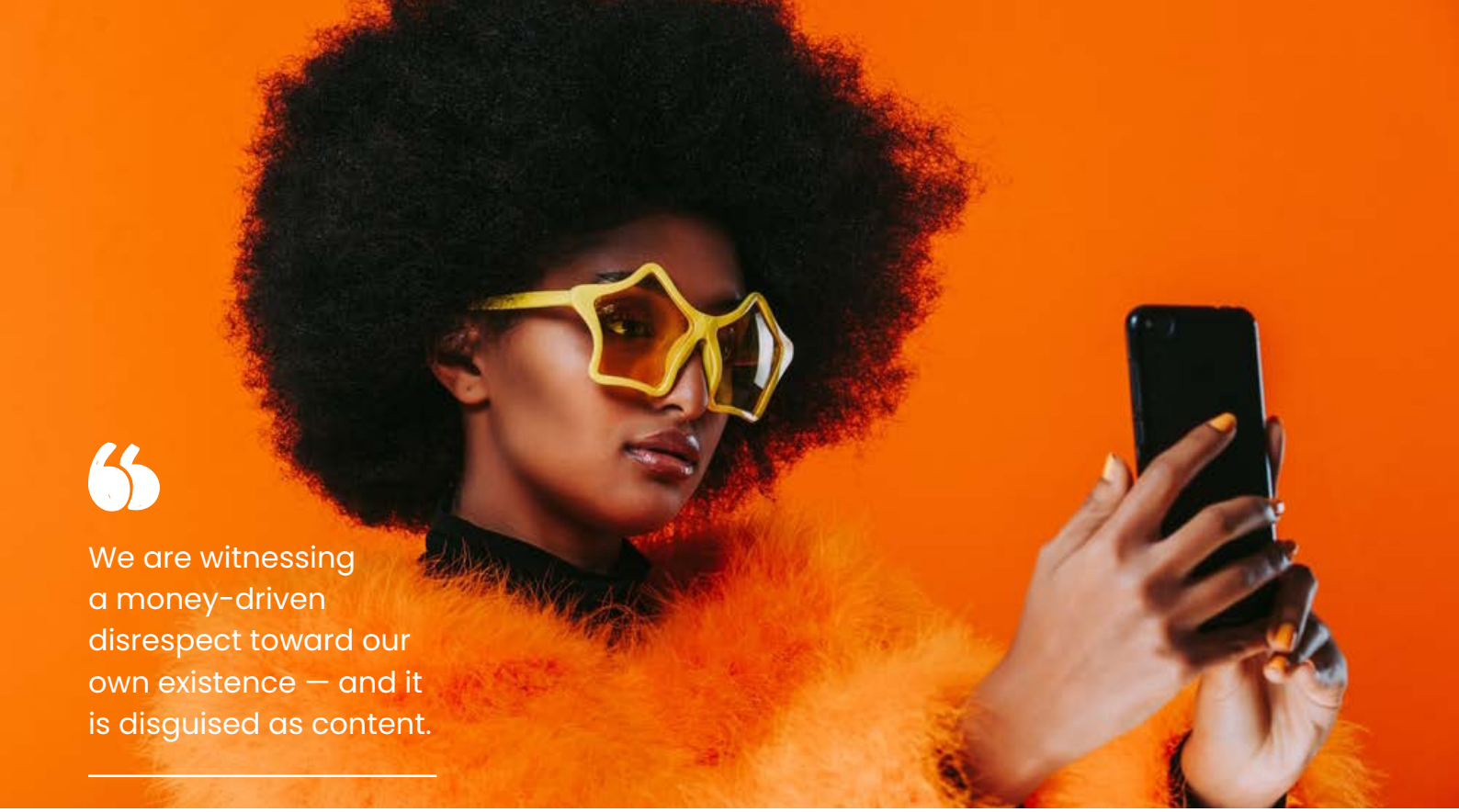
issues here. Not from Ishowspeed himself but from the reactions to his tour across the Americas, Europe, and Asia. That Africa has been—and is still being—"othered" for a long time remains an unimpressive fact. When influencers and social media creators say they want to showcase the "real" or "authentic" Africa, there is an inherent exoticisation in that resolve; there is also a long history of prejudice and racial classism, such as I have discussed, in it.

What makes it necessary for the real and authentic version of a place to beg to be showcased? And who regulates these showcasings? We never see anyone say they want to showcase "authentic Europe" because it has historically been placed in a position of perceptive advantage. When people say they want to showcase the "authentic China" or "The Real China They Don't Show You", as we see these days on social media, what do we see? Decades of Western misinformation about that country, which the Cold War had no small hand in, and which nowadays negates the massive infrastructural advances that that country has made in the last few decades.

Are the various aid economies mining Africa at the moment sincere? My stance is that it is not about sincerity but about the material and immaterial infrastructures that make the need for aid or the rehabilitation of the African image necessary. Everything in that sense is clearly about gain, both those who hustle social media content and those who tailor images of the continent for humanitarian aid purposes.

If one is reinforcing stereotypes about Africa, it's for that month-end YouTube cheque; if they are disparaging such stereotypes in superlative terms, the end-point is still the same. There is nuance, too, for sure, where one person can equally reinforce and disparage from the same position, which further proves that it is about capital interests, not generally Africa and its peoples.

The point being made here is that there is an insidious dehumanisation of Africa that masquerades as something more benign. And the structures behind it are nothing



> We are witnessing a money-driven disrespect toward our own existence — and it is disguised as content.

more complex than gain and profit, directly or indirectly. Large-scale thralldom to screens in our age has created a dog-eat-dog social media market within which Africa is the guinea fowl providing spectacle for the rest of the world (think Sarah Baartman on a continental scale).

The loser is Africans and Africa, whose very existence will continue to be the subject of misinformation. There is therefore a need to subject any false optimism projected onto us with cold rigour and just the appropriate amount of cynicism. We are witnessing a social-based, money-driven disrespect towards our own existence, our history, our aspirations, and our struggles—it's all nothing more serious than content.

Chimezie Chika *is a culture writer whose short stories and essays have appeared in or forthcoming from, amongst other places, The Weganda Review, The Republic, The Iowa Review, Terrain.org, Isele Magazine, Lolwe, Fahmidan Journal, Efiko Magazine, Dappled Things, and Channel Magazine. He is the Fiction Editor of Ngiga Review and the Head of the Literature Department at Afrocritik. His interests range from culture, history, to art, literature, and the environment.*

Section II

MUSIC, SOUND, AND GLOBAL CIRCULATION



2025 Nigerian Music Stats

$600M
Annually

Nigeria's music industry generates an estimated $600 million annually and is on track to more than double in size over the next decade, reaching as much as $1.03 billion by 2033.

https://nairametrics.com/2025/12/19/nigerias-music-industry-generates-600m-annually-hannatu-musawa/

Nigeria now holds the highest percentage of local music support among all countries in the Middle East and Africa. According to the report, 61.3% of on-demand (audio + video) streams in Nigeria were from local Nigerian artistes.

https://www.turntablecharts.com/news/1846

61%
on-demand Streams

57th
Globally

According to a June 2025 report from the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI) cited in industry analyses, Nigeria ranked 57th globally in total recorded music revenues, which were estimated at $11.1 million

https://www.ifpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/GMR2025_SOTI.pdf



1.3B
Spotify listening hours

According to Spotify's eagerly anticipated Wrapped 2025 data, Nigerians collectively spent over 1.3 billion hours consuming audio content on the platform this year.

https://tribuneonlineng.com/nigerians-spent-1-3-billion-hours-on-spotify-in-2025-2/

Wizkid's 'Morayo' is Apple Music's 2025 top album in Sub-Saharan Africa

https://lifestyle.thecable.ng/full-list-wizkids-morayo-is-apple-musics-2025-top-album-in-sub-saharan-africa/

Top
Album 2025

2025 Nigerian Music Stats



There is Nothing New Under the Sun

(That African Music Hasn't Already Lived Through)

By Dami Ajayi

Is Afrobeats losing its creative spark, or is it in a decrescendo? These questions go beyond music, exposing perennial patterns in Nigerian popular culture, including our tendency to overlook history and rush past craftsmanship. By examining Afrobeats' current state, and past cycles of Popular African Music, and the forces shaping it from within and without, we can better understand the trajectory of contemporary Nigerian music, particularly Afrobeats.

Is African Music a Monolith?

African music is not a monolith. Neither homogeneous nor static, African music is a catchall category that requires imagining a sonic fare that brings together the music of over 55 countries under one umbrella.

Lumping African music is reductive and often results from large-scale injustices dat-

ing back to the Berlin Conference, where European powers scrambled for the control of Africa. Preceded by centuries of the Atlantic Slave Trade, Africa's colonisation left its enduring legacy of artificial borders on the continent, as chattel slavery left scars on the bodies and psyche of Africans in the diaspora.

Music, that universal language that eschews barriers, is an intangible form of culture and heritage that tells the collective histories of injustices inflicted on African bodies and borders. To think of African music in defiance of slavery and colonisation is one legitimate way of celebrating the resilience of the African humanity and spirit, yet even this cannot be removed from capitalism's gaze; it exists as a category in your local record store or a product sitting in wait on your digital streaming platform.

Afrobeats to the World?

Afrobeats emerged from Ghana and Nigeria, and their diaspora at the end of the 20th century. A dynamic dance music, Afrobeats is fusionist in its ethos, adapting musical genres, traditional and contemporary, to suit its needs. Afrobeats fuses '60s Highlife with '70s Afrobeats, '70s Roots Reggae with Noughties Jamaican Dancehall, '90s and '00s R&B and American Hip-Hop with Yoruba music genres Juju and Fuji—in fact, the list of influences is endless—to arrive at a mutable music popular among youth in Africa and the Black Diaspora.

In the last decade, Afrobeats has attracted global pop's attention. Although Afrobeats' global ascent crystallised with "One Dance", a song by Canadian Rapper Drake featuring Afrobeats' biggest star Wizkid, the journey to that international attention was slow and incremental and involved a cohort of musicians older than Wizkid.

"One Dance" topped the US Billboard Hot 100 for 10 non-consecutive weeks and has been followed by significant landmark achievements for Afrobeats, including international record label deals, brand endorsements, media appearances and well-publicised tours at coveted venues and arenas both in Europe and North America.

This has led to a scramble among international record labels that have returned to the continent, particularly Nigeria, the central hub of Afrobeats. Record labels like Universal, Sony, and Warner have local operations in Nigeria, scouting for new talent. In 2024, Universal Music Group purchased a majority stake in Mavin Records, a local record label home to Afrobeats popstars Rema and Ayra Starr.

> Afrobeats is not the first African genre to attract global attention — and it may not be the last.

The last five years have seen a sustained rise in digital streaming of Afrobeats worldwide. Afrobeats was streamed about 13 billion times in 2022. In 2024, revenue from music in Africa surged by over 22 per cent, and Afrobeats, included in over 117 million playlists, enjoyed a 34 per cent increase in global streams. Streaming of homegrown talent on Spotify increased by 146 per cent in 2024, and this trend continued in 2025. In January 2026, Wizkid crossed the 10 billion streams mark on Spotify, becoming the first African artiste to do so.

James Foley, lead of Global Editorial Strategy for Spotify, noted in Spotify's 2025 Wrapped, that Afrobeats "...morph further out of its West African roots into a staple of mainstream culture…now firmly

part of mainstream pop and rap in North America and Europe". He also identified the "cross-pollination happening with Latin artistes such Kapo and Beéle, who interpret Afrobeats through their own lens".

The Amapiano Dynamic: Local Tensions and Global Influence

Amapiano, the slowed-down variant of House music developed in Soweto, which fuses kwaito, gqom, jazz, soul, and lounge into a tapestry of synths and intermittent percussive bassline breaks, is following a trajectory similar to that of Afrobeats.

Standalone genres, Afrobeats and Amapiano, have been successfully cross-pollinated by their elite practitioners. A slew of zeitgeist-making Afrobeats songs has borrowed heavily from Amapiano, necessitating the coinage of Afropiano, a subgenre of both genres, which has worsened already fraught tensions between Nigeria and South Africa.

> "Innovation anxiety often disguises historical amnesia.

When South African singer Tyla's breakout single "Water" won the inaugural Grammy Award for Best African Music Performance in 2024, there was an uproar on social media, championed by the Nigerian music industry insiders who took Tyla to task for accepting an "Afrobeats award." In truth, "Water", a masterful song, blends American Pop and R&B elements with both Amapiano and Afrobeats. However, the Grammy for the Best African Music Performance category is not exclusive to Afrobeats records; it is given in the "hono[u]r quality African music performances in any given year". Tyla has won that Grammy award yet again in 2025 for her monster hit, "Push 2 Start".

Despite these ongoing tensions, Amapiano has had a charmed year in 2025, with Kabza De Small named as the most-streamed South African artiste on Spotify. Overall, streaming numbers in South Africa are up by 37 per cent from last year. Local artistes accounted for 70 per cent of the most-streamed artistes in 2025, reversing the trend of 70 per cent of streaming being attributed to international artistes the previous year. Nigeria's Spotify chart also saw a heavy presence of homegrown musicians.

The Local Scene: Infrastructure, Economics, and Innovation Anxiety

Since 2016, the festive period marking the end of every year has featured a month-long series of events in West African coastal cities —fashion shows, parties, concerts, social gatherings—called Detty December. In 2019, the Ghanaian government supported this tourism attraction through its Year of the Return Campaign.

Lagos State reported in 2024 that Detty December injected about 71 million dollars into the local economy, with most of this revenue bagged by hotels, bed-and-breakfasts, nightclubs, and party venues. The popularity of Afrobeats has benefited this campaign as much as it has boosted orders of Jollof Rice and Egusi soup among non-Nigerian patrons of Nigerian restaurants based in the United Kingdom during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The local music industry in Nigeria is plagued by inadequate infrastructure and obsolete legislation, affecting business

ownership, intellectual property rights, and workers' welfare within the ecosystem. These difficulties have meant that the forex earnings from Afrobeats do not effectively trickle down to the local industry that drives Afrobeats innovation.

Additionally, widespread anxiety has troubled the Nigerian Afrobeats community in the last two consecutive years. Since 2024, Afrobeats has neither produced a global hit song with the impact of Rema's "Calm Down" nor launched a debutant recording artiste of Asake's meteoric rise and status.

Realistically, those feats are extraordinary and difficult to reproduce—but this has not assuaged the pervading uneasiness. To add salt to injury, musical innovations have been stagnant. Since the Afropiano craze that propelled the likes of Asake, Lojay, Omah Lay and Victony into the Afrobeats mainstream post-COVID-19, there have been no legible innovations in the Afrobeats sound.

2026 Afrobeats releases continue to draw inspiration from South Africa's Amapiano. This begs the question: why is Afrobeats not looking inwards at its own two-decade-strong discography and the over 100-year catalogue of popular West African music that precedes it?

World Music and Previous Cycles of Global Attention

The general sense in Afrobeats, as with most innovations in show business, including cinema and television as practised in Nigeria, is to reject every connection to the past. It is as though industry insiders are either ahistorical or shun the lessons from their forebears.

Afrobeats is not the first (and may not be the



Source: Facebook/Wizkid

last) popular African music genre to catch some global attention. In 1991, a talented singer/songwriter and guitarist described by his former bandmate as a "Bob Marley and Jimmy Hendrix" creation, signed with the American record label Interscope Records. His name was Majek Fashek, and Spirit of Love, his first international album, was also credited to his 12-man band, Prisoners of Conscience. Overall, the album was well received, supported by a tour with Tracy Chapman and late-night American television appearances.

After Bob Marley died in 1981, Island Records, responsible for popularising Reggae on the global stage, turned its gaze to Africa, ostensibly searching for the next global music star from the "Third World." Fela Anikulapo-Kuti was already signed to Arista Records, so they signed King Sunny Ade, a handsome Ondo Kingdom prince turned Juju music royalty.

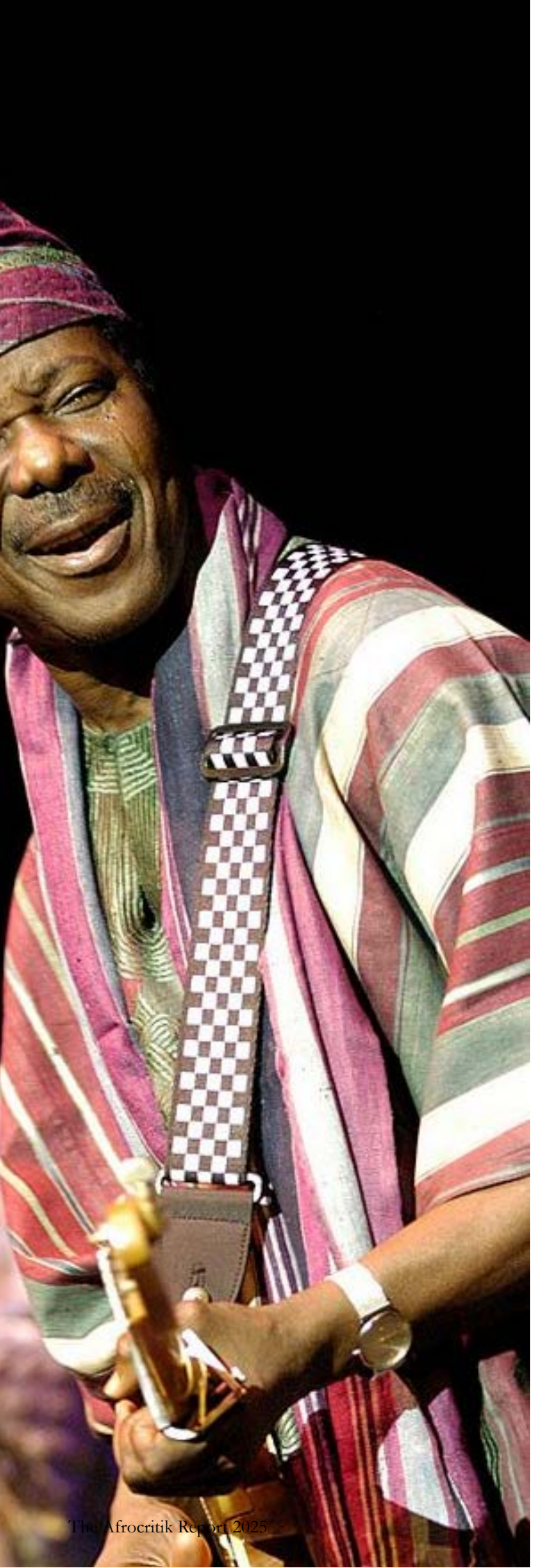
Ade released three albums—Juju Music (1982), Synchro System (1983), and Aura (1984) —in three years. Top-shelf media appearances, including contributions to soundtracks and cameo roles in Hollywood films, supported these album releases and helped secure an encouraging reception for Juju Music, which, to date, is a cult classic. Ade and his 21 man band also went a multi-city tour in America, covered by late culture journalist Greg Tate whose 1983 reportage for The Village Voice, "King Sunny Ade': 'Him Cool, Him Wicked'; Are You Ready for Juju?", a moving reflection of his reckoning with his identity as a person of African descent in the Diaspora.

What do these Cycles Teach the Present?

On Aura, King Sunny Ade's final album



Source: Internet



with Island Records, Ade and his producer, Martin Meissonnier, experimented beyond the boundaries of Juju music, with spooky dub effects, indulgent synths, and off-kilter Linn drums. Assists from American R&B royalty Stevie Wonder and Cameroonian saxophonist Manu Dibango could not save Aura, and Island Records dropped Ade after the album failed to chart.

Juju musician and bandleader Segun Adewale was also signed to Sterns Music, a British record label established in 1983 and home to Salif Keita, Youssou N'Dour, and Franco & OK Jazz. Although Juju failed to capture global attention, it brought African music to the forefront.

American singer/songwriter Paul Simon, and half of the duo Simon & Garfunkel, encountered South African music, mbaqanga, in 1984. Graceland, his next album heavily influenced by mbaqanga, won the Album of the Year at the 1987 Grammy Awards. With over 16 million copies sold worldwide, Graceland remains Simon's bestselling record.

The Rhythm of the Saints, Simon's subsequent album, also borrowed influences from the continent and her diaspora. The tune "Spirit Voices" borrowed its melody from "Yaa Amponsah," a song first recorded by Kumasi Trio in 1928 in London. Simon paid an initial 16,000 dollars to the Ghanaian Copyright Administration and further royalties of up to 80,000 dollars to the Ghanaian government once the commission determined that the musical style in "Yaa Amponsah" was part of Ghanaian cultural heritage.

African music's explosion on the global stage necessitated a marketing label, World Music, a catchall phrase coined by American anthropologist Robert Brown in the 1960s, which was mobilised in the 1980s

to describe music from non-Western countries that was not sung in English. A ready synonym for World Music is Ethnic Music. When performed by Western musicians like Paul Simon, World music can achieve unprecedented success, winning the most coveted award at the Grammys, but when performed by a non-Western musician, it competes in the Grammy's World Music category.

Elias Leight, in their 2018 seminal report for Rolling Stone Magazine, "Why Isn't Jamaican Dancehall Bigger in the US?", performed a postmortem on Dancehall's stateside excursion. They noted that since the Noughties, there has been a tradition of letting one Jamaican record climb up the US charts during the summer. The article argued that a diverse range of non-Caribbean chancers from Afrobeats artistes to Western pop superstars like Drake and Ed Sheeran have co-opted the Dancehall template.

Reggaeton, a genre that emerged in the late 80s from Panama, also borrows heavily from Dancehall. The piece concluded that, "The best way for Jamaican artistes to reach U.S. listeners, counterintuitively, may be turning their eyes elsewhere – towards South and Central America." Eight years later, Leight's logic is spot on: Puerto Rican musician and Reggaeton star Bad Bunny was the most-streamed artiste on Spotify in 2025 with 19.8 billion streams, and their sixth album, DeBÍ TiRAR MáS FOTos, was the Global Top Album. In the same vein, James Foley's aforementioned Latin artistes have begun to interpret Afrobeats, which should run shivers down the spine of the Afrobeats production chain.

Considering the foregoing, Afrobeats' innovation anxiety about the future of the genre in global pop is well-founded. But there is nothing new under the sun that African music has not already lived through. For more than 100 years, African popular music has been exploited by the suits



in the West. Now, what is different is how technology has disrupted the status quo. From consumer content overload to poor revenue for producers, there is a growing disillusionment with digital streaming, the predominant way we currently consume music.

Nevertheless, record companies always find dynamic ways to keep their doors open. Sony Music Publishing has been acquiring and managing the catalogue of legendary musicians in Nigeria, living and deceased, since it opened its doors in Lagos in 2022. It is a wise investment to acquire intellectual property from the past and present while awaiting clarity on the direction of music technology. Without a vibrant ecosystem and required infrastructure in its home base and a clear anchor within the global pop realms, Afrobeats might suffer a fate like that of Jamaican dancehall and Juju music: to exist at the pleasure of hegemonic capitalism.

Dami Ajayi *is a Nigerian writer, poet and author of three award-winning volumes of poetry. His essays on literature, music, film, and popular culture have appeared in Chimurenga Chronic, Guardian UK, The Africa Report, Lost in Lagos Magazine, The Elephant, Bakwa Magazine, Afropolitan Vibes Magazine, and Das Goethe. He writes the Substack newsletter, London Listening Sessions.*





On Afrobeats to the World:

Where Is the Line Between Evolution and Identity Crisis?

By Yinoluwa Olowofoyeku

Source: Michael Tubes Creation

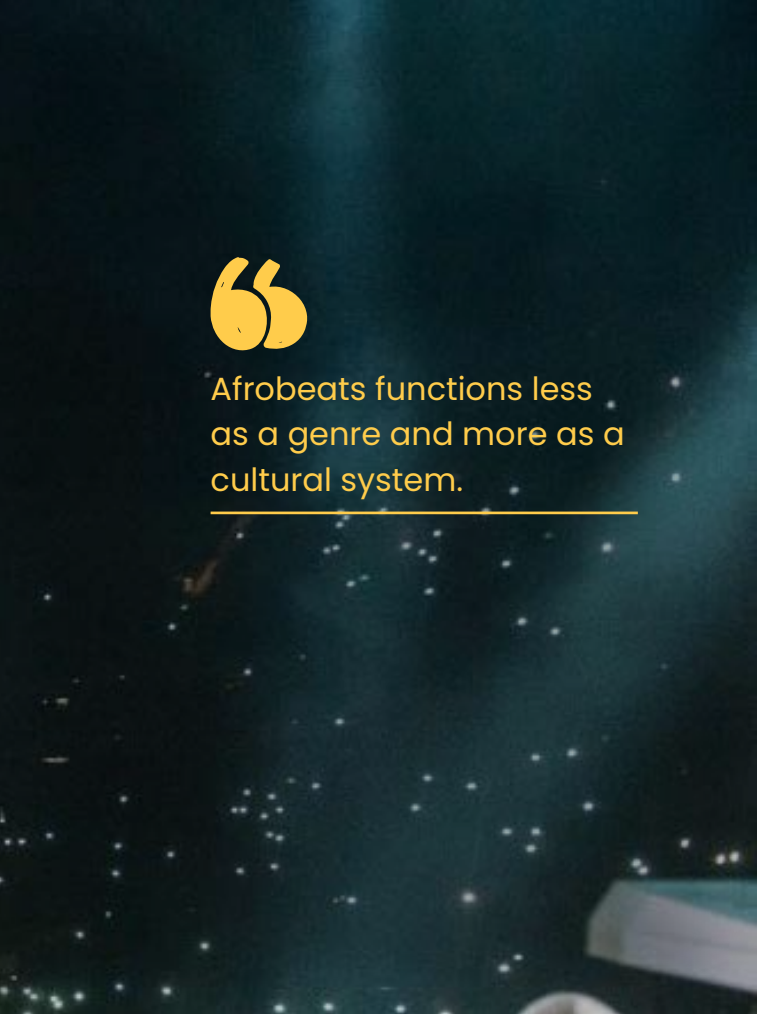
Afrobeats as a Cultural System

Afrobeats now exists in a condition of full arrival. By the end of 2025, it has moved beyond emergence, contestation, or marginality and settled into global familiarity. It circulates across continents with ease, embedded in the machinery of playlists, festivals, brand partnerships, and pop crossover, functioning as a dependable marker of contemporary African popular music. Its rhythmic signatures are widely legible, its aesthetics instantly recognisable, and its presence no longer requires translation. This level of global permeation represents a significant cultural achievement. It also signals a moment that demands closer examination.

Part of that examination requires clarity about what is meant by Afrobeats. The term itself has never been fixed. While initially associated with a cluster of Nigerian pop sounds that gained continental momentum in the late 2000s and early 2010s, it now operates in global markets as a broad umbrella for a range of contemporary African popular expressions.

Ghanaian Highlife-inflected Pop, South African crossover acts adjacent to Amapiano, and diasporic hybrids are routinely folded into the Afrobeats label in international circulation. This elasticity has amplified its reach, but it has also blurred its contours. Technically, a genre implies a relatively stable set of stylistic characteristics and formal conventions that allow works to be grouped within a coherent artistic category.

Afrobeats in its present configuration exceeds that definition. What binds its various strands is not strict sonic uniformity, but shared circulation pathways, branding logics, and global expectation. It is for this reason that Afrobeats resists being ap-



proached simply as a genre. It functions more accurately as a cultural system, shaped by the interaction of sound, circulation, economics, institutions, and demand.

The pressures acting on it are therefore not primarily questions of talent or popularity, but of alignment. The sound continues to travel efficiently, but the meanings it carries increasingly thin out as it moves. What once thrived on locality, friction, and informal experimentation now operates within incentive structures that reward smoothness, familiarity, and export-ready legibility.

Optimisation and the Export Template

This produces a quiet but consequential tension at the centre of Afrobeats' current configuration. As Afrobeats becomes increasingly ubiquitous, its symbolic weight begins to diffuse. Global success incentivises recognisability over specificity, encouraging production choices that prioritise immediate legibility within playlist ecosystems.

The result is a growing emphasis on mid-tempo accessibility, familiar rhythmic structures, and melodic restraint, all of which facilitate frictionless consumption but reduce the sound's capacity to surprise or provoke. Records engineered for global circulation often feel interchangeable, not because they lack craft, but because they are designed to fit seamlessly into a standardised listening environment.

Mid-tempo crossover records such as Ayra Starr's "Commas", Fireboy DML's "Yawa", and Khaid's "Jolie" exemplify this export-ready template. Built around restrained percussion, streamlined arrangement, and immediately legible melodic hooks, these songs are engineered for cross-market compatibility and playlist longevity. Their success underscores how optimisation for global scale can narrow the margins of sonic volatility, even when the individual records remain polished and effective within their intended lane.

A more expansive illustration of this dynamic is found in the meteoric global rise of South African artiste Tyla. Her breakout success with "Water" and subsequent crossover positioning placed her at the forefront of what many international audiences understand as Afrobeats' contemporary face. Sonically, her music blends Amapiano's rhythmic swing with Pop polish, R&B tonality, and Afrobeats-adjacent percussion in a form frequently described as "popiano".

Yet, Tyla herself has resisted narrow classification, framing her sound in broader pop terms rather than situating it strictly within the Afrobeats label. This divergence between external categorisation and self-defi-

nition is instructive. While global markets and award institutions often fold her into Afrobeats branding, her own articulation of genre identity gestures toward something more hybrid and expansive.

The tension becomes even more revealing when viewed through domestic listening patterns. Spotify's 2025 Wrapped data for South Africa shows Kabza De Small once again dominating local streams, underscoring Amapiano's entrenched domestic centrality. Tyla's global stature, by contrast, does not translate into equivalent dominance within her home streaming ecosystem.

The contrast is not an indictment of her artistry, but a reflection of structural dynamics. It suggests that what travels most efficiently under the Afrobeats umbrella internationally does not always mirror the sounds most deeply embedded within local cultural consumption.

This condition does not signal creative decline so much as diminishing cultural returns. Afrobeats continues to function effectively as an export, but its ability to carry distinct cultural narratives weakens as it becomes ever more optimised for scale. In this sense, saturation does not erase Afrobeats' presence, but it softens its contours, making it increasingly difficult for individual records to register as culturally urgent rather than merely successful.

Seen this way, the central issue surrounding Afrobeats is not whether it has peaked, nor whether it has been diluted, but how it is being held together as it continues to expand. Its long-term relevance appears less dependent on further reach than on a recalibration of meaning, structure, and intention.

As with other globally circulating sounds that have passed through similar phases of saturation, the durability of Afrobeats now



rests on its ability to sustain regional specificity and cultural coherence while operating at scale. The question is no longer how far the sound can travel, but how clearly it can define itself while doing so.

Inward Derivation and the Innovation Bottleneck

Afrobeats has always been structurally derivative, drawing energy from its ability to absorb and reconfigure influences across geography and genre. This openness has historically been one of its defining strengths, allowing it to evolve through dialogue with hip-hop, R&B, dancehall, and other diasporic forms. In its current phase, however, derivation increasingly turns inward, resulting in a cycle of self-referential repetition rather than outward expansion.

> What travels most efficiently does not always mirror what is most deeply embedded locally."

Across much of the 2023 to 2025 period, dominant production patterns consolidate around a narrow set of tempos, drum textures, and arrangement structures. Percussion-forward intros, predictable drop points, and chorus-led songwriting become default rather than strategic choices. The widespread absorption of Amapiano elements illustrates this shift clearly.

What begins as a productive cross-regional exchange, visible in the early run of Asake's Mr. Money With The Vibe and subsequent hits like "Terminator", gradually flattens into a surface-level borrowing of log drums and rhythmic feel, often detached from the structural and cultural logic that originally animated the South African sound.

Interestingly enough, the beginnings of this adoption were initially seen as an innovative and emergent sonic fusion, regularly dubbed "Afropiano". It incensed a wave of intentional fusion experiments by heavyweight producers such as Ozedikus, which led to unique spins like Ojapiano, which infused traditional Igbo Oja instrumentation with Amapiano sensibilities.

However, by 2024 and 2025, the Amapiano imprint had flattened to become a stylistic shortcut across multiple mid-tier releases, rather than a generative site of innovation. This is evident in the recent mass adoption of log drums and Amapiano snares in what would now be termed run-of-the-mill Afrobeats, Street-Hop, Afro-Adura, and the likes.

This inward looping does not preclude moments of disruption. Rema's HEIS stands out as a deliberate refusal of optimisation, leaning into abrasive textures, irregular pacing, and tonal unpredictability that disrupt playlist smoothness.

Similarly, emerging sonic architects such as Mavo and Zaylevelten introduce production palettes that feel less beholden to established Afrobeats templates, experimenting with alternative drum programming, distortion, and grungy mood construction that resist easy categorisation.

It remains to be seen how durable their influence will be, but their presence underscores an important reality: innovation continues to surface. What has shifted is not the capacity for experimentation, but the systemic conditions under which experimentation is rewarded or marginalised.

The dominant ecosystem continues to privilege familiarity, reinforcing a feedback loop in which new releases echo es-



tablished templates rather than generating new tensions. There is a possibility for new directions to be starved in favour of more palatable, easily packaged exports, especially where that novelty lacks financial backing and media machinery.

From Sonic Volatility to Global Abstraction

Sonic repetition matters not only at the level of aesthetics, but at the level of meaning. When rhythmic and melodic structures stabilise too completely, they lose their capacity to carry narrative weight. Early Afrobeats thrived on a sense of informal volatility, where shifts in rhythm, language, and delivery reflected the social and cultural pressures of their moment.

Records such as Olamide's "Durosoke", Timaya's dancehall-inflected "Bum Bum", and the rhythmically unconventional "Samba" by Sarz and Wizkid operated without apparent concern for fitting into a unified sonic framework. They were mainstream hits, yet they foregrounded individuality, indigenous cadence, and percussive idiosyncrasy over polish or cross-market smoothing.

This is not to suggest that generic formulas did not exist in that era. They always have. What differed was the weight placed on uniqueness. The industry did not yet feel compelled to engineer songs toward a specific export-ready template. There was less of a commercial product quality to the thinking around structure and sound design, and more tolerance for volatility as a driver of success. As repetition sets in, sound becomes atmosphere rather than statement, and music risks functioning as background rather than cultural expression.

This erosion does not occur suddenly. It accumulates gradually, as familiar structures displace exploratory ones. Over time, the sound's ability to register as socially or culturally situated weakens, making it more susceptible to abstraction and repurposing



elsewhere.

As Afrobeats circulates beyond its points of origin, it increasingly functions as a transferable and flexible sonic toolkit rather than a culturally anchored sound. Its rhythmic patterns, tempos, and melodic sensibilities are adopted across regions and genres, often without reference to the histories or social contexts that shaped them. This process is not inherently problematic. Cultural exchange has always been central to popular music. The issue arises when sound travels faster than narrative.

By 2025, Afrobeats rhythms appear frequently in Latin Pop, global R&B, and mainstream crossover records, integrated seamlessly into local scenes. Collaborations such as Rema's remix of "Calm Down" with Selena Gomez opened new corridors of exchange, so artistes across Colombia and Puerto Rico began incorporating Afrobeats-inflected percussion into reggaetón and Latin R&B frameworks.

> Global success incentivises recognisability over specificity.

Strong examples include "Quilo" by Dawer x Damper, "Mi Reina" by Hamilton and Nanpa Basico, as well as Kapo's "Ohnana", which has garnered over 90M views on YouTube. In many cases, these adaptations foreground groove and texture while sidelining lineage and authorship. Afrobeats becomes a stylistic option rather than a situated cultural expression, deployable without requiring engagement with its origins.

This shift alters the balance of influence and authority. While Afrobeats' sonic vocabulary expands its global footprint, its narrative control diminishes. The sound gains reach but loses density, circulating widely while carrying increasingly generalised meaning.

Misdiagnosing the Moment



Within this context, a noticeable turn toward indigenous Nigerian musical forms emerges as a counter-current. Adekunle Gold's Fuji foregrounds Yoruba oral traditions and percussion structures, drawing directly from the genre that shaped his formative listening. Wizard Chan's "Boma Nime" similarly channels riverine spiritual textures and Ijaw linguistic presence into contemporary production. These gestures signal an awareness of Afrobeats' drift toward abstraction and a desire to re-anchor the sound in specific cultural logics.

Yet, these efforts remain largely peripheral to Afrobeats' dominant pathways. While they introduce valuable sonic texture and cultural grounding, they rarely reshape the core production and distribution systems that govern the genre. Indigenous elements often function as aesthetic accents rather than structural foundations, incorporated selectively without reorganising the underlying logic of circulation.

The autochthonous turn thus operates more as an indicator than a solution. It reveals dissatisfaction with the prevailing model, but without sufficient institutional support, it risks being absorbed as another stylistic layer rather than catalysing systemic change.

As Afrobeats navigates this phase, several dominant responses misidentify the nature of the challenge. One such response centres on gatekeeping, framing global adoption as a threat that must be resisted. Periodic waves of online discourse, particularly on X and Instagram, have seen calls to "protect" or "gatekeep" Afrobeats whenever non-African artistes adopt its rhythmic structures or branding, especially during moments of heightened Latino crossover visibility.

These debates often trend briefly, position-

ing sonic borrowing as cultural encroachment. Yet the focus frequently rests on who is allowed to use Afrobeats aesthetics, rather than on who controls the structures that govern credit, compensation, publishing rights, and long-term narrative ownership. In doing so, the conversation risks mistaking symbolic policing for structural reform.

Another misdiagnosis treats genre elasticity as evolution. As Afrobeats stretches to encompass an ever-widening range of sounds, its identity risks becoming diffused. Flexibility, once a strength, begins to obscure coherence, making it difficult to articulate what Afrobeats represents beyond a general sense of vibe or mood.

Finally, shifts toward slower tempos and mood-driven records are sometimes framed as reinvention, when they more accurately reflect listener fatigue with high-energy repetition.

> Gatekeeping aesthetics is not the same as controlling infrastructure.

The global resonance of Omah Lay's emotionally subdued catalogue, particularly records such as "Soso", and "Understand" alongside the international breakout success of Libianca's "People", illustrates how introspection, vulnerability, and restrained production have increasingly displaced exuberance as Afrobeats' most exportable register.

These records center atmosphere, emotional confession, and sparse rhythmic framing rather than percussive intensity or dancefloor propulsion. Without deeper structural change, however, this tonal pivot risks functioning as a surface-level adaptation rather than a substantive reorientation of the system itself.

Reorientation and Strategic Recalibration

Afrobeats is not alone in facing the pressures of saturation and global diffusion. Other genres offer instructive examples of how similar moments have been navigated. Hip-hop sustains vitality through regional fragmentation, from Atlanta's trap lineage to the UK drill movement, allowing local scenes to set the narratives and redefine the sound continuously.

Reggaetón maintains coherence by retaining Spanish as its primary linguistic vehicle even at peak global visibility, ensuring cultural rootedness even amid massive crossover moments like "Despacito", or more recently, Bad Bunny's SuperBowl Half-Time Show. K-pop demonstrates the value of institutional coherence.

Companies such as HYBE and SM Entertainment do not simply manage artistes; they operate vertically integrated systems that combine long-term artiste training, synchronised branding, global distribution networks, and tightly controlled narrative ecosystems through dedicated fan platforms and multimedia expansion.

This coordination ensures that as K-pop scales internationally, ownership, storytelling, and economic leverage remain centralised rather than diffused. Dancehall, by contrast, illustrates the risks of insufficient structural protection. During the mid-2010s, dancehall rhythms and patois-inflected cadences heavily influenced global pop through records such as Rihanna's "Work" and Drake's "Controlla," yet the widespread sonic adoption did not translate into equivalent institutional strength-

ening or sustained economic leverage for Jamaican originators.

Across these cases, longevity emerges not from endless expansion, but from strengthened internal logic. Genres that endure do so by clarifying identity, reinforcing structure, and managing diffusion intentionally.

The conditions surrounding Afrobeats point toward the need for reorientation rather than reinvention. Streaming platforms have seen sustained growth in mood-based playlists over genre-based ones, while global chart data across pop and R&B reflect a gradual drift toward slower BPMs and emotionally subdued production in the post-EDM era.

On short-form platforms such as TikTok, resonance often hinges less on dance intensity and more on lyrical relatability and atmospheric texture, rewarding songs that evoke feeling rather than spectacle. This broader tempo and mood recalibration positions Afrobeats within a global environment that is receptive to nuance, provided that nuance is rooted in coherent cultural identity rather than surface adjustment. Afrobeats is well-positioned to respond, but only if regional specificity is treated as an asset rather than an obstacle.

> The question is no longer how far Afrobeats can travel, but how clearly it can define itself while doing so."

This does not require retreat from global circulation. It requires a recalibration of priorities, where indigenous structures inform production at a foundational level, where language operates as a worldview rather than an ornament, and where projects are shaped by narrative intent rather than playlist optimisation.

This orientation is already visible in pockets of the ecosystem: in the continued vitality of Lagos Street-Hop scenes that prioritise vernacular immediacy over global smoothing, in the faith-tinged textures of Afro-Adura records that merge gospel cadence with street percussion, and in the way artistes emerging from Port Harcourt increasingly foreground the city itself as narrative anchor, wearing regional identity as both badge and backdrop.

Much like Chicago rappers embed neighbourhood codes into delivery, or South African township culture animates the genres that arise from it, Port Harcourt artistes often allow the city's social texture, slang, and lived experience to shape lyrical perspective and tonal atmosphere.

A parallel clarity can be observed in contemporary Ghanaian Highlife-Pop, where artistes continue to draw directly from Highlife's melodic inheritance and Twi lyricism without flattening those elements into generic global pop templates. Even as Ghanaian records circulate internationally under the Afrobeats umbrella, their structural allegiance to highlife traditions preserves a distinct sonic lineage.

These sub-scenes do not dominate the charts, but they demonstrate that regional grounding and sonic coherence remain viable pathways rather than nostalgic gestures. Such an approach emphasises coherence over scale, allowing global relevance to emerge from clarity rather than compromise.

Afrobeats' current condition reflects the tensions inherent in global success. As a sound, it continues to thrive. As a system, it faces questions of coherence, ownership,

and meaning. Treating Afrobeats as a genre alone obscures these dynamics. Approaching it as a cultural system brings them into focus.

What is at stake is not whether Afrobeats can continue to travel, but whether it can do so without losing the structures that give it shape. Its long-term durability depends less on expansion than on definition. In a moment where the sound is heard everywhere, the challenge is to ensure that it still knows where it is coming from and what it is carrying with it as it moves forward.

Yinoluwa "Yinoluu" Olowofoyeku *is a pioneering music producer who contributed to the foundation of the Alté movement. An avid multi-hyphenate artist and creative, his work across various media is available on all platforms.*



Source: theguardian.com

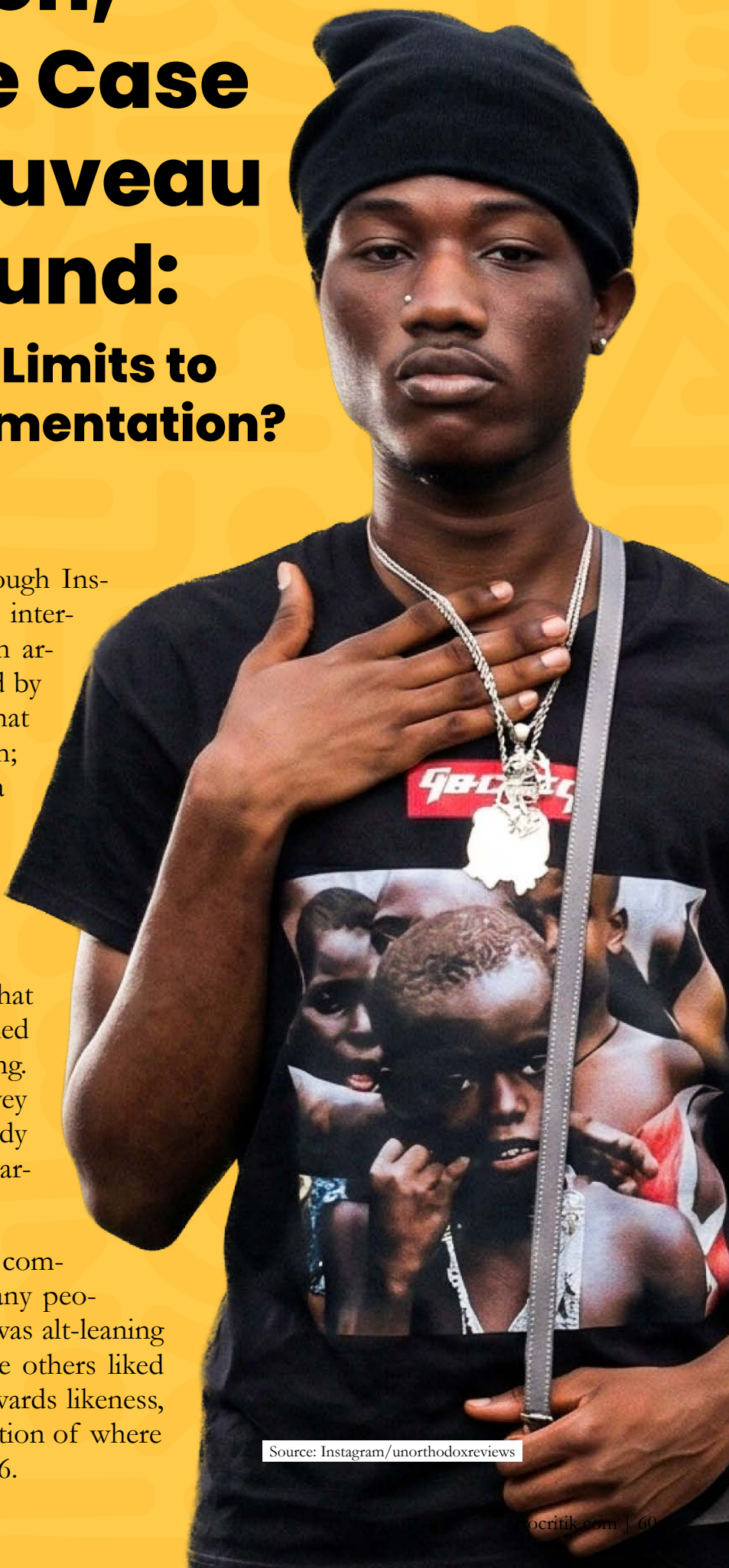
Zaylevelten, Mavo: The Case for the Nouveau Underground:

Should There Be Limits to Afro-pop Experimentation?

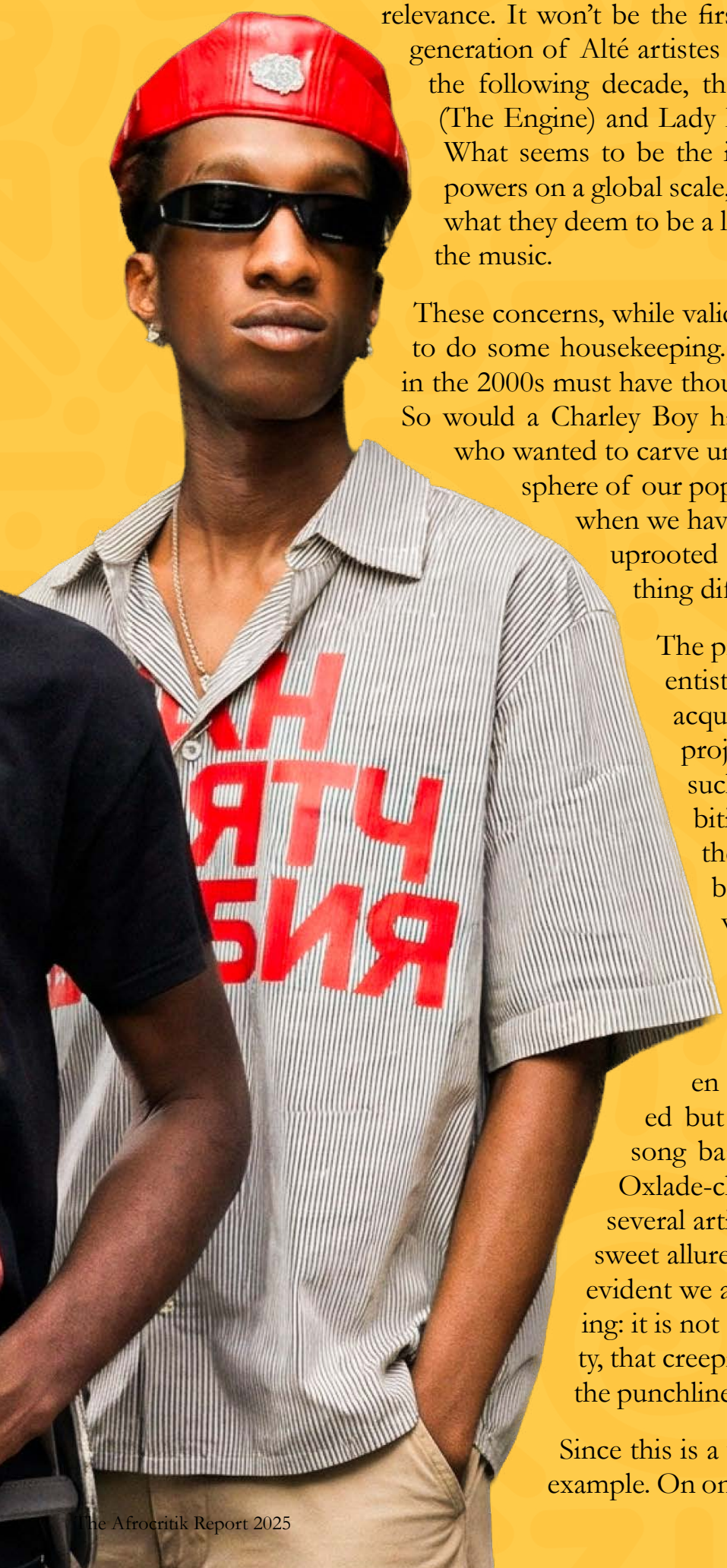
By Emmanuel Esomnofu

During a recent scroll through Instagram, I saw something interesting: a video clip of an artiste named EF Moon, surrounded by young people playing roles in what seemed like a post-apocalyptic film; a girl who he stands beside, and a guy who carries a mirror past him. Despite the strange composition of that clip, what I found most striking was the music itself: a twisting of several forms, there was a swooning undercurrent that was everywhere and nowhere, carried on the back of assured storytelling. "I like the load / I like the load wey I carry for my back / wey no body help me, na me choose am," the artiste sings in the opening lyrics.

Was this a good song? Those who commented had varying reactions. Many people lambasted what they thought was alt-leaning just for the fun of it. While some others liked the strangeness, I leaned more towards likeness, but it was also an acute demonstration of where Nigerian music has reached in 2026.



Source: Instagram/unorthodoxreviews



Anyone who has ears to the ground would surely be familiar with a wave of experimental artistes who are seeking pathways into mainstream relevance. It won't be the first time this is happening; the first generation of Alté artistes came as far back as the 2000s, but the following decade, the likes of Cruel Santino, Odunsi (The Engine) and Lady Donli made it even more popular. What seems to be the issue now is Afrobeats' dwindling powers on a global scale, with critics inscrutably pointing at what they deem to be a lack of conscious projection within the music.

These concerns, while valid, are not entirely correct if we are to do some housekeeping. Anyone who listened to Terry G in the 2000s must have thought him a shift from the 'normal'. So would a Charley Boy have been: brazen-minded creators who wanted to carve unique spaces within the generalised sphere of our pop music. There is no time in history when we haven't had such crazy 'scientists' who uprooted the status quo to implant something different, perhaps crazier.

The prime shortcoming of this era's 'scientists' is that some of them have not acquired the necessary tools for such a project. And when these artistes make such efforts, the weight of their ambition sometimes comes crashing on them. It is not immediately apparent, but between 2022 and now, we have witnessed at least three different styles 'threaten' to become the dominant sound.

We have had the Fuji choral-driven style of Asake, massively duplicated but barely effective beyond song-by-song basis; then we had the Victony and Oxlade-championed vocal stacking, where several artists utilised TikTok to promote the sweet allure of their offerings. Right now, it is evident we are in the era of the flashy, the daring: it is not so much a sound as it is a sensibility, that creeping sense that only the brazen lyric, the punchline, can deliver on the altar of virality.

Since this is a yearly report, let us use 2025 as an example. On one hand, you had the usual pop style

of the Davidos and Wizkids of Afrobeats, whose celebrity level does not require them to overly experiment. And yet, even they had songs with the artiste Mavo, who embodies the depth of novelty that has often sparked divisive debates about the direction of our music.

Mavo's music carries an overt strain of nonconformity. "Tumo Weto", the song which introduced him to me, is perhaps his most regular song, yet its structure is quite distinct: it sprawls out as one long verse, punctuated by mentions of the titular phrase in select sections. His more popular songs like "Shakabulizzy" and "Escaladizzy" have drawn the most vivid reactions, with what some people are wont to describe as the 'cananisation of Nigerian music'.

Artistes like WAVE$TAR and Monochrome have also created credible communities on the back of music like Mavo's. They are your Nigerian versions of Playboy Carti and Trippie Redd, and it is telling that their musical education came from sections of the globalised internet. In their case, the experiences are subverted to mean something to the Nigerian who hears them, as we've seen in the case of its most popular purveyor.

Mavo's themes are flashy, depicting his own coolness and often involve tales of shared pleasures with ladies as open and experimental as he is. His status as an undergrad arms him with a cache of sparkling catchphrases and terms, which would not sound as cool as they are if you aren't open and experimental, or at least close in age and sensibilities as him.

This explains why the biggest section of his critics have been millennials; they harken back to a time in pop music culture, when language and imagery were intensely





> Cool shit doesn't make itself accessible to everyone.

connected to the landscape of the larger Nigerian society.

Artistes like 2Baba and P Square had a firm grasp on the language of their demographies in such a way that you never mistook what they were talking about. You connected instantly with the pulse of that communal-sourced creation, and their ambition was to find an elevation in the slant: from the implied, from the manipulation of voice and tone.

By contrast, Mavo's generation takes creative inspiration from hiding: they're almost elitist in the use of coded language. They are saying, you have to belong among our circles to understand this music. Cool shit doesn't make itself accessible to everyone. Not everyone will agree with this position, but there is little doubt it connects among those it's meant to connect with.

Zaylevelten is another one who falls into that zone of young, experimental artistes whose existence supposedly threatens the sonic direction of the genre. He taps into a similar lingual plane, but his brilliance is perhaps more audible on close listen. Producing his own music under the sobriquet Tenski, he revels in the creative freedom that has spurred the seminal then 1t g0t crazy, which would likely be a reference in the future for synth-heavy, swag-indebted rap music. Pidgin English is a flexible tool in his hands, situating his global aesthetic within the peculiar geography of mainland Lagos.

I would however, like to caution while considering these trendy attempts at experimentation, that the stronger the middle finger of any artiste, the more reliable the other four should be. Creating edgy music demands a depiction of belief, a currency of taste which affirms that there is an audience for this seeming madness.



> An artiste popular in Lagos might not be popular in Enugu.

That is why the EF Moon clip relies on the multiplicity of bodies; that is why you will always find these artistes with groups of people, mostly folk who share that self-absorbed belief rife amongst young Nigerian creatives.

It thus seems that present Nigerian music relies on clusters, on little sections of listeners who are connected to the everyday life of their favourite musicians. The generalised lyricism of P-Square and 2Baba created the national pop star, who you knew across demographics and spaces. Now, an artiste who is popular in Lagos might not be popular in Enugu, and vice versa.

Northern Nigeria spawns unique talents by the day, although they are more intentional in crossing over to bridge the cultural deficit of their region. With streaming and an increasingly powered ecosystem made possible by AI and new technologies, artistes are seldom going through the label route, and are building their own communities with their coded languages.

Does this mean that the generalised experience, the ability of music to unite and create collective memories, will be erased? I do not think so. In recent times, songs like "Joy Is Coming" and "With You" thrived in the sense of community.

Other artistes still make music that owes a lot to society, except that they now have to compete with cool kids who know how to brand themselves better, and who are more savvy on how to utilise the aforementioned tools of the internet. For now, however, the numbers are with the mainstream acts for the sake of their larger audience, but that may very well change.

What obtains in the music scene should never be a bleak image. What is therefore missing is the projection of our differences, the beautiful variance that makes any music industry thrive. We have always had different sorts of artistes, but what crowns these options is deliberate curation, knowledge building from people within the scenes, who are curious—almost anxious even—to see its story told.

As we know it, today's Nigeria thrives on a sort of pitiful individualism resulting from a crippling economy, of being conversant with a political class that fuels selfishness, ethnic bigotry, corruption, and immoral financial acquisition and the flaunting of the same.

Our music, too, carries the strain of these

anxieties: you get the sense that everyone is singing for pecuniary gain, and when this happens, the executives want in on their monetary gains as well. This extends to the press, then the audience, via handouts, popularly known as 'giveaways', which is ultimately linked to the practice of asking their favourite acts for money on the streets.

> Life seeks balance — moreso music.

Previous generations had presses and awards and ways of fostering a sense of homeward ambition, a beacon to guide the artiste back home. Nowadays, Afrobeats is a game played on foreign lands, where we agonise about losing Grammy awards or the Grammys misrepresenting our sound; meanwhile, we have almost nothing to point to at home as institutions or hallmarks of music ownership.

It is like the proverbial man who leaves his burning house to chase rats. Afrobeats have been chasing rats for a while, and those who make a claim to the house are not the problem. Rather, it is imperative that when the chasing man returns, he makes peace with what is left of the old house. Could he rebuild it from memory? Does he abandon the old and seek newness?

No one knows for sure where his working arm will swing. With the seeming inability of even the pop stars to connect beyond an ephemeral level (the critic Ayomide Tayo has noted how pop albums are barely resonant lately), it is not impossible we will continue to see music created from the fringes, where the likes of Jeriq and Aguero Banks connect the world with their Igbo raps drenched in survival and triumph; where the gospel troubadours like Anendlessocean and Kaestrings will attend to their own audiences; where Fimitheflow creates a rap persona like Sampha The Great: ambitious and conceptual. The trado-influenced Ife Musiq and DOTTi The Deity, shining from the example of their forebears; experimental genre-benders like Obongjayar and J4v1nny, yet fingering the nerves of our perception—there is indeed enough variance for those who want to find them.

What is clear is that the music listener in 2026 must be intentional about digging beneath the surface for the music they like. As in 1970, as in 2003, as in 2018 and now, there have always been different ideas going into music.

If popular music is not connecting on the intrinsic level that contributes towards a country's cultural history, I hereby state that the issues stretch beyond the artiste's singular task of making a song. It goes into the plain of the generational, weakening memories and structures; it goes beyond any one person, and if we must reclaim that quality, then some of the biggest figures in the scene must have to let go of some of the generation's pleasures. You cannot enjoy the benefit of technology's wild hand and rebel against it elsewhere. Life seeks balance, moreso music, the most potently charged element of life.

Emmanuel Esomnofu *is a Nigerian writer and culture journalist. He was awarded 'Best Writer of 2024' by The Republic and was named among the '30 Under 30 Power Players in Nigerian Music' by Turntable. He's working on his debut manuscript.*

After the Peak: What Is Next for Afrobeats?

By Emmanuel Esomnofu

In 2011 when Wizkid sang the words "my music travel no visa", he wouldn't have thought he referenced the era's sense of pride. Emerging from the 2000s when Afrobeats relied heavily on American influences (cue the P-Square samples and video styles), a stronger Nigerian identity was opening up within the music in that decade. The sonic references were indigenous formulations like Highlife and Fuji, and the lyricism was inclusively local, bridging several elements of our contemporary existence. The music could indeed travel without a visa because it was good and marketed even better.

Afrobeats to the World was a movement that had strong interest from important places, and that sped up its journey from scenic impact to intercontinental recognition. Admittedly, this was not our first rodeo: the 1980s spawned the interest in 'World Music', where artistes like Ali Farka Toure, Miriam Makeba and King Sunny Ade became global superstars. Nollywood also went global in the following decade and hit its peak in the 2000s.

However, when one goes back to study both eras and their key developments, it's clearer to track the African influence within previous artistic work and how it intersects with the larger society. Engaging ideologically with the creators' incentive, we see that the work was possible because the creators and executives never allowed themselves to stray far from the source of the work. Even American and European executives who worked for record labels like PolyGram and EMI would live in African cities for long stretches, keeping their boots to the ground while providing support for the artistes.

It was never more apparent the level of detail and dedication that went into vintage African production than last year, when I visited my family's country home in Anam-





bra state. There, I found hundreds of vinyl covers which my father gathered during his time as a young family man in Lagos. A lover of Highlife and its nearby genres, the albums I saw then included artistes from Nigeria, Ghana, Congo, Cameroon, and even Guinea-Bissau. On the covers, one found intricate artwork which blended myth and the artiste's vision, often including a written text explaining some aspects of the presented work.

You flipped the vinyl in your hands, from front to back, and you felt an entire world contained within its physical state. To put that disk into a player would be to enter into that world, sit amongst its grandeur and be reminded of something deeper than music. Nowadays, vinyls are barely available for the African listener based in Africa, and the ready-made excuse would be their lack of commercial prospects. This begs the question, what have we done with all of Afrobeats' pecuniary gains over the past few years, beyond the flash, glitz and celebrity life?

> The Afrobeats dream used to be simple: make music, get signed, go global.

From a culture journalist's perspective, preserving the essence of musical traditions is key. But also important is opening one's mind to the currents of the contemporary climate, wherein we gauge what is working through a keen insight into what we've been doing. Anyone who maintains more than a minute interest in the affairs of African mainstream music—mostly called Afrobeats—would know that for years now, the conversation about the movement is a return to the home-front. To reverse the psychological and institutional factors that make its biggest artistes so eager to dominate the international sphere, at the cost of homeward impact.

I'd posit here that the lack of respect with which the genre has treated its own is ironically the same reason why it holds no true influence at the tables where it matters. That is why a Burna Boy can dismiss his Nigerian streams for a lack of financial worth, and at the same time canonise Seyi Tinubu as a great person. Between the All Progressives Congress (APC) and Bola Tinubu's government, one can draw a straight line as to how Nigerians became so impoverished, and how our spending power has greatly diminished that supporting artistes is an afterthought.

In a globalised world where there is a lot of connection between things and people, we have an industry that has not bothered to gauge its importance beyond its feeder role. The Afrobeats Dream used to be pretty straightforward: make music from an obscure part of the world, attract the



> A song can be big but not valuable.

signed and drop some hits, go global—with global success being the end of this dream. And with Nigeria, being a country so intrinsically linked with Japa, and also a de facto leader of Afrobeats—it is quite ingrained in the subconscious to see the other side as, not only greener, but essentially better and more important.

When Amapiano looked shaped to become the African sound of the 2020s, it was telling how quickly Nigerians rushed to the scene of the latest wave. Some even tried to distort its history, much to the chagrin of socially astute South Africans, who were relentless in their claim to the sound. While it is not the first time Nigeria has co-opted other countries' sounds, in the past they brought the music home and engaged thoughtfully and practically with it. We explored the music within our own social experiences and tweaked it to suit our unique dispositions. These days, the music is treated as exotically as possible, listened to in the studios and lifted as it was originally made.

For a while it has seemed that mainstream Nigerian music—and Afrobeats by extension—has become so mechanically inspired and produced that it is failing to connect. From this rubble, we have seen young artistes arrive on the scene who are increasingly experimental and niche-driven, catering to little blocks of audiences rather than seeking that long global push.

Elsewhere, I have argued that the penchant of artistes today to create their own sound and lingo has to do with a lack of cross-generational interest within the music industry. An essential chain of influence has been broken, and now tradition is being remodeled, shaped by the fire of the zeitgeist. However, that isn't the full story.

For Enemuwa Dafe, a music manager and executive based in Lagos, this new approach is necessary because of a shift in where funding comes from into Afrobeats. "I don't think Afrobeats is regressing, I think Afrobeats has plateaued", he says. "The Afrobeats to the World movement from 2017 to 2023 was fueled by investor funds and foreign labels, particularly putting a lot of money into seeing Afrobeats as a genre grow. Many artistes got deals and, unfortunately, have not been able to recoup. So the conversation is, 'What justification do we have to keep putting up investment funds

for artistes from this region?' For many of these investors, there is no justification, so that pool has kind of shrunk."

He argues that rather than a talent deficit, it is a matter of marketing. "Somebody like Tyla can have access to budgets and push their songs because they are viable in the markets that matter," he says. "Nigeria, for instance, is not a market that can stand beside the American market or the Asian market. A song can be big but not valuable; that is how catalogue and publishing works, so it has been a question that investors and foreign labels have had to answer for themselves."

On what can be improved within the local industry, he makes a case for the deliberate usage of data. "We must identify the fact that the crowd can be ignorant but your fans are sensible," he says. "What this means is that the general public may not understand you; it is one thing to go for visibility. If you're selling something that requires you getting revenue, it is not a very smart thing to optimise for visibility alone. Instead, you should look at conversion."

> "Visibility is not the same thing as conversion."

Using such metrics, it bodes that artistes and their teams will have to work smarter than harder. Where foreign validation used to be a key metric, now one must play closer to their home-front, servicing the audience that shows the most affinity for their work. This would mean that an artiste like Mavo or Zaylevelten, who makes music closer to the realities of young people in Nigeria, will inherently be favoured by them. And we have seen how intentional they are about campus events and impromptu shows, cashing in on speed and execution, while the first generation of 'Afrobeats to the World' artistes have gone under the radar or are pushing their music passively.

"Afrobeats artistes should look inwards: what is my major market? An artiste like Tems has figured that out; her market is in the US, she targets the US", says Dafe. "I think many artistes are lost in the idea of doing everything, everybody that can hear us should hear us. You're not working with data. If my market is in Port Harcourt, for instance, then it is unwise for me to be targeting the Lagos market. I think a lot of artistes should work with data going forward. It is the only way we can get out of this. Know where your market is, focus on your market."

These are salient points made, and as someone who loves and breathes African music, I am curious to see how our artistes will work themselves out of these challenging times. What won't be lost, I would wager, is the vitality within the music which, as long as there will be artistes who place their African experiences above all else, will always find expression, no matter how ghastly the wars of economics and commerce present. So when someone asks you what is next for Afrobeats, tell them to just press play. Sometimes that is enough.

Emmanuel Esomnofu *is a Nigerian writer and culture journalist. He was awarded 'Best Writer of 2024' by The Republic and was named among the '30 Under 30 Power Players in Nigerian Music' by Turntable. He's working on his debut manuscript.*



Section III

FILM AND CINEMA CULTURE

2025 Box Office Summary

According to The Nigeria Box Office Year Book 2025 by FilmOne Entertainment

N15.6B

in total box office revenue generated across Anglophone West Africa



N5,959

average ticket price, up **37%** year-on-year



2.8M

Admissions

marking a second consecutive year of attendance recovery



122

Cinemas

Screens | **369**

in operation across the territory

Revenue growth outpaced audience growth:

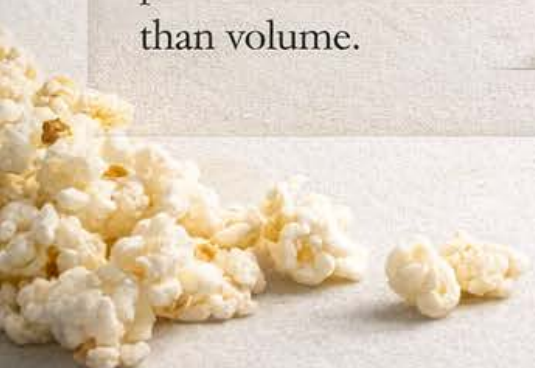
Box office expansion was driven primarily by pricing and premiumisation rather than volume.



16 titles crossed N200M

confirming the continued importance of event-level releases.







African Cinema's Long Road to Freedom

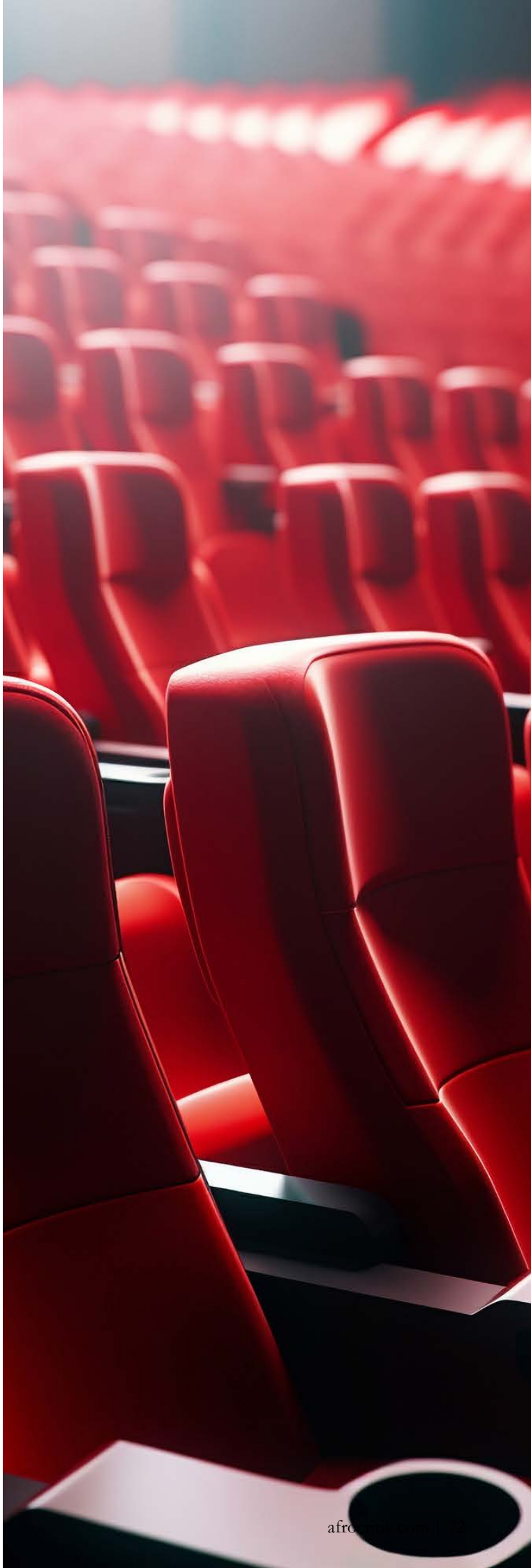
By Wilfred Okiche

It is 2026 and if there one was concept that was routinely challenged by the events and development of the past year it is the "African film".

When the term African film is mentioned, an idea certainly comes to mind, but what is this idea? Is the African film one that is made by Africans or one that parades a predominant cast of Africans? Is it funded by Africans or one that is produced and set on the continent? Is it African because the Oscars say it is or because Africans decide for themselves?

Globalisation and transnationalism continue to factor in strongly in today's world order, even as the most established proponents seem to be reverting course and shrinking towards nationalist sentiments. It is therefore a ripe moment to reconsider the idea of the African film. Who is this title for? Who does it engage and who does it exclude? Has this term simply become quaint? What do borders and platforms bring to the foreground when it comes to discussions on African cinema, and what do they eliminate?

Historically, African film is considered the cinema of Ousmane Sembène, Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, Souleymane Cissé as well as the other founding fathers and moth-





Source: Instagram/funkejenifaakindele

ers. There was filmmaking activity in and around the continent prior to the arrival of these key figures. But these filmmakers, who themselves individually represent a variety of histories and styles, heralded a joint tradition that is now considered to be African even though many of them differed in style and sensibility. So, in a sense, this question of the African film isn't a new one but a tale as old as time.

Despite advancements in innovation since the origins of African cinema in the sixties, it remains as challenging to make a film today. Contemporary filmmakers find that in order to make and present their films to audiences, they have to operate in environments shaped by constant negotiation. Not only with funders and the economic powers that be, but also with the apparatus that will deliver the film to the end user.

> African cinema has always been wonderfully complicated.

These negotiations—some of which have always existed—are ultimately reflected in the body of work that continues to emerge and be identified as the cinema of the continent. It is all wonderfully complicated, and this is why any definition of the term African cinema has to allow for plenty of wriggle room for context—political, individual, social and historical.

Nollywood, for example, is a huge, money generating industrial complex that continues to be the pride—and envy—of many other film industries on the continent. The films tend to provide maximum pleasure, hyper-specific as they are, and reflect the experiences of the primary audience. But they travel across borders within the continent and also speak to audiences in search of familiar media representations. However, perhaps because of the specific visual language of Nollywood films that comes across as made for television, the films routinely fail to find viewership beyond this core and specific audience.

The biggest Nollywood hit of the year at the local box office, Behind the Scenes, was supplied by the ever-reliable megastar Funke Akindele who has made a habit of breaking her own box office records while almost single-handedly propping up the country's theatrical business. Despite Akindele's homegrown popularity, Behind the Scenes barely made a dent in international

markets where it was placed in limited release to capitalise on interest from diaspora audiences.

Instead, the most successful Nigerian film of the year, in terms of reaching a crossover audience, wasn't a Nollywood film—at least not in the traditional sense. Akinola Davies Jr.'s family drama, My Father's Shadow, made history when it was announced as the first film from Nigeria to be programmed in the official selection of the Cannes Film Festival. Starring British actor—of Nigerian descent—Sope Dìrísù, My Father's Shadow is a moving memory capsule about two young brothers who spend a day exploring Lagos with their estranged father.

> There are several routes to and for an African film.

Born in London to Nigerian parents, Akinola Davies Jr. represents a fast-growing wave of filmmakers who operate in the diaspora but stay rooted to their home cultures. Davies Jr. has identified as a Nollywood filmmaker and expressed his admiration for the industry's output. But formally, with its deliberate pacing and auteur imprint, My Father's Shadow owes more to European style indie traditions than the fast-paced, easily digestible melodrama of Nollywood. Davies Jr. acknowledged this tension in a chat with OkayAfrica: "There is this tension where people talk down on Nollywood because it has its own aesthetic going on that not everyone understands. But I think… the sensitivities of Nollywood and Hollywood at some point have to overlap."

A co-production between Nigeria and the United Kingdom, My Father's Shadow was financed with funds and institutional support from BBC Films and the British Film Institute. Streaming platform MUBI stepped in to acquire distribution ahead of the Cannes debut. In every way, My Father's Shadow was set up primarily for wide foreign spectatorship even though it did score a brief theatrical release in Nigeria. Is it still a Nigerian film? Obviously.

It is very fine, confident filmmaking that Davies Jr. pulls off with his debut, but My Father's Shadow also plays like it has a duty to explain Nigeria to an outward audience. This burden, which is absent in home-



Photo: Pascal Le Segretain/Getty Images

grown Nollywood films, can make for a knotty viewing experience, especially for local audiences. This is perhaps inevitable considering My Father's Shadow is also a British film, and was selected to represent the United Kingdom at the Oscars where it was not ultimately shortlisted.

This kind of co-production arrangement may be a relatively new way of working in Nigeria but it is de rigueur in Francophone Africa and the Maghreb. Proximity to Europe, as well as historical contexts and relationships, have led to these regions receiving significant institutional support in terms of funding and talent resources.

National film funds set up by Senegal and Tunisia have made it easier for filmmakers to be able to match funding at home while receiving support from bodies like the Berlinale's World Cinema Fund, France's National Cinema Centre (CNC) and the Hubert Bals Fund, to name a few. Burkina Faso joined the fray last October, setting up the one billion CFA endowed Faso Film Fund to support film production at home and abroad. The Middle East has also been an emerging source of funding with partnerships from Saudi Arabia's Red Sea Fund and the Doha Film Institute helping greenlight films last year like Tunisia's Where the Wind Comes From directed by Amel Guellaty and the Sudanese collective documentary effort, Khartoum.

This kind of institutional support was responsible for the existence of The Voice of Hind Rajab, an angry renunciation of the ongoing genocide in Gaza by Tunisian maestro Kaouther Ben Hania. Perhaps the most important African title of the year, The Voice of Hind Rajab is a harrowing feat of experimentation, demanding accountability for a real-life tragedy—the killing of a five-year-old girl by Israeli forces.

Long before receiving a record setting 23-minute standing ovation at its Venice Film Festival premiere, The Voice of Hind Rajab was supported at home by Tunisia's film fund and abroad by the Doha Film Institute. As word of mouth built around the film internationally, more international backers would join, including Brad Pitt's Plan B, Joaquin Phoenix and Alfonso Cuarón. Due to the political landscape in the United States, The Voice of Hind Rajab struggled to land distribution for some time but was acquired, eventually landing Ben Hania her third Oscar nomination. African cinema can indeed look outwards to find a shared humanity.

There are several routes to and for an African film.



A country like South Africa exists in a different context because while it supports commercial filmmaking, it has a robust infrastructure made capable by state support that has attracted co-productions and Hollywood studios looking to make films cheaper. South Africa has, for some time now, been the de-facto location for any Hollywood project set in Africa. Last year, Viola Davis' political thriller G20, Gore Verbinski's Good Luck, Have Fun, Don't Die, and the sprawling Netflix adventure One Piece were just some projects that helped further enshrine South Africa's bonafides as a global production hub.

Long a stronghold of animation on the continent, South Africa managed to score big at the global box office with the Biblical epic, David—based on the miniseries Young David—directed by Brent Dawes and Phil Cunningham. Box office receipts stand at $83 million with roll outs still to come in markets across Europe. This impressive effort went almost unnoticed probably because no one expects a polished major animation project to come from the continent.



Private funding remains the biggest source of filmmaking on the continent.

Over on the indie side of town, things are a little more challenging, particularly for first-time filmmakers. Zamo Mkhwanazi went the traditional route for her feature debut, the arresting Laundry (Uhlanjululo). She developed the project at the Atlas Workshop run by the Marrakech International Film Festival on its way to a Toronto International Film Festival debut. The Joburg set period drama about members of a Black family navigating the tensions created by the apartheid system is a Swiss co-production with Mkhwanazi hiring Swiss creatives as heads of department.

The journey to making the film took at least ten years as Mkhwanazi struggled to land financing. Then, there was the debacle of dubious collaborators. She recalls, "I had a producer try to steal the project from me. At a certain point, a Swiss producer found himself another South African producer, a white dude that no one in the industry has any relationship with. All because he did not want to work with any Black woman."

Imran Hamdulay whose debut feature, The Heart Is a Muscle, was selected to represent South Africa at the Oscars went a different route to realise his vision. Frustrated by the lengthy process of getting his earlier work off the ground through grant applications and lab support, he decided to bet on himself. With blessing from his producers, private funds were raised to see the project through principal photography. It wasn't until post production that the film received some support from the national film fund. "I didn't want to wait six to eight months before I heard back from someone, so I thought, fuck it, I am going to shoot with or without you." Hamdulay recalls. The Heart Is a Muscle debuted at the Berlinale.

There is no shortage of paths available to the African film, and each filmmaker is destined to go on their own respective journey as they realise their creative vision. The more avenues that exist, the more opportunities tend to be available for filmmakers and the more diverse the stories and traditions that will emerge under the umbrella of African cinema.

Private funding remains the biggest source of funding for filmmaking on the continent, but it is clearly not sufficient. Creative industries on the continent need more in-

vestment as profit making to grow the local industries. Just as important is the wholesale support of artistic expressions that can shield filmmakers from the tendency to conform to market demands or a certain bias in terms of how their stories are told. Both of these perspectives can co-exist, but on a more sustainable scale than what is currently available.

The recent pull back by American streaming platforms from operations in the region has demonstrated that a lot of this hard, unsexy work of building film infrastructure will have to be done on the continent by the continent and for the continent. And no, making films for YouTube cannot be the sustainable fix, regardless of how profitable they might be for now.

What is the African film today?

It is still hard to outline a coherent definition without some context. One thing it is not, however, is a cinema that exists on the margins to be mentioned only for the sake of completeness. African cinema can be regional, sure, just like any other cinema. But it is also global, boasting active industries and diverse cultures that feed into a global melting pot of cinematic history and tradition. On some level, the answer to this question doesn't even matter. And one day, it really won't. But the work to get there is still in its early stages.

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For How Long Can We Sustain This Thing Of Ours?

On Bootstrapping And The Current Iteration Of Nollywood

By Jerry Chiemeke

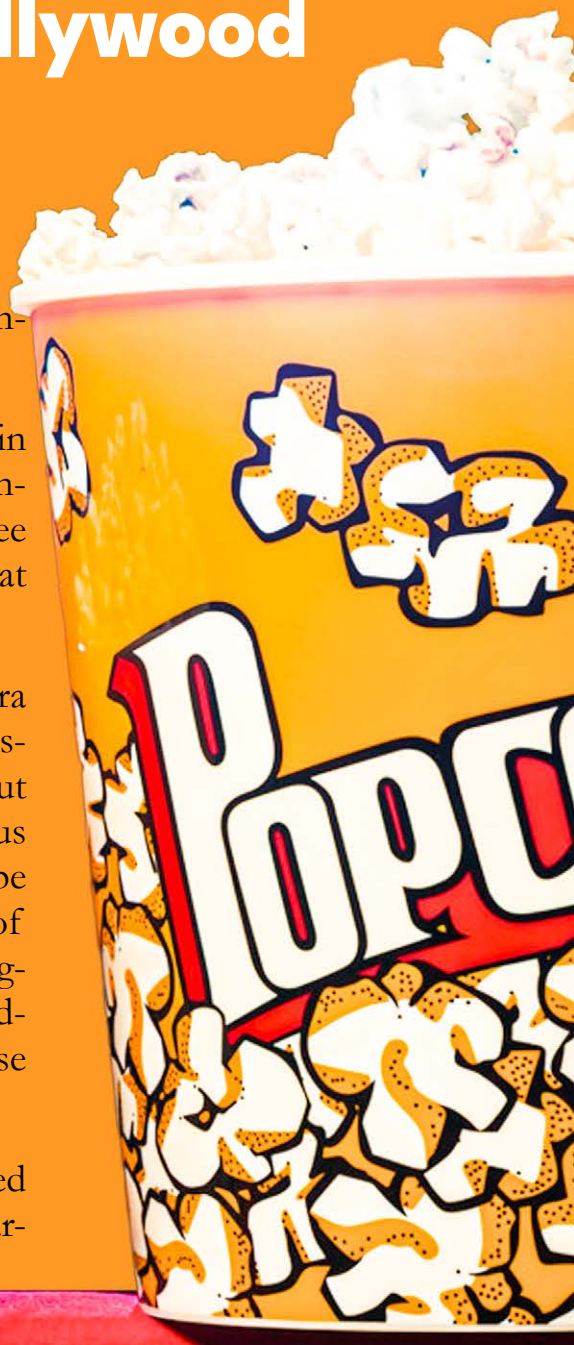
I. Nollywood Lately

"What do you think about Nigerian films with regard to conversations around global cinema?"

If I had a nickel for each time I had this question thrown in my direction during a heated panel following the screening of a Nollywood film in London, I would have three nickels, which doesn't add up to a lot, but it may be weird that it's happened thrice within a five-month period.

…or maybe it isn't. Perhaps there are people in the diaspora who want to hear the truth about an ecosystem that is bustling (or at least appears to be) from someone who cares about how his natal country is perceived. Perhaps they are curious to hear elaborate detail about the current state of a landscape that produces around 2,500 films annually and is (or boasts of being) the world's second-largest film industry, but has struggled to translate this size and volume to relevance on a grander scale, which is bemusing given the potential for diverse stories.

Film industries in Africa have had to deal with protracted waves of volatility over the decades, but Nollywood in par-



> A country of over 200 million people is served by barely 118 cinema theatres.



ticular has had to ask difficult questions of itself, and understandably so: investment of resources by external players have not yielded dividends (certainly not to a desired volume), and memes or pop culture trends simply do not translate to meaningful soft power of any sort. Individual triumphs, be it a huge box office sweep or runaway critical acclaim in the festival circuit, cannot be heralded as industry growth, even as they are pointers to what is possible if prospects are duly harnessed.

II. Don't Let Those Numbers Fool You, We Are Not Growing

Since 2024, major streamers have ceased commissioning original productions and significantly downsized investment in Nigerian features. In 2025, only 24 Nigerian titles were licensed by Netflix, with over 80% of them geoblocked - Baby Farm and To Kill A Monkey were two of the few shows accessible outside Africa. For perspective, the streaming giant licensed 19 titles in the first half of 2023 alone.

A lot of reasons have been adduced for the scale-back, from the unprofitability of the Nigerian market — sheer population isn't synonymous with economic stamina — to the dearth of quality in stories greenlit for viewing, but away from the Blame Olympics and Fingerpoint Games, Nigerian filmmakers have had to turn elsewhere to platform their works, considering that the benefactors have all but walked out the door.

This has, inevitably, culminated in a reignited focus on cinematic releases. In 2025, more than 81 Nollywood titles premiered at movie theatres, compared to 73 films from the year before. Ostensibly, the figures seem propitious: box office numbers have risen from N5 billion in 2021 to N15.6 billion in 2025. But it's important to view this in context: according to FilmOne, in 2021 there were 3.3 million admissions in total with tickets priced at an average of N1,512, while 2025 re-

corded 2.79 million admissions with movie tickets now costing N5,596 on average. Accounting for inflation, that's hardly a victory that should be held out as "immense growth."

In any case, for a country's movie industry to achieve global success, it must be successful outside its home market. Nollywood, however, has struggled to produce breakthrough films that resonate commercially with global audiences. None of its highest-grossing films has generated significant revenue outside Nigeria. Even the most successful Nollywood film of all time, Funke Akindele's Behind The Scenes, has earned approximately $1.7 million domestically with virtually no international box office. The scale disparity is stark. Per international valuation, Nigeria's entire 2025 box office revenue totaled approximately $11.52 million, less than what major Hollywood blockbusters earn on their opening day in a single market. For comparison, Deadpool & Wolverine earned $96 million on its opening day in the US and Canada alone, while Inside Out 2 collected $62 million on its opening day in the same market.

Sure enough, jostling for commercial success in a terrain where there are only about 118 cinema theatres catering to over 200 million people would always be an uphill task. But there's also the additional impediment of being at the mercy of distribution chains. In Nigerian cinemas, operators assign better showtimes to titles with bigger budgets, riding on the assumption that such films would draw in larger audiences, ergo more revenue. Some would argue that this is inevitable from a business standpoint, but whatever happened to creating a level playing field? How does a film with a smaller budget stand a chance when it only shows for three weeks at cinemas, with time slots placed at working hours on weekdays and screenings fraught with "technical issues" that reek of sabotage? During the theatre run of Akay Mason's Red Circle in June 2025, moviegoers who tried to see the film complained about being stuck in uncomfortable halls, or watching in dismay as screens went off mid-movie. In December, directors Niyi Akinmolayan, Ini Edo and Toyin Abraham expressed their displeasure over what they deemed "unfair practices" perpetrated by cinema distributors in refusing to honour agreed-upon screening schedules for their respective films Colours Of Fire, A Very Dirty Christmas, and Oversabi Aunty. This concentration of influence in the hands of a few key players is inimical to the industry's developmental targets.



III. Will Nolly-Tube Be The Death Of Our Storytelling?

By some twist of fate, NollyTube (the term I coined in 2024 for Nollywood films distributed directly on YouTube) has emerged as a **viable** revenue model for Nigerian filmmakers over the past few years. Unlike traditional theatrical releases or premium streaming platforms that require significant capi-



tal and industry connections, YouTube's open-access platform has democratised film distribution. Would we have had so many actors and directors flock there if the big streamers had not pulled back resources? To lean into Kanye-esque verbiage, I guess we will never know, but it currently functions as a repository for hundreds of Nigerian stories.

Producers like Omoni Oboli, Bimbo Ademoye, and Bolaji Ogunmola have leveraged this model to build substantial audiences and generate revenue through ad monetisation, reaching millions of viewers without the gatekeeping mechanisms that historically controlled Nollywood's distribution channels. Oboli's Love In Every Word and its sequel Love In Every Word 2: The Wedding garnered 31.1 million and 21 million YouTube views respectively, and for some reason, these figures are meaningful in modern Nigerian film discourse.

> From a perspective of fellowship, how eagerly does the wider industry embrace these films?

The appeal of NollyTube content lies in its accessibility and relatability. These films, predominantly low-stakes romantic comedies with saccharine premises, resonate deeply with Nigerian adult audiences both at home and across the diaspora, offering comfort viewing that provides some escapism without the heavy drama or high production values that characterise prestige cinema. Actors like Eso Dike, Bamike Olawunmi, Uzor Arukwe, Detola Jones and Michael Dappa have cultivated devoted followings, becoming household names through their recurring presence in these easily digestible stories. The tropes are silly for the most part, but by God, the people seem to love it. Apologies to my friend Cindy; I know that I had promised to facilitate an introduction with Frederick Leonard.

But as with all things Nigerian, the gift comes with the curse. The lack of barriers to entry also present a situation where we have to deal with an acute lack of…well, other things. The pressure to maintain constant content output has led to production

timelines that can span as little as four days, a pace that inevitably compromises storytelling quality. Channels have fallen into patterns of recycling the same actors and retreading familiar storylines, creating a homogeneous landscape where one romcom bleeds indistinguishably into the next. The assembly-line approach to filmmaking, while feasible in the short term, sacrifices narrative depth, character development, and creative risk-taking. If you look into a mirror and utter "Maurice Sam" three times, you'd suddenly find yourself performing cinematography duties on a feature where the short-fused protagonist is enamoured of his personal assistant, with an absurd title to boot.

Complaining about the quality of the stories that permeate Nollytube is one thing, but having to worry about seeing one screenplay duplicated across three different productions is downright ridiculous. In January 2025, Oboli had to pull down her film A Different Type Of Love following allegations of copyright infringement, on grounds that it bore similarities to Hope Given, a production released on Susan Jimah's YouTube channel in 2023. Further conversations revealed that between 2022 and 2024, one Jayne Nwachukwu had "sold" the same screenplay to Oboli, Jimah and two other producers. Christmas ushered in a legal snafu to close out the year as actor Baaj Adebule starred in productions on two different channels with similar plots and characters, Lily Perez Films' A Kristmas To Love and ChinnyLove Eze's George Hates Christmas, the former claiming that copyright had been flagrantly violated.

With such a wonky system of production where films are churned out at the speed of baking meat pies, it's hardly surprising to stumble on reports of tensions boiling





over. When actors and crew members are made to work in gnarly conditions over a period of months, the most probable outcome is a disaster of huge proportions. In November 2025, actor Taye Arimoro and producer Peggy Ovire got into a heated confrontation on a movie set which ultimately escalated into a physical altercation. In a befuddling turn of events, the Directors Guild of Nigeria (DGN), Actors Guild of Nigeria (AGN) and Association of Movie Producers of Nigeria (AMP) deemed Arimoro the primary aggressor (in spite of video evidence hinting at the contrary) and ruled that he be "suspended from all Nollywood productions until further notice." Since the decision was made public, however, Arimoro has featured in multiple NollyTube productions. But this is not the essay where we discuss the relevance (or lack thereof) accorded to guilds and trade unions in the industry's current iteration.

IV. Should **Nollywood** Arrogate The Critical Success Of Arthouse Films?

At last year's edition of Festival De Cannes, Akinola Davies Jr's feature length debut My Father's Shadow made history as Nigeria's first official selection at the festival, competing in the Un Certain Regard section and earning a Camera D'Or special mention. Following an impressive festival run with screenings at Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) and the BFI London Film Festival, the film has gone on to win several awards, including the British Independent Film Award (BIFA) for Best Director and two Gotham Awards for Best Breakthrough Director and Outstanding Lead Performance (for Sope Dirisu). It has also received a BAFTA nomination for



Outstanding Debut.

I think My Father's Shadow is brilliant (especially because it's semi-autobiographical), nostalgic, and functions as a love letter to Lagos, amid its unique exploration of Nigerian masculinity. But I do not regard it as a **Nollywood** film; Davies Jr will disagree with me (if he gets to read this), but I promise that I mean well. The same goes for CJ "Fiery" Obasi's Mami Wata (2023) as well as Arie and Chuko Esiri's Eyimofe (2020). While these productions are Nigerian at their core, belong to a canon of arthouse films featuring stories that go against the grain, and exist as metaphors for variety in our filmmaking, it is not exactly preposterous to assert that they may not identify as Nollywood films in the strict sense of the word.

From a perspective of fellowship, how eagerly does the wider industry (by way of its stakeholders) embrace these films? Are their theatre runs supported without manipulating showtimes? Haven't we stumbled on certain filmmakers derisively referring to their colleagues as "festival directors"?

Demanding that we expunge Davies Jr's masterpiece from Nollywood's end-of-year lists may be too much to ask, but at least I can argue for an asterisk to be placed alongside it. Then again, consider that it was selected as the United Kingdom's entry for Best International Feature Film.

V. Alternative Models As Hail Marys

Nigerian creatives have a penchant for finding windows when doors close. With limited domestic infrastructure and revenue, the country's filmmakers have become structurally dependent on film markets and

development labs as essential pathways for funding, development, and international exposure. James Omokwe's historical drama Osamede and Gbolahan Peter Macjob's, Ireke: Rise of the Maroons , both indigenous-language epic films, premiered in May 2025 at the Cannes Film Market. Omotola Jalade Ekeinde's directorial debut, Mother's Love, screened at the TIFF Lightbox 5 for an audience of distributors, sales agents, and international industry delegates in September 2025.

Producers and directors are also latching on to another strategy in working their way about the shrinking revenue streams. By partnering with production companies and talent from other markets, they attempt to get one foot in the door. More cross-national feature films are coming to life, and we should expect to see an upshoot of these projects in the near future. One Woman One Bra, a Kenyan-Nigerian coproduction, made its world debut at the Venice Film Festival in August 2025, an outcome of its selection for the festival's Biennale College Cinema programme in 2024. Son of the Soil, an action thriller filmed entirely in Lagos and whose African theatrical rights were acquired by Nile Entertainment, was birthed by a collaboration between Action Xtreme (a genre label of UK production company Sovereign Films) and Wingonia Ikpi's Boxonia Blueprint.

> Gatekeepers walked out the door. Now we upload.

In August 2025, Inkblot Studios' Chinaza Onuzo and Filmhouse Group's Kene Okwuosa announced the launch of KAVA, a Nollywood-focused streaming app. The co-founders have talked a good game, claiming to hold the solution to the industry's creator compensation puzzle. KAVA's proposed hybrid licensing model promises ongoing stakes for content creators, but whether the platform can deliver on this remains to be seen. There's also the small matter of Inkblot being the studio that cranked out movies like A Lagos Love Story (2025), Japa (2024), No Way Through (2023) and Charge and Bail (2021), so scepticism is by no means misplaced.

VI. Parting Notes

Nigerian filmmakers have proven their capacity for innovation under constraint, time and again, but there comes a point where ingenuity cannot compensate for structural deficiencies and a fundamental lack of investment in craft, infrastructure, and long-term thinking. The harsh reality confronting Nollywood is that survival mode has become the default setting, and you cannot build an industry worth its salt when everyone is simply scrambling to stay alive. This current trajectory is not a sustainable path forward.

Transition is not a state we are unfamiliar with: we have had to navigate moments of inertia right before VHS machines and DVD players gave way to Cable TV at the turn of the millennium, and there was a lull that preceded the resurgence of cinema culture in Nigeria by the end of this century's first decade. The difference this time is that the world is paying more attention compared to previous epochs, and we have not been quite honest with acknowledging how far off we are from where we need to be.

Asserting that Nollywood is caving in or on its last legs would be presumptuous in multiple respects, but it's imperative for stakeholders in the ecosystem to move

far outside the bubble of press releases in trade publications. This thing of ours is in a state of flux, and while it is true that we shouldn't necessarily pander to external validation, the fact remains that we are playing on a global stage, and our current model is not tenable if our stories, personnel and structure are to be taken seriously. With consumer fatigue in Hollywood at an all-time high (amid multiple reboots and diminishing returns of CBM franchises), there's a golden opportunity for Nigerian stories to take centre stage and garner sustained international spotlight like our Indian and South Korean counterparts have done since the turn of the 2010s. But we can't do it like this, not while our films wear the look of poorly-glued wigs holding on for dear life. Until we do the much-needed, long-overdue introspection that our industries require, we will always find ourselves here, teetering on the brink, pulling ourselves by our bootstraps every now and again, requiring defibrillators at intervals when we could be sprinting into the wild as we bask in our peerlessness.

Across several weeks in the summer of 2025, I was in frequent correspondence with a French filmmaker. We had intended to co-direct a short, and while that plan (among other things) fell through, I was intrigued by her interest in African cinema. During one of our long conversations, she had requested that I mention some "great modern Nigerian movies" to serve as an introduction to current Nollywood for her and her associates. I hate that it took me one hour to revert with just about nine titles - for a moment, I felt like Abraham pleading Sodom's cause and hoping that a righteous few could be found within the city walls - but I like to think that it wasn't my fault. I shouldn't have to rack my brains for so long if we were more intentional about the quality and delivery of our stories.

Jerry Chiemeke *is a Nigerian-born writer, film critic, journalist, and lawyer based in the United Kingdom. His writing has appeared in Die Welt, The I Paper, The Africa Report, The British Blacklist, Berlinale Press, The Johannesburg Review of Books, Culture Custodian, Olongo Africa, and elsewhere. Chiemeke's work has won or been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Ken Saro Wiwa Prize, Diana Woods Memorial Award for Creative Nonfiction, Best Small Fictions, and the Quramo Writers Prize. He is the author of the critically-acclaimed short story collection, Dreaming of Ways to Understand You. For his work as a writer and critic, Chiemeke has been invited to the Sundance Film Festival, Berlinale, Toronto International Film Festival, BFI London Film Festival, Lagos Book and Art Festival, and Abuja International Poetry Festival.*



Filmmaking Within the Frame of Neglect

By Taiwo Egunjobi

Cinema serves many masters.

It can persuade, entertain, provoke, indict, memorialise, and mobilise.

In the Nigerian context, where I live and work, the demand to entertain is often treated as the primary, most legitimate function. My own early education in film mirrored this tension; while studying a diverse canon, I gravitated towards works that married persuasion with pleasure, and often found myself impatient with European or African art films that seemed to disdain entertainment. Yet, many of those films held something vital: an unflinching gaze at the environments shaped by systemic neglect. The danger, I learned, was in turning that gaze into dogma, in presenting restraint or deprivation as the only "correct" cinematic mode. It has become a thematic preoccupation of festival programmers and critics of African cinema to reinforce this dogma, and there are no signs of this abating anytime soon.

For me, the real goal is not a predetermined style, but an honesty of relation between form and condition. This honesty becomes imperative when the subject is infrastructural failure that is permanent rather than exceptional, bureaucratic rather than violent, and normalised rather than shocking.

In such a context, spectacle often lies. Not morally, but structurally. It distorts the lived experience of neglect by presenting it as an event or a dramatic interruption, rather than the very air a society breathes. The question for a filmmaker, then, is not "Should cinema avoid spectacle?" but "What kind of form does this reality demand if I am not to distort it?"

Sometimes the honest form is quiet. Sometimes it isn't. The trap is in making poverty porn for the international festival circuit, a commodity of despair that is legible to outsiders but alien to those who live within the reality it claims to depict. Some truths about neglect collapse when aestheticised. In response, restraint becomes less an aesthetic choice than an ethical refusal to misrepresent.

My filmmaking practice has been shaped



by this refusal. In Nigeria, infrastructure does not fail episodically; it fails continuously. This continuity alters not only how films are made, but what kind of films can be made. Electricity is the cardinal example. On set, power failure is not a crisis, but the chief premise. The generator's constant hum is our baseline, reshaping soundscapes, dictating schedules, and rewriting dialogue. This is not dramatic. It is routine. And because it is routine, it quietly determines form: it dictates where scenes can be staged, how long they can run, and what kind of auditory silence is achievable.

This pressure extends into writing. I stopped imagining stories that could only be realised through production heroics. Instead, I began writing for contexts I knew intimately: university campuses, zoological gardens, junkyards in familiar neighbourhoods, spaces whose rhythms and constraints I could predict. This was not so much a creative limitation than it was an adaptive logic: if neglect structures the world, then narrative must be designed to survive inside it. Constraint became a tool to be acknowledged, not romanticised.

Infrastructure in Nigeria does not merely fail; it asserts itself as a constant condition, a baseline against which life is measured. Electricity, water, transport, and access to safe streets are all provisional, temporary, and negotiable only in the most practical terms.

Power cannot be relied on permanently, and this uncertainty seeps into every aspect of production, every choice of location, every moment of planning. Filming exteriors in many urban centres is a hazardous negotiation: crews are confronted with extortion, thugs demanding payment, and the ever-present threat of violence. On one prominent set, several crew members were stabbed after refusing to settle a new gang of thugs. Injuries, fear, and improvisation become part of the production. Fuel crises compound the instability: kegs of petrol have been seized by authorities and never returned, forcing productions to continue with smaller generators and improvised energy sources. These are not exceptional crises; they are ordinary pressures, shaping both how stories are told and what stories can survive the day.



> In Nigeria, power failure is not a crisis. It is the premise.

Source: Brian Larkin 2015



Source: Internet

The slow violence of neglect extends beyond electricity and roads into the very rhythm of urban life. Public roads, estate streets, and city infrastructure become both stage and character, subtly dictating where and how action can unfold. The filmmaker must budget for power, assume the impossibility of social infrastructure, and anticipate the interruptions imposed by spatial decay.

Waiting becomes a civic condition: students endure terminal university strikes, markets operate on the whims of fuel availability, commuters navigate streets that offer no guarantee of safety. Lives are navigated in suspended time, negotiating around absence, scarcity, and delayed provision. Such rhythms are not incidental—they shape aspiration, social connection, and hope itself. Filmmaking that attempts to ignore these rhythms risks distortion; the camera must learn to breathe with them, to acknowledge absence without fetishising it.

Audience recognition introduces a further tension. Local audiences, accustomed to the realities of infrastructural failure, often recognise the truth quietly embedded in a film: the generator hum in the background, the awkward improvisation of a scene, the improvised detours through broken streets. Yet, there is also a persistent desire for entertainment above all else, a demand that stories provide pleasure or distraction.

International festival circuits add another layer: films that aestheticise neglect and failure often receive attention precisely because they conform to a dogma of African cinema, a spectacle of deprivation legible to outsiders. Filmmakers are left in a delicate bind: how to tell the real story without transforming endurance into performance, or suffering into spectacle? The tension between domestic recognition and festival reward becomes a structural pressure, shaping choices in framing, narrative pacing, and even casting.

Cinema, then, is ultimately an archival act. Beyond immediate aesthetic or narrative concerns, films bear witness to the texture of the era: the music that pulses in streets and markets, the clothing that marks generational change, the language and dialects that punctuate daily life. They become living photographs of a time and place, recording not just absence or failure, but presence, the strategies of survival, the improvisations of ordinary people, the small assertions of dignity that persist in conditions of structural neglect.

This documentation matters because it



Source: Nippon Communications Foundation

allows the future to understand who we were and where we were. By capturing the rhythms of daily life, films create a historical ledger that statistics and policy papers cannot; they register the lived experience of citizens navigating an infrastructural landscape of instability. In doing so, cinema becomes a form of memory, offering a reference point for reflection, critique, and perhaps, eventual improvement.

Visually, this translates to a preference for compositional stillness. While often interpreted as a stylistic signature, for which I often reference Yasujuro Ozu, its roots are practical and ethical. The environments I film are often visually chaotic or compromised. A restless camera would risk turning that backdrop into a spectacle, forcing the audience to see deprivation as a series of striking images. A still frame, by contrast, allows attention to settle on the characters. It becomes a form of refusal: the refusal to insist that every broken thing be seen, the refusal to make deprivation perform. My characters exist within materially constrained worlds, but the camera does not linger on peeling paint or empty cupboards as if collecting evidence. Deprivation is the given, not the subject. The goal is not to show that things are "bad," but to show how lives, gestures, and hopes are rearranged around that "badness." It is not about the bridge that collapsed, but about the path people take to walk around it.

This approach demands a specific discipline: the discipline of patience. It means making fewer films. It involves long periods of development, writing with specific collaborators and locations in mind, building productions that can absorb sudden, predictable collapses. On almost all my projects, from In Ibadan (2020) to All Na Vibes (2021), A Green Fever (2024), and The Fire and the Moth (2025), locations have fallen through repeatedly due to sudden situations. Scenes have been reworked overnight, interiors converted to exteriors, and narrative emphases shifted not for creative flair but for survival. This filmmaking trains a particular kind of patience, not as a virtue, but as a necessary, embodied response to a world where nothing is promised and continuity cannot be assumed.

Ultimately, this practice advocates for cinema as a historical witness, a record of neglect that operates on the level of form. It



> The goal is not to show that things are bad, but how lives are rearranged around that badness.

is a cinema that allows broken systems to shape its aesthetics quietly and its ethics firmly. It refuses to turn neglect into either pity or poetry.

By accepting the slow, repetitive, and incomplete rhythms imposed by infrastructural failure, such filmmaking creates a durable record of ordinary life within abandonment. It captures not the spectacle of crisis, but the texture of endurance, offering a testament to how authority, legitimacy, and daily existence are contested and shaped within the quiet, continuous crisis of the everyday: how a poor Ibadan farmer deals with heartbreak, how terminal University strikes can damage waiting students, how a smuggler and a struggling student try to make off with a great artifact. This is the record we make from within the frame of neglect, not a cinema of complaint, but a cinema of witness.

Taiwo Egunjobi *is a Nigerian film director, screenwriter, and cultural commentator based in Lagos. A graduate of Psychology from the University of Ibadan, he began making short films as a student, driven by a deep interest in how stories shape human experience and identity. His films have screened at international festivals, including the NOW Festival Paris, the African Film Festival in Argentina, and AFRIFF. His works are available globally, with All Na Vibes on Netflix, and A Green Fever and The Fire and The Moth on Amazon Prime Video.*

Beyond filmmaking, Taiwo serves as the Editor-in-Chief of Filmkaku, where he contributes to critical discourse on African cinema, and regularly shares insights on other platforms. He has taught sessions on storytelling and leadership at YP Lagos, and has served as a juror for the Africa Magic Viewers' Choice Awards (AMVCA), the Fountain International Film Festival, and the Ibadan Indie Film Awards.

Nollywood's Political Unconsciousness and the Critic's Quagmire

By Vivian Nneka Nwajiaku

I. The Politics of Cinema

In a world of magic and speaking animals, a green-skinned young woman enrols at a magical university. She is bullied and mistreated, but she endures, accepting to be tutored by the Dean of Sorcery Studies in hopes of gaining access to the great Wizard. On campus, she discovers that animals are losing their speech. Determined to do right, her first opportunity to fraternise with the Wizard becomes an advocacy project on behalf of the animals. She expects a solution. Instead, she is invited to join a scheme to control and scapegoat the animals. Her refusal sets her against the Wizard and the Dean. She is branded the Wicked Witch and a sworn enemy of the land.

> Film gives the impression of reality.

This is the story of Wicked (2024-5), Hollywood's colourful two-part musical fantasy that primarily presents itself as entertainment. Most audiences, especially those uninterested in the political, would consume Wicked for its entertainment value. Fascism, the "nature versus nurture" debate, power imbalances and social inequalities in daily life, these discourses may not bear heavily on the casual viewer. And yet, American sociopolitical realities and the ideological positions of the filmmakers seep through the screen, intentionally controlling the narrative. The casual viewer, wherever they may be located in the world, might not know it, but they are likely internalising certain political stances propagated via this fantasy world.

"Political", here, refers not to the strict dictionary definition of "relating to the government" but to the broader socio-cultural interpretation of the term as the exercise of power or, as the British political scientist Andrew Heywood defined it, "the activity through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which they live". In this sense, "the political" encompasses several forms of negotiation for power or control within the various contexts of cultural, socio-economic, and socio-political



realities, including the politics of identity, of community, of human emotions and relationships, of class struggles, and of societal systems and power structures.

In this age of social media and the considerable democratisation of access, we have come to discover that the flawed perception held by most of the Global South in favour of the West has been, at least partly, a result of the PR machine that is cinema. The United States, for instance, has historically wielded Hollywood in garnering global respect and consolidating soft power. Hollywood's reinforcement of American ideological dominance is well documented, from government-sponsored propaganda to independent-minded filmmaking with deliberate socio-political messaging.

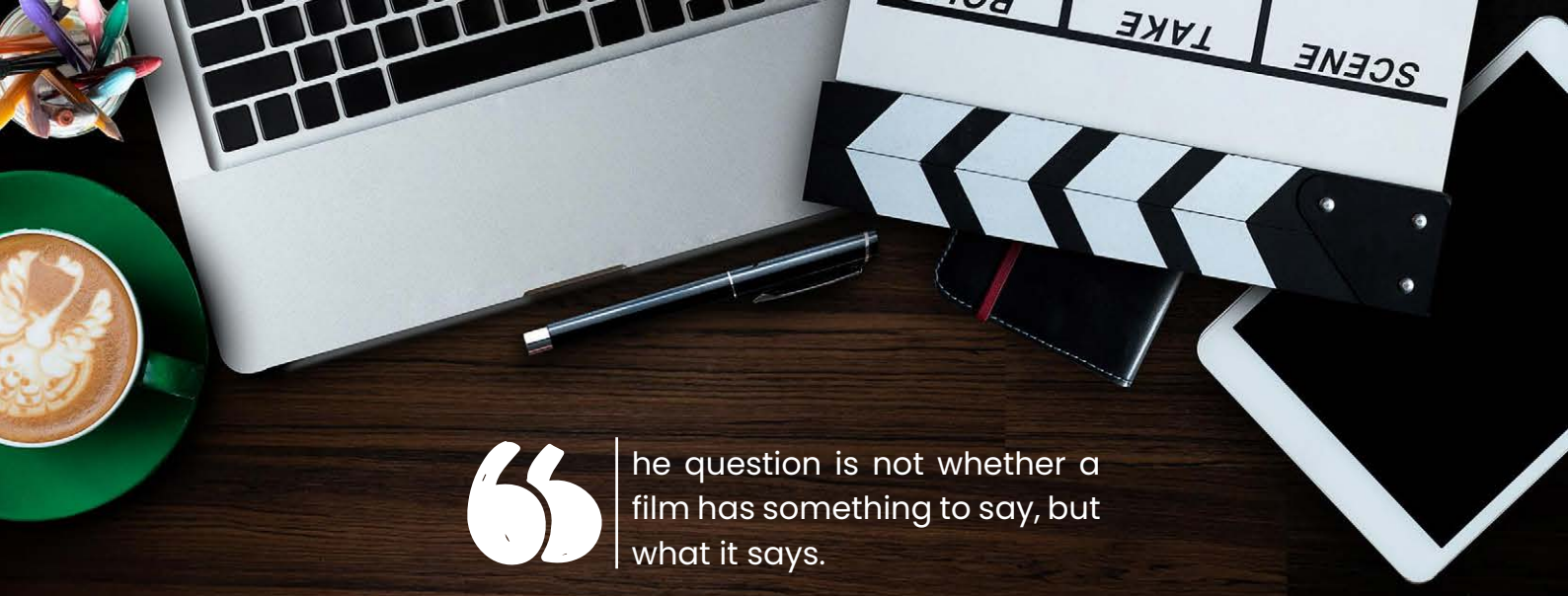
Beyond the West, film has played a remarkable role in propagating ideologies. Chinese Kung Fu films, from Drunken Master (1978) to Shaolin Temple (1982), were psychological weapons that shaped national identity and global perception. And even in Nigeria, early Nollywood notably altered the fabric of Nigerian society, for better and for worse. Much of Old Nollywood has been blamed and criticised for the proliferation of societal ills and the deformation of Nigeria's global image—an extreme example, films such as End of the Wicked (1999) are considered to have influenced the upsurge in the branding of children as witches, a culture which persists today—but their clarity in messaging can scarcely be denied.

In its present iteration, however, Nollywood hardly seems aware of this power of cinema to shape cultural perception, consciousness and influence. That is not to say that cinema is required to function specifically as a marketing tool or a morality police. After all, many of Nigeria's finest films, from Tunde Kelani's classic Saworoide (1999) to Arie and Chuko Esiri's globally acclaimed Eyimofe: This Is My Desire (2020), have been films that highlight the country's dysfunction, with the latter, in particular, eschewing moral judgment.

The point is, film is political. A film may clearly address a society's sociopolitical conditions and contradictions or it may not, but it is inevitably a product of such condition as well as a cultural repository. One need not study Fredric Jameson on political (un)consciousness, or consume



Source: Drunken Master (1978)



> The question is not whether a film has something to say, but what it says.

the critical exchange between Cahiers du Cinema and Cinéthique in the 1970s—although these are considered essential reading—to appreciate the politics, conscious or unconscious, of cinema. One need only consider the most entertaining and commercial film they can think of, from Hollywood's superhero genre to Nollywood's comedy blockbusters. Banal or brimming with depth, they ultimately reflect, reinforce or challenge societal conditions and worldviews.

As French film critic and theorist Christian Zimmer put it in his 1970 essay titled "All Films Are Political": "There is no innocent film, we would say, no film without some political incidence." This is even more so because the medium itself is political, pulling its audience in and making active participants of them. Film gives "the impression of reality" as French film theorist Christian Metz famously described it in his seminal 1968 work, Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema. "Films give us the feeling that we are witnessing an almost real spectacle—to a much greater extent… than does a novel, a play, or a figurative painting."

We may preach eternally about the fiction of film, even in documentary filmmaking, but we will remain unable to deny that the public does not always see the screen. Too many members of the audience are simply unable to divorce film from reality. Even critics, as Zimmer acknowledged, do not always manage to escape the effects of that impression of reality created by a film. This is its very design and, perhaps, its strongest appeal.

So, if films are inherently political, and if they indeed shape public consciousness, then is it not preferable that films be conscious? Surely, such consciousness need not take the form of overtly political themes. But is it not necessary that films have a clarity of essence and a sense of responsibility for their inescapable political implications? And is it not imperative that films be subject to critical engagement and interpretation? What, then, is the essence of criticism if not to interrogate the intersections of culture and politics?

II. The Critic's Quagmire

In the Nigerian film ecosystem, journalistic assessment has minimal effect on audiences' filmgoing decisions, a phenomenon which appears to diminish the power of criticism. I argue that this is not the case. Granted, criticising is an element of the critic's job, despite our insistence on marking distinctions between "criticising" and "critiquing". Indeed, in Criticism and Politics: A Polemical Introduction, Amer-

ican literary scholar Bruce Robbins gently admits (although with specific reference to literary criticism) that faultfinding is a major component of what critics do. And I concede that it does register as partially futile, at least, if that faultfinding has no effect on the market, since the incentives for correction and improvement are considerably minimised.

Yet, film has established itself as an integral part of culture, and criticism is crucial to culture, not only as a faultfinding affair but also as an analytical and interpretative activity, essentially political in itself. To quote Robbins, in his reflection on the career of Thomas Mann, the German social critic and Nobel Prize in Literature laureate who notably walked back his position on maintaining an apolitical approach to culture, "Culture doesn't represent only itself, but that it is socially representative, passively displaying truths about its time but also intervening—representing in an active sense—so as to push the social collectivity in a certain direction or directions. If it is indeed representative, it would be the duty of critics to figure out what cultural politics does represent, and how much, and with what effects."

Accordingly, even in Nigeria, criticism, at the very least, interprets, contextualises, and enlightens. This is an essential duty, considering the political power of cinema, especially in a society desperately in need of a sociopolitical reckoning. But if one has a duty to engage, what does one do when there is nothing coherent to engage with? When the film itself fails to properly engage with its own cultural politics? When the film is itself unaware of or uninterested in its inherent power? When it does not know what it wants to say?

We often frame Nollywood's filmmaking and storytelling problem as primarily a screenwriting problem. That is indeed a part of the industry's challenge, but one that arises at a later stage. A more urgent diagnosis, perhaps even more worrisome, may be that Nollywood is largely devoid of thematic direction and intentionality.

In essence, Nollywood has a messaging problem. This challenge is often transcribed as "Nollywood films have nothing to say", a sentiment that even I may have expressed in the past. However, if it is established that all films are political, it follows that all films have something to say. The question, then, is not whether a film has something to say but what the film has to say. This is Nollywood's primary difficulty, I contend, where a film often runs into its first trouble.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to note that the term "Nollywood" is used here strictly, referring specifically to mainstream Nigerian cinema. In fact, political consciousness abounds at the other end of Nigerian cinema, independent cinema, typically in overt manners, with stories and themes deliberately sociopolitically or ideologically driven.

Indie titles like My Father's Shadow (2025), Freedom Way (2024/5) and When Nigeria Happens (2025) remain overtly conscious of the social conditions that produce them. Beyond the conspicuous approach, as well,



Nigerian indie films, especially films which function with an independent mindset rather than merely as a stepping stone to mainstream Nollywood, also tend to appreciate the inherent political character of cinema.

Nollywood, on the other hand, rarely does. Too many films suffer from an entry stage deficiency, as it concerns messaging, hence the recurring complaint in Nigerian film criticism: "This film does not know what it wants to say."

Often, they meander, skipping between ideas, easily distracted, unable to complete any thought, and incapable of delivering coherence. Consequently, a story of self-discovery ends without self-discovery (Finding Me (2025)). A drama centred on a dysfunctional family grappling with trauma and abuse abandons the trauma and abuse in favour of theatrics (Family Brouhaha (2025)). A crime drama attempting a critique of Nigerian party culture and ethnic tensions takes an unjustified detour into unwarranted marital drama (Owambe Thieves (2025)). And a tourism film meant to challenge negative portrayals of Northern Nigeria becomes a decidedly negative portrayal of Northern Nigeria (Finding Nina (2025)).



It is through reflection on films that we understand cinema itself.

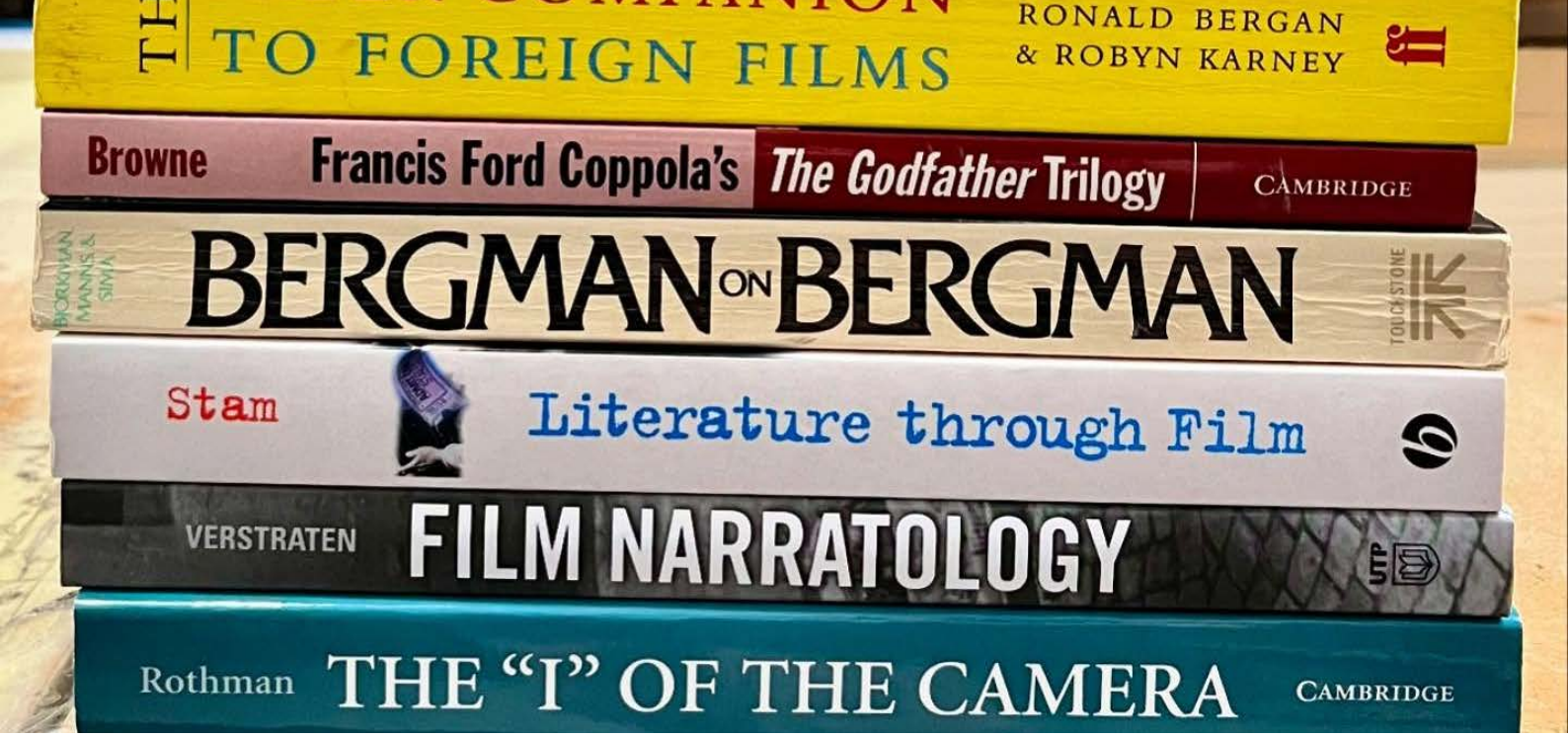
Other times, Nollywood films bury their thematic essence in pursuit of genre expectations. Thus, a psychological thriller built around sexual exploitation does not recognise that it is a film about sexual exploitation (Blackout (2025)). And a romance drama apparently interested in celebrity culture and power dynamics either skirts around the subjects or completely avoids them (A Lagos Love Story (2025)).

The overtly political films do not enjoy exception solely based on the fact of their politics. They, too, tend to fail the entry-stage test, often presenting incoherent ideologies, betraying their lack of appreciation for the implications of their attempted political statements.

Consider The Masked King (2025), a historical drama set in an ancient Efik kingdom. Arriving in a cinematic era of proud historical epics, currently dominated in Nigeria by Yoruba cinema, The Masked King pitches itself as a celebration of Efik history and culture. However, the historical events the film draws from (the customary killing of twins) demands that the film create a balance between adoration and condemnation. The Masked King, unclear on its own core message, ultimately leans towards a generalised demonisation of the local customs and a celebration of colonial religion.

Exceptions exist. Nollywood films like The Fire and the Moth (2025), The Herd (2025), and Radio Voice (2025) have recorded decent success in resolving the entry-stage question of political awareness. Having accomplished this feat, the question that follows is the deftness of the writing and the effectiveness of the message delivery. As that question is beyond the scope of this inquiry, suffice to say that proper execution of the message is a venture of equal importance, and, understandably, a priority of film criticism in Nigerian cinema.

If the vast majority of contemporary Nollywood films struggle to generate thematic relevance, to produce storytelling worthy of meaningful engagement, the implication is that the critic becomes easily manipulated towards the more agitating approach:



"film bad / film good", where good really means technically decent or competent. It is a belittling of the form, both of film and criticism, and a predominant cause of Nollywood fatigue among critics and audiences, especially critics.

Yet, criticism remains a sacred duty. And if films are inherently political, if all films have something to say, though they may be unaware or unconscious of their inherent politics, then the critic's duty remains, difficult as it may have been rendered by the film itself. The critic must endeavour to rise to the challenge, above "film bad / film good". The critic cannot afford the hypocrisy of limiting themself to "film bad / film good" while they criticise filmmakers for a similar failure.

Admittedly, we often wrestle with this demand, even more so in the past year. Critical engagement noticeably declined across the board, partly due to exhaustion. We wonder why we must consciously dedicate our faculties to films that exhibit little evidence of equal consciousness. Perhaps, we will always wonder. Nevertheless, we must apply to ourselves the rules we apply to filmmakers: It might be easier said than done, but it must be done properly.

After all, as Christian Metz succinctly noted, "Certainly, the criticism of films—or, better yet, their analysis—is an enterprise of utmost importance: it is the film-makers who create the art of the cinema; it is through reflection on those individual films we have liked (or those we have disliked) that we have gained insights into the art of the film in general."

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Why Nollywood Has Stars But No Movie Stars

By Joseph Jonathan



Imagine a Nollywood actor walking into a Lagos mall. They're swarmed, photographed, asked about their latest endorsement deal, their skincare line, or the last meal they had. The crowd knows their face, their Instagram handle, their brand partnerships. Now imagine Shah Rukh Khan arriving in Mumbai, or Tom Cruise at Cannes. The reaction isn't just recognition, it's reverence. Fans don't ask about endorsements; they recall specific scenes, gestures, the aura accumulated across decades. The difference isn't fame. It's myth.

Nollywood produces celebrities and recognisable faces at an industrial scale, but it rarely produces movie stars in the classical sense: figures whose persona alone sells films, structures genres, and accumulates symbolic capital across time. This isn't a talent deficit. It's a systemic condition, rooted in how Nollywood is organised, circulated, and culturally imagined. The industry optimises for celebrity circulation, not star accumulation. And the difference matters more than we've admitted.

Before we diagnose the problem, we need to define terms. Celebrity and stardom are not synonyms, though Nollywood often treats them as interchangeable. A celebrity is visibility-driven. They have social media presence, brand endorsements, tabloid coverage, and above all, familiarity. They are recognised. But recognition without distance produces accessibility, not aura. Celebrities are known. Stars are imagined.

A movie star is something structurally different. Their persona exists larger than any individual role. When they appear on screen, they bring accumulated associations: gestural signatures, thematic obsessions, a history of choices that feel consistent even when contradictory. Anticipation precedes the film. Narrative expectations

are shaped by their presence. The star doesn't just act in a story; they authorise it. Their face carries symbolic capital built across years, even decades.

Think of Tom Cruise. Before you know the plot of a Cruise film, you know what kind of experience it will be: high-octane, technically obsessive, physically committed. Think of Meryl Streep: you expect intelligence, transformation, a certain moral seriousness even in comedy. Think of Shah Rukh Khan: romantic longing, outsider charm, the myth of the self-made man who never quite belongs. These aren't just actors playing roles. They are industrial infrastructures. Their names greenlight projects. Their presence shapes marketing. Their absence from a genre becomes newsworthy.



Celebrities are known. Stars are imagined.

Nollywood has actors everyone knows. But can you name a Nollywood actor whose persona alone sells a film to an audience that knows nothing else about it? Can you name an actor whose thematic preoccupations have shaped how Nollywood writes women, or men, or moral ambiguity? Can you name an actor whose career has been a decades-long conversation with the audience about who they are, what they represent, and what they refuse to be?

The silence that follows those questions is not about talent. It's about infrastructure.

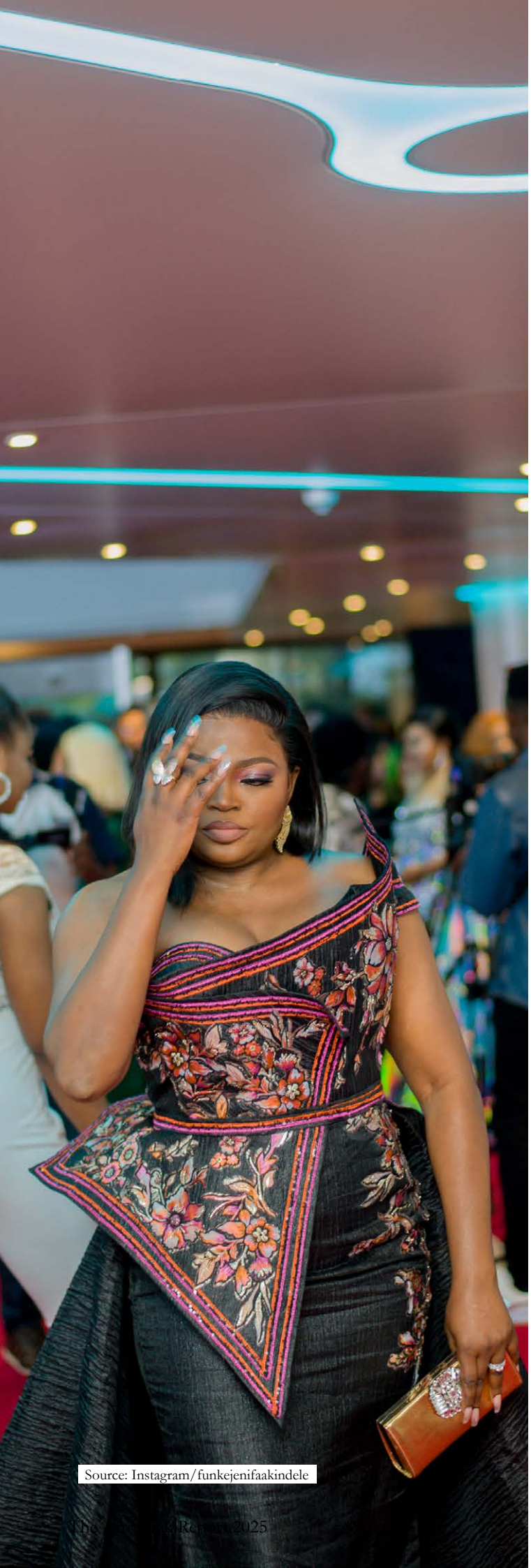
The Speed Problem

Nollywood's first structural impediment to stardom is pace. The industry runs on volume. A lead actor might shoot fifteen, twenty, sometimes thirty projects in a single year. They move from set to set, genre to genre, playing a betrayed wife on Monday, a corporate executive on Wednesday, a village priestess on Friday. The roles blur. The characters become interchangeable. The actor is everywhere, and therefore nowhere.

Classical stardom requires temporal gaps. Between films, a space opens—anticipation, speculation, myth-building. What has the star been doing? What will they do next? The absence creates hunger. The return feels like an event. This is why Tom Cruise's appearance in Top Gun: Maverick (2022) felt like a cultural resurrection. He'd been away, not from public life, but from that persona (Capt. Pete "Maverick" Mitchell) for 36 years. More so, his last film appearance prior to that was in Mission: Impossible – Fallout (2018). That gap made the return meaningful.

Nollywood allows no such gaps. An actor finishes one film and immediately begins another. Streaming platforms release their projects simultaneously. A viewer can watch the same actor play six different moral types in a single weekend. Familiarity is produced instantly, but reverence is never allowed to grow. The system mistakes ubiquity for loyalty.

Compare this to Bollywood's pacing. Shah Rukh Khan, at the height of his powers, rarely released more than two or three films a year (excluding cameos and special appearances as himself). Each release was an occasion. The gap between My Name is Khan (2010) and Jab Tak Hai Jaan (2012) was two years. When he returned in Pathaan (2023) after a four-year hiatus from lead roles, it wasn't just a comeback, it was a "resurrection". The absence had done the work. Nollywood actors never disappear long enough for anyone to miss them.



Source: Instagram/funkejenifaakindele

South Korea's star system engineers scarcity even more aggressively. Lee Min-ho's career is a study in controlled output. Since his breakout role as Gu Jun-pyo in the acclaimed TV show Boys Over Flowers (2009), Min-ho has been in just 3 feature films and 9 TV shows. In between, there were endorsements, carefully curated public appearances. But never oversaturation. The agencies that manage Korean stars understand what Nollywood's producer-driven system does not: absence is an investment.

Nollywood's speed problem isn't just about quantity. It's about the collapse of anticipation. If a star is always present, always available, always performing, the audience never develops hunger. And hunger is the precondition for myth.

Producer-Dominated Logic

Nollywood's second structural problem is who controls the industry. This is not a star system. It's a producer system. And producer-driven models are fundamentally incompatible with star mythology.

In Nollywood, films are commissioned by producers (individuals or entities) chasing seasonal trends, cultural moments, and distributor demands. The producer is the auteur, the brand, the economic anchor. Actors are hired to execute a vision they rarely shape. Ensemble casts dilute individual presence. The system is designed to survive any actor's absence. If one lead is unavailable, another is cast. If a star demands too much, a producer builds a project around someone cheaper. The model is economically rational, flexible, and highly productive. It is also hostile to stardom.

Take Behind The Scenes (2025), the highest-grossing Nollywood film to date. It's a

Funke Akindele film, but Akindele's power comes from owning the means of production, not from star aura in the classical sense. She is a producer-star hybrid, closer to Tyler Perry than to Julia Roberts. The film's success was built on her brand as a filmmaker, her distribution muscle, and her Christmas slot strategy. Remove her from the film and replace her with another capable actress; does the box office crater? Maybe. But the infrastructure that made the film possible was producer-driven, not star-driven.

Contrast this with Bollywood. Pathaan (2023) was sold as "Shah Rukh Khan is back". The premise—spy thriller, patriotic action—was secondary. The hook was the star's return. The film's existence was justified by Khan's mythology, not the producer's vision. Yash Raj Films, the production house, provided infrastructure, but the reason audiences showed up was Khan. The star precedes the script.



You cannot build myth when your actors appear in thirty films a year.

Or consider Hollywood. Top Gun: Maverick exists because Tom Cruise willed it into existence. For years, he refused sequels to his iconic films. When he finally greenlit Maverick, it was because he believed he could deliver something worthy of the original. Paramount facilitated, but Cruise authorised. The film's $1.4 billion global gross was a Tom Cruise event, not a studio product.

Perhaps a potential argument would be that Cruise and Khan are stars from a previous era, having broken out in the 1980s and 1990s respectively. But that's precisely the point. The fact that their names still sell films decades later, that their "return" becomes a cultural event in the 2020s, proves the durability of properly built stardom. Star mythology, once established, compounds across time.

Nollywood has no direct equivalent timeline. Consider Genevieve Nnaji, one of Nollywood's biggest stars from the previous era. Her last major box office success was Ijé: The Journey (2010), which became Nollywood's highest-grossing film at the time; though notably, she starred alongside Omotola Jalade-Ekeinde, another major star from the same era, diluting singular star power. When Half of a Yellow Sun (2013) broke that record, Nnaji was again part of an ensemble cast, not the sole draw.

Her "return" with Road to Yesterday (2015)—her first lead role in a theatrical release in five years, which she co-produced—earned approximately N30 million at the box office. For context, Fifty, the highest-grossing Nollywood film that year, made N87 million. The gap is telling.

Lionheart (2018) carried significant cultural weight, yes, but as Netflix's first Nigerian original, not purely as a Genevieve Nnaji vehicle. By then, she was full producer, not just star. Her power came from ownership, not primarily from star aura that could greenlight someone else's project. Even Nollywood's closest approximation to a classical movie star couldn't survive the system's structural hostility to stardom.

Why? Because Nollywood's producer-dominated model is designed to minimise risk by spreading star labour across multiple projects. A producer who builds a film entirely around one actor's persona takes on enormous financial exposure. If the star walks, the project collapses. If the star demands backend points, profit margins shrink. If the star's mythology doesn't resonate, there's no fallback. Nollywood's producers

have instead built a system where actors are fungible. This is economically rational. But economic rationality and star-making are often incompatible. The result: Nollywood makes films with stars, not films for stars.

Typecasting Without Iconography

Nollywood has typecasting. It does not have iconography. And the difference is everything.

Typecasting is functional. An actor is repeatedly cast in similar roles because they reliably deliver a tonal or moral effect. The "good woman". The "bad guy". The "comic relief". These are templates, narrative utilities designed to serve plot and theme. The actor becomes recognisable for playing a type, but the type is not imbued with gestural, physical, or thematic singularity. The roles are interchangeable. Another actor could play them with minimal disruption.



A star's value is built on scarcity.

Iconography is mythic. It's the unrepeatable signature: a way of moving, speaking, inhabiting space that becomes inseparable from the star's persona. Clint Eastwood's squint, slow-burn rage, and moral pragmatism weren't just repeated roles; they were a philosophy communicated through gestures. Meryl Streep's transformative precision, her ability to disappear into characters while somehow remaining unmistakably Streep, is iconographic. Shah Rukh Khan's outstretched arms, his romantic longing performed with desperate sincerity, are a thematic obsession, not just a casting choice.

Nollywood has actors who play similar roles across films, but the repetition produces familiarity, not myth. Ask yourself: is there a gestural signature, a physicality, a thematic preoccupation that belongs uniquely to any current Nollywood actor? If you say "a Funke Akindele role," are you describing a persona or a function?

Compare this to Hollywood or Bollywood. A "Denzel Washington role" evokes moral authority, controlled intensity, and a certain kind of masculine dignity. A "Priyanka Chopra role" (in her Bollywood prime) evoked intelligence, sexual agency, and modernity—she played women who wanted things and pursued them unapologetically. A "Meryl Streep role" evokes transformation, yes, but also a particular kind of moral seriousness, even when she's being funny.

Nollywood's roles are not built around persona. They are built around moral function. The role dictates the actor, not the reverse. And so the actor never accumulates symbolic capital. They are recognised for being in many films, but not for meaning anything across those films.

Social Media and the Collapse of Distance

Classical stardom required distance. Not physical distance—though that helped—but mythological distance. The space between the star and the audience had to be carefully managed, curated, and protected. The star was seen, but not too much. Interviewed, but not too often. Available, but not accessible. The distance allowed the audience to project, to imagine, to fill the gaps with their own fantasies and interpretations.

Nollywood's stars have no such distance. They are hyper-visible, relatable, constantly performing authenticity on Instagram Live, TikTok skits, product endorsements, reali-



ty TV guest spots. You know what they ate for breakfast. You've seen their brand partnerships for everything from hair extensions to betting apps. You've watched them beg for votes on Big Brother or dance in viral challenges. They are present; always, exhaustingly, intimately.

This is not inherently the problem. Social media is a tool. The problem is the absence of countervailing structures that might preserve mystery elsewhere. Hollywood stars are also on social media, but they operate within an ecosystem that includes other myth-making apparatuses: Vanity Fair cover profiles that treat them with high-gloss reverence, Oscars machinery that ritualises their cultural value, and controlled late-night talk show appearances that maintain the performance of glamour. The social media presence is one channel among many. The star is also seen in ways that reinforce distance.

Bollywood has similar structures. Karan Johar's Koffee with Karan is a curated star-making apparatus where celebrities are made to seem accessible, but within a carefully controlled format that reinforces their status. The Filmfare Awards, the IIFA weekend, the brand campaigns shot like high-fashion editorials—all of these are institutions that say: This person is not like you. They are special.

South Korea's system is even more explicit. Agencies restrict fan access by design, creating scarcity even in the age of ubiquity. A K-drama star's Instagram might be updated sporadically, with images that feel aspirational rather than relatable. Fan meetings are ticketed, ritualised events. The star is kept distant even when they are present. The agencies understand that accessibility kills aura.

Nollywood has none of these countervailing structures. There are no glossy magazines that treat actors with mythological reverence. There are no institutional gatekeepers curating how stars appear. The few award shows that exist are not treated as sacred cultural rituals; they are often criticised for corruption and irrelevance.

Nollywood's stars are left to self-mythologise, and self-mythologising in real time, on Instagram, is nearly impossible. By the time the star has posted their tenth brand endorsement or their fifteenth "humbled and grateful" acceptance speech, the myth is dead.

What Nollywood lacks is not social media literacy. It lacks institutional myth infrastructure—the press machinery, the archives, the retrospectives, the critical apparatus that says: This career matters. This person is significant. This body of work is worth remembering. Without that, every Nollywood star is left alone with their phone, performing intimacy, killing the distance that might have made them mythic.

Morality, Ambivalence, and the Limits of Myth

Movie stars thrive on contradictions. Not moral simplicity, but unresolved tension. James Dean's Rebel Without a Cause (1955)—alienated, beautiful, doomed—was compelling because the film never fully explained or redeemed him. Marlon Brando's Stanley Kowalski in A Streetcar Named Desire (1951) was sexually magnetic and morally repellent, and the film let both truths coexist. The star becomes mythic not by resolving contradictions, but by embodying them.

Nollywood narratives demand moral clarity. Good is rewarded, evil is punished, ambiguity is temporary and eventually resolved. This is not unique to Nollywood, Bollywood and Hollywood also traffic in moralistic storytelling. But Nollywood's Pentecostal and conservative gatekeeping structures go further. They demand not just moral resolution in the story, but moral purity in the star.

Bollywood, despite its formulaic morality, allows its stars moments of dangerous ambiguity. Shah Rukh Khan in Darr (1993) plays a psychotic stalker. The film condemns his actions, but it eroticises his obsession, lets the camera linger on his longing, and allows his final confrontation to feel tragic rather than triumphant. The star persona absorbs the contradiction. Khan became more interesting because he could hold both the romantic hero and the unhinged villain in the same



Source: Internet



Source: Instagram/jim.iyke

body.

Nollywood rarely allows this. Its stars are morally typecast not just in individual films, but across careers. If an actor plays a villain, they are likely to play villains repeatedly, becoming identified with moral failure. If they play virtuous roles, they are expected to remain virtuous on-screen and off. The industry has little tolerance for stars who embody contradictions, who play morally ambiguous characters with empathy, who make audiences want something they should not want.

This is partly a function of audience expectation. Nollywood's core audience includes religious conservatives who expect films to reinforce moral lessons—it's the reason why kissing scenes still make Nigerian social media spaces go gaga. Or why audiences condemn (mostly female) actors who show skin.

But it's also a function of risk aversion. A producer investing in a film does not want to alienate a segment of the audience by making the star too complicated, or too uncomfortable. And so the roles are sanitised. The contradictions are flattened. The star never becomes mythic because they never become dangerous.

Consider Hollywood's most enduring stars. They are often defined by their moral ambiguity. Clint Eastwood's Man with No Name was not good—he was pragmatic, violent, self-interested. Meryl Streep's Miranda Priestly in The Devil Wears Prada (2006) is monstrous and magnificent. Robert Downey Jr.'s Tony Stark is narcissistic, reckless, and emotionally stunted, and the franchise never fully "fixes" him. These contradictions are not problems. They are the point. The star becomes mythic because they cannot be reduced to a moral lesson.

Nollywood does not permit this. Its stars must be exemplars or cautionary tales. They cannot be both. And so they never accumulate the kind of contradictory, unresolved mythology that makes a star unforgettable.

2025: A Year That Proved the Point

If the structural diagnosis feels abstract, 2025 offers all the proof we need. The year's box office numbers

don't just support the argument, they make it impossible to ignore.

The three highest-grossing Nollywood films of the 2025 calendar year were Behind the Scenes (N1.3 billion), Gingerrr (N522 million), and Oversabi Aunty (N480 million). Each was driven by producer brand, ensemble casts, and viral marketing. None was sold on a single actor's persona. None became a cultural event because of who was in it. The films succeeded because of what they were—concepts, packages, holiday releases—not because of who starred in them.

This is producer-driven cinema at full strength. And it works. The model delivers box office results. But it doesn't build stars.

Consider the most commercially successful actors of the same calendar year. Tobi Bakre, the highest-grossing actor of the year, appeared in five films, including Behind the Scenes. Uzor Arukwe—often described as one of Nollywood's most "bankable" actors—was in twenty films and one TV series. Twenty. Timini Egbuson appeared in thirty films, two of which ranked in the year's top ten highest-grossing releases.



The system that produces speed and volume cannot produce myth.

On the actress side, Toyin Abraham, the highest-grossing actress of 2025, was in ten films, including three of the year's top ten. Scarlet Gomez, the second-highest-grossing actress, appeared in four films and one TV series.

The numbers are staggering. But none of these films was marketed around the actors' individual personas. Not one. The posters were ensemble-heavy. The trailers emphasised concepts, not stars. The press coverage featured producers and casts, not singular mythological figures whose return audiences had been anticipating. These actors were everywhere, and therefore nowhere. Recognisable, but not mythic. Successful, but not movie stars.

If Nollywood had a star system, Uzor Arukwe would not have been in twenty projects in a single year. He would have been in three, maybe four—carefully chosen, strategically spaced, designed to deepen a persona audiences could miss between releases. Timini Egbuson's thirty-film output is not evidence of star power. It's evidence of its absence. A star's value is built on scarcity. When you're in thirty films in a year, you're not a movie star. You're inventory.

The one exception—if we're generous—is Femi Adebayo's Agesinkole 2: King of Thieves, which earned N417 million from community screenings across Southwest Nigeria. It's a sequel to King of Thieves (2022), with Adebayo reprising his role as Agesinkole, the protagonist. The film's success was tied to Adebayo's continued embodiment of that character. Audiences showed up for him, for the continuation of a persona they'd invested in.

But even this comes with caveats. Adebayo also produced the film. His box office power is almost inseparable from his ownership of the project. He's not a star in the classical sense—an actor whose presence alone greenlights a film someone else is financing. He's a producer-star hybrid, closer to Funke Akindele or Tyler Perry than to Shah Rukh Khan or Tom Cruise. His success is real, but it's built on owning the means of production, not on the kind of pure star mythology that allows an actor

to walk into any project and transform it by their presence alone.

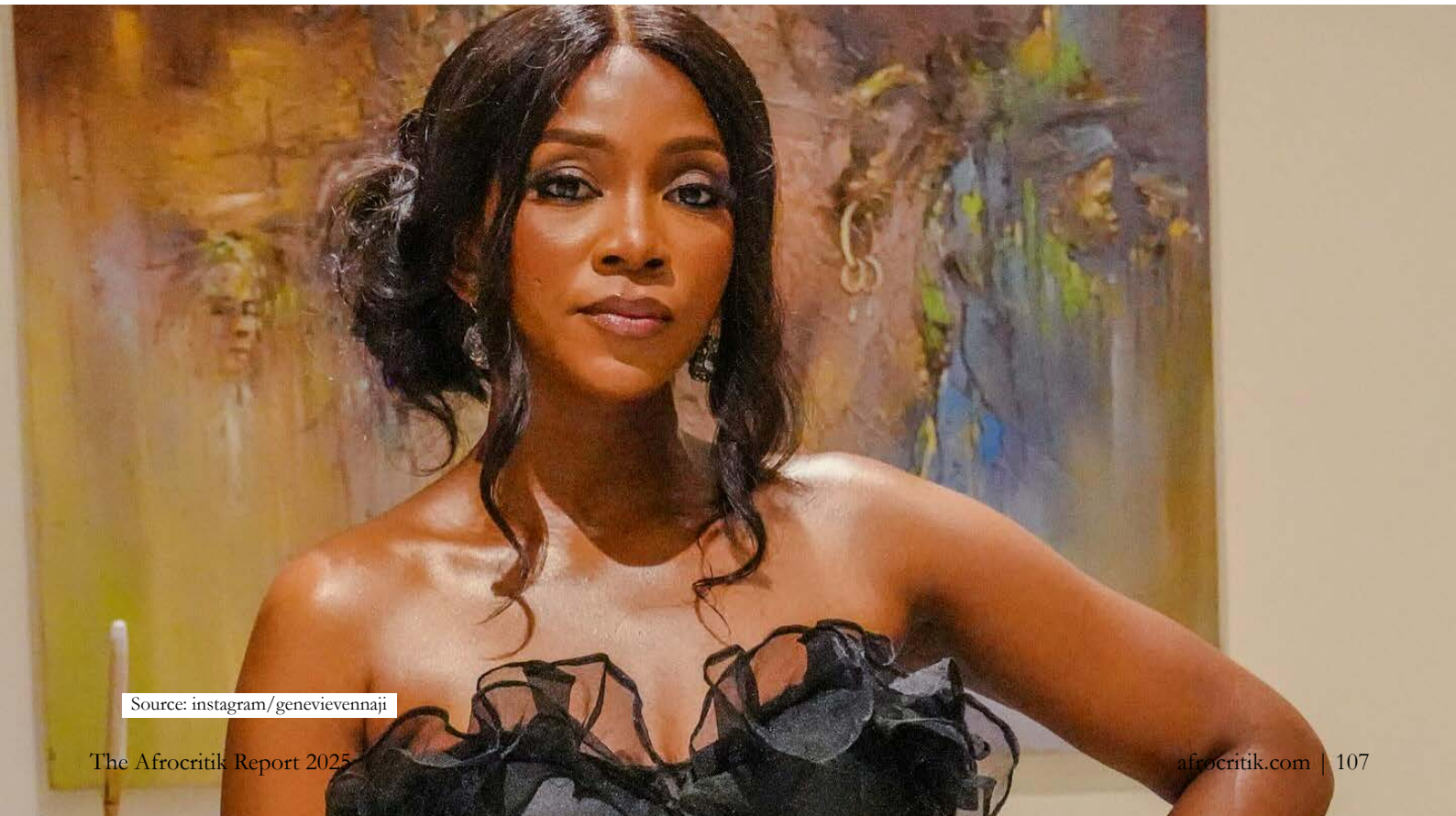
What 2025 revealed is that Nollywood's model works brilliantly for what it's designed to do: produce volume, maximise visibility, deliver consistent box office returns, and survive any individual actor's absence. But that same model makes classical stardom structurally impossible. You cannot build myth when your most successful actors are in twenty to thirty projects a year. You cannot accumulate symbolic capital when no film is positioned as the Uzor Arukwe event of the year. You cannot create hunger when audiences are never given the chance to miss anyone.

The producer-driven model isn't broken. It's functioning exactly as intended. It just doesn't—can't—produce movie stars.

The Stars We Almost Built: What Old Nollywood Understood (Accidentally)

Before we prescribe solutions, we need to acknowledge something: Nollywood has done this before. Not perfectly, not systematically, but recognisably. Old Nollywood came closer to building movie stars than contemporary Nollywood does. Not because it was trying to, but because its structural constraints accidentally created the conditions for myth-building.

Sam Dede's trajectory from the mystical power of Igodo (1999) to the vigilante authority of Issakaba (2002) showed how a star persona could evolve while remaining mythologically consistent. Sam Dede embodied a particular kind of masculine power; elemental, dangerous and righteous. Pete Edochie became a bastion of masculinity, patriarchal authority, moral weight, proverb-wielding wisdom that authorised every film he entered. Ramsey Nouah was the romantic lead, the lover, the man women wanted and men wanted to be. Jim Iyke embodied the bad boy; dangerous, charismatic, morally complicated in ways that made him magnetic rather than repellent.



Source: instagram/genevievennaji

The women built equally indelible personas. Omotola Jalade Ekeinde was an aspirational beauty and emotional vulnerability; the girl next door who transcended ordinariness. Genevieve Nnaji was elegant, cosmopolitan, representing a version of Nigerian femininity that felt modern and global. Oprah Winfrey called her "the Julia Roberts of Africa"—a testament to how far her star mythology had travelled. Regina Askia was glamorous and unapproachable, the fantasy figure whose distance was part of the appeal.

These weren't just familiar faces. They were personas; gestural signatures, thematic obsessions, mythological consistencies that audiences recognised, anticipated, and missed between appearances.

Old Nollywood didn't set out to build a star system. It stumbled into one because the industry's limitations created the conditions that classical stardom requires. Scarcity came by constraint because production was slower, budgets were smaller, and distribution was limited to physical VHS and DVD sales.

An actor might appear in five to ten films a year; high by Hollywood standards, but a fraction of contemporary Nollywood's output. The result: temporal gaps that allowed anticipation to build. Distance came by default because no Instagram, no TikTok meant no constant access.

Fans encountered these actors only on screen or in carefully controlled magazine profiles. The mythological distance wasn't a strategy; it was the media environment. Audiences could project onto these figures, imagine them, and mythologise them. Typecasting was iconographic: it wasn't just "play the villain"; it was "you are this kind of villain, with this physicality, this voice, this way of inhabiting space". The repetition didn't produce boredom. It produced a persona.

But it didn't fully develop because the infrastructure to sustain stardom never materialised. Actors weren't paid enough to be selective; even the biggest names had to take nearly every role to survive. There were no backend deals, no star-driven financing structures. There was no critical apparatus treating these careers as bodies



Source: Instagram/peteedochie

of work worth preserving. No retrospectives, no canonising festivals, no serious awards culture. No sustained director-star collaborations that could deepen personas over time. The stars existed, but the system to protect and mythologise them did not.

Then came modernisation. When Netflix and Prime Video entered the market, when budgets increased, when production professionalised, the industry optimised for what streaming platforms reward: volume, consistency, algorithmic visibility. The accidental conditions that had created stars—scarcity, distance, iconographic consistency—were systematically designed out.

Streaming doesn't want actors in three films a year; it wants actors who can anchor multiple projects simultaneously. It doesn't want mythological distance; it wants relatable, accessible talent promoting their movies on social media. It doesn't want iconographic consistency; it wants range and versatility.



Nollywood produces celebrities at industrial scale.

Old Nollywood built stars without meaning to. New Nollywood, with all its professionalisation, funding, and global visibility, cannot. We don't have the mythological weight of Pete Edochie in his prime, or Genevieve at her peak—the woman Oprah called the Julia Roberts of Africa. We have actors everyone knows, celebrities everyone follows. But we have no gods. Old Nollywood came close, showed us what was possible, and then we built an industry that made it impossible.

What Would a Nollywood Star System Require?

This is where the analysis risks becoming wishful thinking. But let's be realistic. If Nollywood wanted to build a star system—if it decided that cultivating mythological figures was worth the economic tradeoff—what would it require?

First, a provocation: What if Nollywood doesn't want movie stars?

The producer-driven model is economically rational. Stars are expensive. They're temperamental. They bottleneck production schedules. They demand creative control and backend points. Nollywood's flexibility—its ability to churn out 200+ films a year, to respond to trends in real time, to survive any individual actor's absence—depends on actors being fungible.

The system that produces speed, volume, and flexibility is fundamentally incompatible with the system that produces myth, scarcity, and reverence. So, the real question isn't "How does Nollywood build stars?" It is, "Would stars even survive Nollywood's economic logic?"

But let's assume, for the sake of argument, that some faction within Nollywood—producers, distributors, or even actors themselves—wanted to shift toward a star-driven model. What would that transformation require?

Actors would need to do fewer projects. A star who appears in three carefully chosen films per year allows temporal gaps for anticipation. The audience misses them. Their return feels like an event. This requires paying actors enough per project that they can afford selectivity. Right now, most Nollywood actors take every available job because the per-project fees are low. To enable scarcity, the industry would need to consolidate budgets—fewer films, higher pay per film. This is a structural shift, not an individual choice. The economics must change before the aesthetics can.

Films would need to be built around a star's established persona or designed to create a new one. This means screenwriters and directors working with the star to develop roles that extend, complicate, or reinterpret their mythology. Hollywood does this constantly. The Mission: Impossible franchise exists as a star vehicle for Tom Cruise's obsession with practical stunts and physical risk. Erin Brockovich (2000) was tailored to Julia Roberts' combination of sex appeal and moral seriousness. Nollywood rarely does this. Roles are written generically, then cast. To build stars, the process must reverse: casting creates the role. The star's persona becomes the starting point, not an afterthought.

Nollywood needs institutions that treat stardom as culturally valuable. This means serious film criticism that analyses actors' careers as bodies of work, not just individual performances. It means retrospectives and festivals that canonise certain actors, treating them as living archives. It means press machinery that produces long-form profiles, not just Instagram soundbites. It means awards shows that are taken seriously, that function as rituals of cultural validation rather than transactional PR events.



Classical star systems often involve long-term collaborations between directors and actors. Scorsese and De Niro. Tarantino and Samuel L. Jackson. Kurosawa and Toshiro Mifune. These partnerships build personas over time. Each film is a chapter in an ongoing conversation about who the star is, what they represent.

Nollywood has directors—talented ones—but few sustained partnerships. Biodun Stephen, Kunle Afolayan, and others have worked with actors multiple times, but not in ways that build mythology. For that to happen, the director would need to be seen as an auteur (rare in Nollywood's producer-driven system), and the star would need to commit to fewer projects so they can sustain such partnerships. A star cannot build mythology with a dozen different directors in a single year. Mythology requires consistency, repetition, and deepening, not variety.

Stars need permission to be complicated. To play morally ambiguous characters. To make audiences uncomfortable. To embody contradictions that are never fully resolved. This requires producers willing to gamble on films that don't deliver easy moral lessons. It requires audiences willing to engage with complexity. And it requires stars willing to risk their "brand" by playing against type. None of this is easy in an industry where the audience's moral conservatism is a known commercial factor. But without risk, there is no myth. Safe stars are forgettable stars. The most enduring stars are the ones who made us feel conflicted, not the ones who made us feel righteous.

If Nollywood's major players—FilmOne, Inkblot, EbonyLife—began functioning like mini-studios rather than project-based

producers, they could build multi-year franchises around specific stars. Not just sequels, but universes where the star's persona is the connective tissue.

Marvel did this with Robert Downey Jr.'s Tony Stark. For a decade, Stark was the anchor of the MCU. The character evolved, but the persona remained consistent. By the time Avengers: Endgame (2019) arrived, audiences weren't just invested in the story—they were invested in Downey Jr.'s mythology. Nollywood has nothing equivalent. But it could. Imagine a multi-year franchise built around a single star's persona, with each instalment deepening the mythology. That would require producers willing to think beyond single-film profitability. It would require stars willing to commit years to a single character. And it would require audiences willing to follow that journey. All of this is possible. None of it is easy.



Patience is the hidden infrastructure of stardom.

Patience as Infrastructure

Let's return to where we began. Nollywood produces celebrities and recognisable faces at an industrial scale. It does not produce movie stars. And now we understand why.

It's not about talent. It's about infrastructure. Nollywood's speed, producer-driven logic, social media saturation, moral conservatism, and lack of institutional myth-making all conspire to prevent the cultivation of stars in the classical sense. The system is optimised for visibility, not reverence. For ubiquity, not mythology. For celebrity, not stardom.

Hollywood, Bollywood, and South Korea did not stumble into stars. They engineered them. They built industries that valued scarcity over volume, persona over function, distance over accessibility. They created institutions—studios, agencies, press machinery, awards rituals—that treated stardom as something worth preserving. They gave their stars time. Time to disappear. Time to return. Time for the audience to miss them, imagine them, mythologise them.

Nollywood has none of this. And so it has no stars, not because it lacks talent, but because it lacks patience. Patience is not passivity. Patience is infrastructure. It's the willingness to invest in long-term mythology rather than short-term visibility. It's the discipline to let a star do fewer things so each thing matters more. It's the courage to protect distance even in an age of total access. It's the institutional commitment to say: This person is not just another actor. This person is significant. This career is a cultural text we will preserve, interpret, and remember.

Nollywood does not lack stars. It lacks patience. And patience is the hidden infrastructure of stardom. Until Nollywood builds that infrastructure—until it slows down, consolidates power around stars rather than just producers, protects mythological distance, and tolerates moral complexity—it will continue producing celebrities everyone knows and movie stars no one remembers.

The question is not whether Nollywood can build a star system. It's whether it wants to. And whether it's willing to pay the price: fewer films, higher stakes, longer waits, and the uncomfortable admission that not every actor can be everywhere, all the time. Stardom requires sacrifice. Nollywood has not yet decided if the sacrifice is worth it.



Source: ragital.com

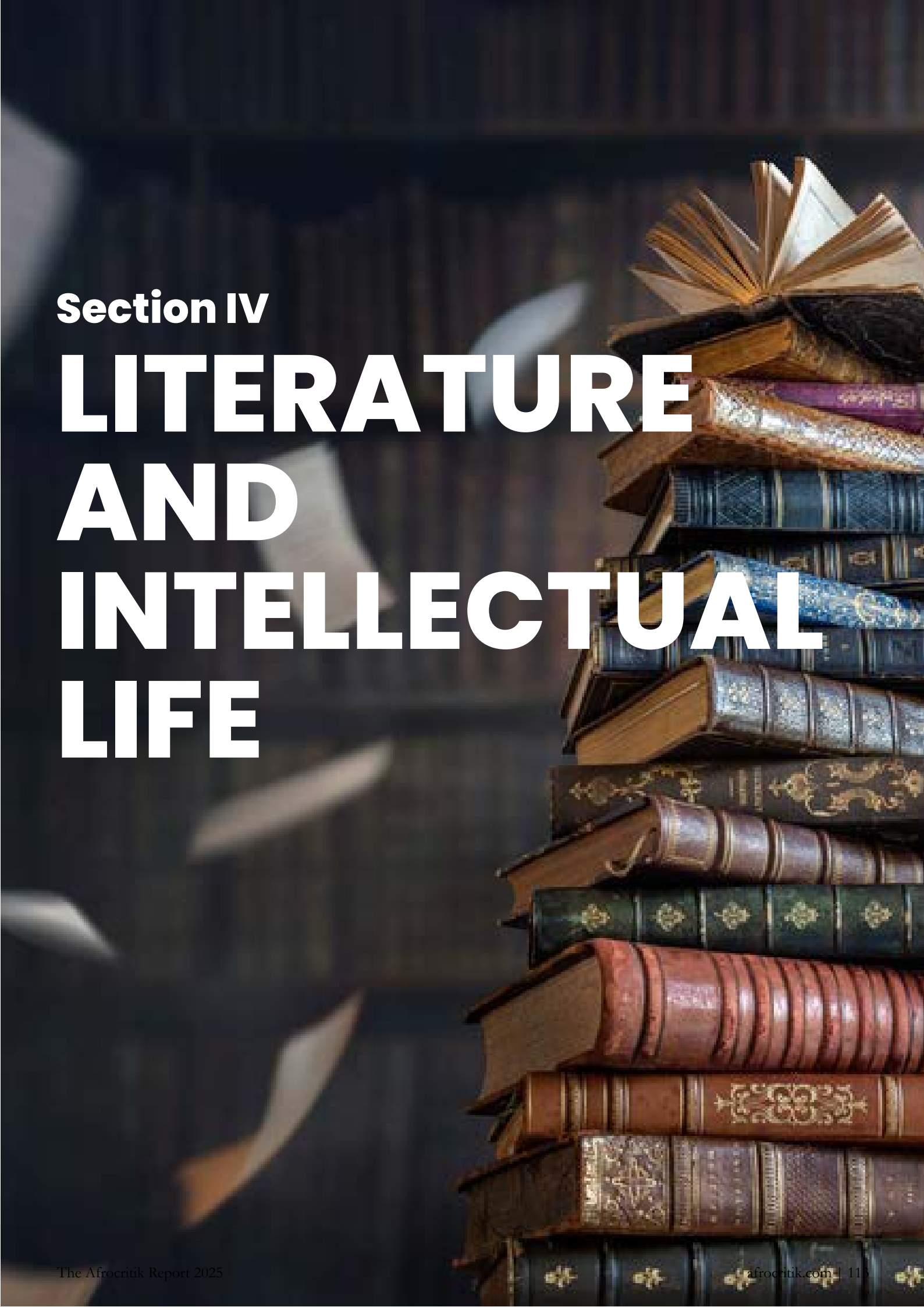
Why Does Stardom Matter Anyway?

Movie stars are not just cultural decoration. They are economic engines and psychological anchors. Human beings are wired for parasocial attachment; we invest emotionally in figures who feel larger than life, whose narratives we follow across years. This attachment translates into loyalty that transcends individual projects. A true movie star doesn't just draw audiences to one film; they create anticipation for the next, and the next, building a relationship that sustains careers and industries across decades.

Economically, stars reduce marketing risk. A Shah Rukh Khan or Tom Cruise film is pre-sold before a trailer drops. Distributors invest with confidence. International markets pay attention. The star becomes a cultural export, carrying not just their own mythology but their industry's global credibility.

Nollywood's lack of stars doesn't just limit individual actors; it limits the industry's ability to command sustained global attention, to build franchises that outlive trends, to create figures whose cultural weight opens doors for everyone else. Nollywood is the world's second-largest film industry by volume. But volume without mythology is just content. And content, however entertaining, is easily forgotten.

Joseph Jonathan *is a historian who seeks to understand how film shapes our cultural identity as a people. He believes that history is more about the future than the past. When he's not writing about film, you can catch him listening to music or discussing politics.*



Section IV

LITERATURE AND INTELLECTUAL LIFE



On Writing as an Immigrant in America

By Adedayo Agarau

It was in September, when the new fellowship year had just started, that Adams Adeosun, a Nigerian writer whose quiet, devastating lyrics I had admired since we first met in the literary circles back home, asked me what I would do after the Stegner. I scampered around my room, pressing the hot phone against the lobule of my left ear, and I gabbled something I do not remember, then later hurled curses at him and laughed, and then I asked him what he would do after his fellowship, which was ending the coming summer, around the same time the Stegner Fellowship at Stanford sunsets. We live a kind of life, as immigrant writers, that, when you think about it, is like walking barefooted on a street filled with broken shards of glass—a glamorous life, you know, one that we can write about, one that we can romanticise, and place into line-fitted metaphors and in poems of place, and depression, and cities, even as there is an existential fear that we carry into every workshop room, and on our colourful photos on Instagram.

> The anxiety of the immigrant writer is as plain and glaring as possible.

I did not have an answer, and the longer I sat with that silence, the more I realised the absence was structural—that the narrowness of the pathway we have been taught to want had left me with nothing to say when the path ran out. The MFA, then the fellowship, then the book, then the professorship. In the language of economists, this is a kind of pathway dependency: a single route so deeply grooved by precedent



and expectation that it begins to feel like the only route, even when the evidence suggests it cannot hold us all. What I am trying to say, plainly and from the middle of my own uncertainty, is that it is time for African writers to begin imagining a wider life—one capacious enough to hold the poems and the rent, the writing and the living, the ambition and the survival. I do not have a complete map. But I can see the contours of one, and perhaps in the act of naming it, others might see it too.

But before I draw the map, let me be honest about the landscape of the creative writing economy as it stands right now. The anxiety of the immigrant writer is as plain and glaring as possible, and so is his insecurity. I was having an unbelievable year at Stanford as a Stegner Fellow—something I didn't even think to apply for until Othuke Umukoro, a Nigerian poet and one of my closest friends from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, told me to that afternoon in hall of Dey House—working with my mentors, the poets Elizabeth Willis, Tracie Morris, Mark Levine, writing my MFA thesis, Year of Blood, which will later become my debut poetry collection, The Years of Blood. Perhaps the feeling that I am living or have lived all the dreams I had in 2017 when I decided I wanted to write for life. I thought all I had to do was write poetry, submit to places, win awards, and publish a book, and I would be ready to take on the world as a professor teaching African poetics to a diverse class. I did not think about what happens after the MFA, the fellowships, the book, and perhaps the residencies. The question for me was what would come after the MFA and maybe the Stegner, but that was only a question because I got accepted into these programmes. I remember we sat in the perpetual darkness of Adeniyi Ademoroti's living room in Iowa—Ademoroti, a fiction writer and friend, now at the University of Houston—listing places we were looking to apply to: PhD programmes, fellowships, and residencies. And while one would often come knocking, the good mothers of Iowa, which is what we called the programme's faculty who always seemed to find a way for us, had an extra year of teaching lying around for any of us who would not be leaving. And that has been the way we live in this country: writing applications for opportunities, our eyes swollen with tears, begging for a place to continue to write because our visas depend on it. And when none of these programmes take interest in our applications, we return with our hands folded behind us, asking the programme for a third year. We are grateful for the third year.

When I left Nigeria, I just wanted an



> Scarcity captures cognitive bandwidth.

MFA—to write the poems and dream the terrible dreams that chased me back to the house where I was born—but I did not prepare myself for the realities of the literary structures here. There are so many brilliant writers in Nigeria, America, and the world that the opportunities in world literature can cater to. Which reminds me of the Brunel International Poetry Prize—God bless Bernardine Evaristo, the Booker Prize-winning novelist who championed African writing long before the world caught up, and the Africa Poetry Book Fund, which has done more than perhaps any single institution to create pathways for African poets into global publishing, and the light they shone on African poetry. If you think about it, that prize is the reason I am in my Los Angeles apartment with its large windows and palm trees, the sun leaking through the leaves. It is why Romeo Oriogun, whose poems of exile and queer longing remade the sound of Nigerian poetry, got his big break and moved to America. And Gbenga Adesina, a poet of precise lyric intelligence. And Othuke. And all of us, arriving with our chapbooks and our hunger.

And to my generous head and its luck, and perhaps the gift of language, I have gone through several of the programmes that are mostly referred to as prestigious, which several say is the American writer's pathway to success. And finally, I had my debut collection, The Years of Blood, published in September 2025 by Fordham University Press. But the job market does not know what to do with poets. The job market has never known what to do with poets.

So to answer Adams's question, I applied to several fellowships, visiting positions, year-long residencies, and creative writing doctorate programmes, even though I had little to no school left in me. And I applied with the same anxiety I've had since the first day I stepped into this country. Please, do not get me wrong. I love school. In fact, it's a running joke amongst my friends that since they've known me, I have been in school. And some of them, I've known since 1999. It began to feel as though I was preparing myself for a war I know is coming, a silent war that comes without warning, like a thief or a wind—either way, something is taken. And I felt it in my body last year. The mornings when I opened the poem draft only after I had opened the email, the job listings, and the bank account.

Do you know that Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir, an economist and a psychologist, demonstrated in their landmark study "Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much" that financial scarcity captures cognitive bandwidth the way a

virus captures a cell? And that worrying about money reduces effective IQ by thirteen to fourteen points? They call it tunnelling—the way scarcity forces the mind into a narrow focus on immediate threats, so that long-term thinking, creative risk, and the tolerance of ambiguity all collapse under the weight of the urgent. So technically, the bandwidth that scarcity consumes is the same bandwidth that poetry requires: the ability to hold multiple possibilities open, to stay inside a poem long enough for it to unmask itself. This is what I mean when I say I opened the email before the poem. What the study exposes is the cost of how we have learned to live as writers in America—the chronic migraine, the clinical anxiety, the need to work twice as hard, to use the same part of the brain for worrying and creating, for teaching poetry and tweeting about our unreserved love for African literature. It is as though one is in constant battle with the self, to, if anything, convince yourself that you are deserving of everything you own, and if you'd be good enough by the time you need to prove yourself again, sometime in the future, usually in a calendar year.

> The MFA-to-academia pipeline has given us a single point of failure.

I wonder how we were able to write under the conditions of our lives when we were still home, looking forward to a life entirely based on the hope that a big break might happen. I stopped writing just before the collection came out. I just couldn't. The dread of how much they need me at home.

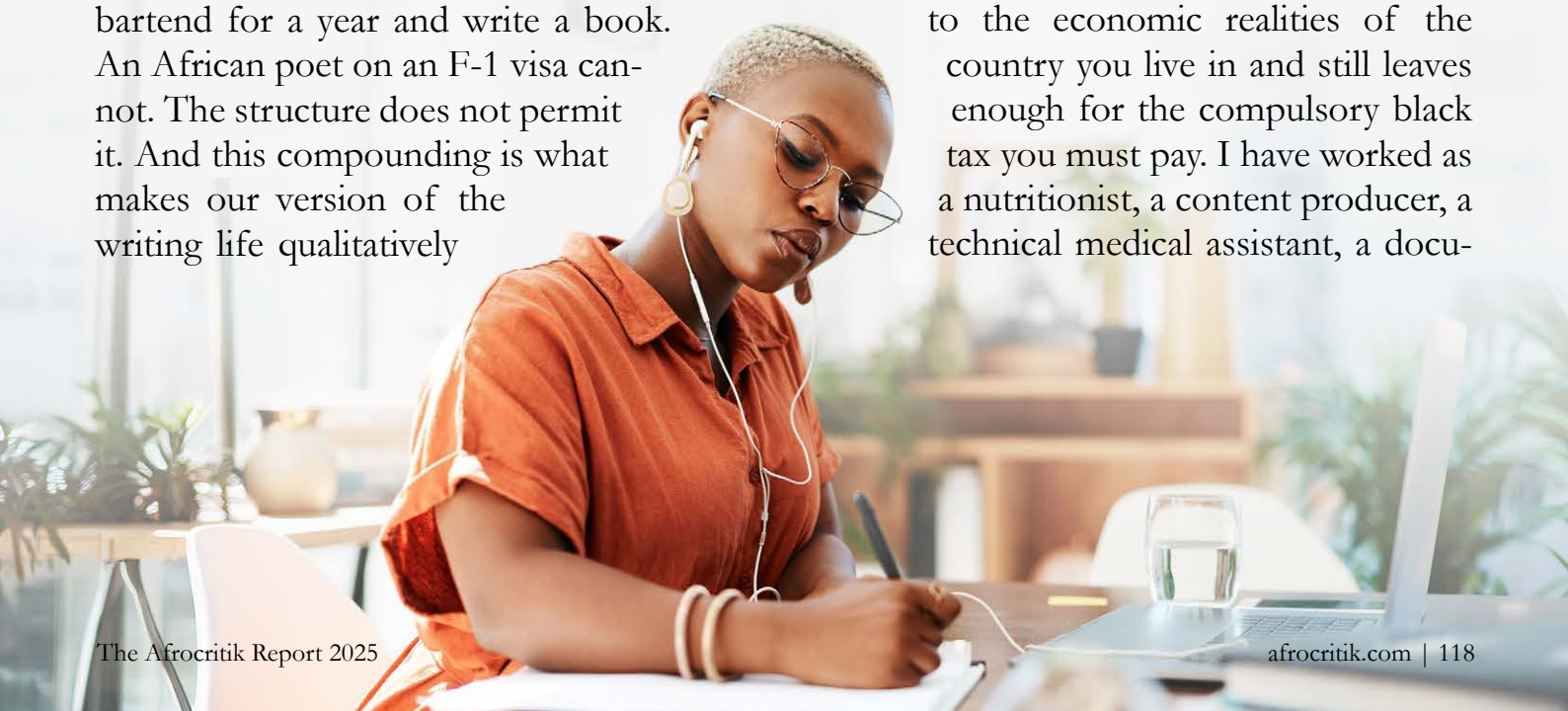
And this is why it's sometimes incredibly funny or, to be honest, appalling to find that writers, and misinformed critics, think of migrant African writers pursuing their work in MFA programmes as gatekeepers. What gate, what door, and where is the key? The gatekeeping metaphor assumes a position of power, an ability to open or close access, to decide who enters and who is turned away. But the African writer in the American MFA, fellowships, doctoral programmes, as well as writers serving as assistant professors, holds no such power. Confusing institutional proximity with structural power misunderstands how these systems operate. We are among the people trying to hold the door open from the inside while our own visas hang in the balance. What I have witnessed in Iowa, Stanford, and now the University of Southern California is the opposite of gatekeeping. I have watched writers, already saddled with their own manuscripts, teaching loads, and the chronic anxiety of their uncertain futures, carve out hours to read application materials, write recommendation letters, and answer emails from younger writers they have never met. It is almost impossible to hold out the opportunity to reference or recommend a truly brilliant writer when you remember what



it meant to receive that email, that encouragement, that small act of attention from someone who had walked that path. The other side, however, is not as green as it seems; 2025 taught me that.

I want to be honest about something here, because the gatekeeping accusation often carries an unspoken assumption that the writers inside these programmes have it figured out. The scarcity is everywhere. American poets face the same thirteen jobs, the same adjunct economy, the same grim arithmetic of too many brilliant writers chasing too few positions. But the American writer who does not land a job in December can freelance in January, can take a visiting position across the country, can wait out a bad year and try again. The immigrant writer who does not land a job in December may not be in the country by August. This is the part that is difficult to explain to anyone who has not lived it. The visa is the multiplier. It transforms ordinary career uncertainty into something existential. What labour economists might call a stacking of precarity—the market scarcity that every writer faces, compounded by the immigration architecture that makes our presence in this country conditional on institutional sponsorship, year after year after year. An American poet can decide to bartend for a year and write a book. An African poet on an F-1 visa cannot. The structure does not permit it. And this compounding is what makes our version of the writing life qualitatively different—differently shaped, differently constrained, differently urgent.

This reminds me that Lucille Clifton composed her first book of poems entirely in her head—all of them, start to finish—because she had six children under seven and no time to sit at a typewriter. "Humans are starving," she said in an interview decades later. "What else would I write about?" Binyavanga Wainaina, the Kenyan writer and founder of the literary magazine Kwani?, wrote donor brochures for $7,000 per project before he could build his dream. Chris Abani wrote from prison, from exile, from the aftermath of a death sentence. Warsan Shire, the Somali-British poet who would go on to write the words for Beyonce's "Lemonade", visited the abandoned Somali Embassy in Rome, where young refugees had made a home in the ruin, and one had jumped to his death the night before. She wrote "Conversations About Home (at a Deportation Centre)" for them, for anyone who has lived around grief in that way. These narratives appear aligned, as if suffering is a rite of passage for writers. But I refuse the romance. Being a poet at a time of migrant anxiety, an epileptic economy, and the Trump-Tinubu regime means your craft does not only include your writing. You must have a life that responds to the economic realities of the country you live in and still leaves enough for the compulsory black tax you must pay. I have worked as a nutritionist, a content producer, a technical medical assistant, a docu-



mentary photographer, and a content designer, sometimes freelancing to meet the financial demands of the cities I have lived in. At what cost?

I would even argue that my anxiety about the job market is not in a vacuum. Yes, 2025 was a remarkable year for Nigerian poetry. Gbenga Adesina, Othuke Umukoro, Salawu Olajide, Rasaq Malik Gbolahan, Chinua Ezenwa-Ohaeto, Ifeoluwa Ayandele—fellow Nigerian poets, many of whom I came up alongside in workshops and literary communities across two continents—debuted their poetry collections that year. But meeting the basic requirement of having published one book means the number of African poets seeking teaching jobs has doubled, adding to the mix of writers from everywhere applying for available assistant professorships. There were only about thirteen jobs as of December last year. Realistically, only a fraction of us would get a dream job during that hiring window. My intention is not to ramp up the anxiety. I am using data to point toward an existing structural problem that migrant writers face, and that will only intensify as more of us, thankfully, publish.



Writers are working in rooms the MFA never thought to send us to.

I applied to teach at Stanford University as a Jones Lecturer, and my application was rejected a couple of weeks after the programme ended. So my hopes fell back on the PhD programmes I had applied to, hoping that might buy me four or five years to write another book. Maybe turn my gaze away from poetry and write a novel as my agent has often suggested? I felt emotionally and physically done with school, but it felt like the only possible option for me if it came. In January of this year, I began to question whether I had conditioned myself to want only a certain thing and had closed myself off to other possibilities. What other possibilities?

But what if the cost is partly a function of how narrow we have allowed the dream to be? I keep returning to this question. The professional monoculture of the MFA-to-academia pipeline—the unspoken understanding that the only legitimate life for a serious writer is one spent inside a university—has given us a single point of failure. When the job market contracts, as it has, there is nowhere else to go, because we were never taught to look. And the things a literary education actually teaches you—close reading, rhetorical precision, the ability to structure complex narratives, the ear for how a sentence sounds and who it sounds like it's talking to—turn out to be worth something in rooms the MFA never thought to send us to. I worked as a content designer for several technology companies, including one where I helped design the voice and personality of an artificial intelligence system—its tone, its ethical guardrails, the way it navigated difficult conversations with users. And what I discovered is that the work required precisely what the MFA trained me to do: precision with language, sensitivity to audience, the ability to hold a reader's attention across an interface the way a poem holds it across a line break. That tolerance for ambiguity that Mullainathan and Shafir describe as the first casualty of scarcity? It is the same tolerance that conversation design demands—the capacity to anticipate how a sentence might land in multiple contexts, to write for the listener you cannot see. If that is not what a poet does, I do not know what is.

I say this with caution, because I do not want to sound as though I have figured out

what I am still, truthfully, figuring out. But I have lived enough of these parallel lives to know that the possibilities are wider than we have been told. Writers are working in communications for nonprofits and international organisations, translating the skills we use to write grants and fellowship applications—persuasion, empathy, the ability to make a case for something you believe in—into development writing, donor relations, and advocacy campaigns. Writers are building careers at content design agencies and UX writing studios, where the ability to write clearly under constraint—which is, after all, what a sonnet teaches you—pays well and leaves the evenings free for the manuscript. Writers are working in games, building narrative worlds and branching storylines that require the same attention to character, pacing, and emotional architecture that a novel demands. And in content strategy and in brand narrative, there are writers helping solve the complex problem of user-agent conversations—how to hold a tone, how to soften a refusal, how to sit with a user's grief without rushing to fix it. There is something beautifully absurd about a Stegner Fellow spending his mornings teaching a chatbot how to apologise, but I can tell you that the chatbot is better for it, and so is the poet, because the problem of tone is the problem of the poem, just wearing different clothes. In Los Angeles, where I now live, the film and television industry pays creative writers more than most professorships ever will, and the adaptation economy—novels into screenplays, stories into limited series—is its own thriving literary culture. I have friends who write by day in writers' rooms and publish poetry by night, and the two practices feed each other in ways the MFA never anticipated.

I recognise that none of this is easy, and I am wary of replacing one pipeline with





another, or of suggesting that the solution to precarity is simply to hustle harder. However, we cannot take out the visa question or the economic precarity of our immigrant lives, mirroring the realities of American late capitalism. The question of whether any of these industries will welcome African writers with the same enthusiasm they show for African stories is also hanging over our heads. But there is a structural dimension to all of this that we rarely discuss, perhaps because it feels too practical for a literary essay, or too bureaucratic for a community that would rather talk about metaphors. The loop I described earlier—MFA to fellowship to PhD to professorship—exists in large part because of the F-1 student visa, which ties our presence in this country to enrollment in an institution. But the F-1 is one path among several that most of us never hear about. The O-1B visa, sometimes called the artist visa, is designed for individuals who have demonstrated distinction in the arts through published work, significant recognition, editorial leadership, or awards. A writer with a book from a respected press, fellowships at Iowa and Stanford, publications in major journals, and editorial work at a literary magazine of significant readership would, in many cases, meet the evidentiary threshold. The O-1B is tied to your work, and it permits you to freelance, to consult, to build a professional life that does not depend on the next admissions cycle. However, an O-1B does not make you a resident.

And beyond the O-1B, there is the EB-1A—the green card category for individuals of extraordinary ability—which I have spent time studying and thinking about because the benchmarks align remarkably well with what many African writers already have by the time they finish their programmes: published books, awards, editorial leadership, significant media coverage, judging roles at literary prizes, and original contributions to the field. I put together a framework for applying for the EB-1A and shared it freely, and it has since been used by several African writers to leverage what they already had—the publications, the prizes, the editorial work they thought of as just part of their life—to gain lawful permanent residency in this country. Understanding the scope early, understanding the benchmarks, and what you need to do while you are still in your programme positions you so that by the time you are done, you are qualified. In all my years in MFA programmes and doctoral seminars, no one mentioned any of this. The literary community invests enormous energy in helping writers build tenure files. Some of that energy could go toward helping writers build immigration cases.

Coming to America, for writers, is a loop

that curves back on itself. And the most glaring question, apart from what I will eat or how I will pay my rent, is: what institution will sponsor your presence in this country next year? Adams, who called to ask the rupturing question, moved across the country to resume the Stegner Fellowship. Ademoroti, who moved to Texas, tells me very often about the incredible people in the University of Houston creative writing program. I, too, received a call from Robin Coste Lewis, the National Book Award-winning poet who is my professor and mentor, and who recruited me into the University of Southern California doctoral program.

But, really, what happens now? What's next?

I am setting this down so that the next writer, when the US finally opens its borders to F-1 students again, knows she is not alone in the uncertainty. A writer's life is an uncertain life. Arriving opens you up to a new node of anxieties. But I am also setting this down because I believe the uncertainty is partly a failure of imagination—ours and the institutions that trained us. We were taught to want one thing, and when that one thing could not hold all of us, we blamed ourselves rather than questioning the narrowness of the dream. Perhaps it's time for African writers to think outside of the MFA-to-academia pathway as the only possible dream one can have. Perhaps it is time for MFA programmes to teach professional diversification alongside workshop craft, to mention the O-1B visa alongside the tenure-track listing, to invite the content strategist, the screenwriter, and the games writer to speak alongside the visiting poet. Perhaps it is time for the African literary community to build infrastructure—mentorship networks, immigration guidance, industry pipelines—that does not depend on the generosity of a single admissions committee in a single year.

> The professional monoculture of the MFA-to-academia pipeline has given us a single point of failure.

I am still inside the uncertainty, and I want to be clear about that. I have some answers, and they have cost me years of anxiety and freelance invoices and mornings spent on job boards when I should have been inside a poem. But they are answers I earned the hard way. The MFA-to-professorship pipeline was never designed with us in mind, and waiting for it to accommodate us is its own kind of tunnelling—the scarcity narrowing the vision



until the only future you can imagine is the one that has already been imagined for you. The wider life is there. I have glimpsed it. I am still walking towards it.

I resumed my doctorate programme last fall. I am still in school, writing, and teaching. I am also thinking, for the first time, about what comes after school that is not more school.

So let me tell you about my new city, Los Angeles. It is sunny. The streets are lined with palm trees, and there is always a dog in sight. It feels like Lagos on some days, it feels like Iowa City on many days, never like Oakland, where I had the time of my life.

> The MFA-to-professorship pipeline was never designed with us in mind.



How do you see Me?

Tolu Daniel

A year ago, I was walking home with a friend I had a severe crush on. We were on the historic Euclid neighborhood of the Central West End of St Louis. It was a rare April afternoon with an extended sunshine and the street was filled with people in shorts and dresses they wouldn't have been able to wear in the days prior. The crush had already expired by the time of that walk, officially at least. We had had a thing for a few weeks before she decided that I was not right for her and went on to date someone else. That context is not entirely necessary, but it hovered over the evening anyway. The more immediate reason for our walk was that she was leaving town for good. Before that, she had just exited a tumultuous relationship, one she chose after whatever it was between us fell apart. For reasons I did not fully understand, she wanted to see me before she left. For the duration of the conversation, I was preoccupied by a single, ungraceful question: what did she want from me, and why did saying goodbye feel necessary now? The larger, quieter truth was that I was still really into her and I tried to hide this. We talked about ordinary things at first: the logistics of departure, and the future as an abstract noun.

Then, without ceremony, the conversation turned. She asked how I thought about the way she moved through the world. How I saw her. It was a strange question, and it caught me off guard. Not because I had never thought about it, but because I had thought about it too much: privately, without language. The question pulled me backward in time, to a period not too long ago, around 2015, when I began making photographs. From then until now, my notion of the image as an object has remained stubbornly consistent, even as my technical abilities have lagged behind my intentions. I am drawn to a particular ideal of portraiture. I like images in which the human, while active, can be both center and decentered. Not a subject posed for inspection, not a body frozen for emphasis, but a person caught amid movement. The human as the axis of the frame and also one element among others, negotiating space rather than dominating it.

When she asked how I saw her, this was what I thought about. Not as answer, but a practice. A way of paying attention that I keep returning to, even though I have not honed it into anything with the semblance of mastery. I thought about the way she sat, the way she walked, the way she smiled without checking who might be watching. The way she dashed in and out of sight, unaware of the eyes that followed her around, mine included. The way she'd angle her head when speaking, as though she was posing for a photo. I thought about what it was about her, that attracted me to her in the first place. How in that year, I was in such pain from the passing of my father, and life felt unnecessary, and useless. And meeting and befriending her dragged

me from that hole of apathy, because suddenly, here was someone I could live for. And though it didn't work between us, it didn't matter.

Up until that point, I had imagined photographing her. But that was precisely the point. Photographing her, in the way I meant it, would require that she not know she was being photographed at all. Not out of deceit, but out of fidelity. Fidelity to a mode of being that existed prior to observation. A way of moving through the world without an awareness of how one is seen. This kind of unselfconscious movement fascinates me because it is so unevenly distributed. Some people move through space as though it belongs to them, or at least as though it is neutral. Others move through it with a constant low-grade alertness, an internal monitoring system attuned to how they might appear, how they might be misread, how their presence might be interpreted as threat, spectacle, or error. As a Black immigrant living in the United States, standing at exactly six feet, I am acutely aware of how people perceive me in both space and time. This awareness is not occasional. It is not something I can choose to switch off. It is ambient and structural. It is learned early and reinforced often. It has shaped not only how I move through the world, but how I look at it. It forms the core of my practice. A practice of self-perception, yes, but also of outward attention. To see, under these conditions, is never neutral. Vision becomes charged with anticipation and memory. You learn to read rooms before entering them. You learn to register glances, pauses, and recalibrations. You become aware not just of being seen, but of being anticipated, pre-read, slotted into narratives that precede you.

Photography, for me, emerged out of this heightened attentiveness. Not as an attempt to master the image, but as an attempt to linger with it. To stay with what is usually passed over. To hold still long enough to notice how bodies inhabit space, how gestures repeat themselves, how meaning accumulates around ordinary movement. Writing, I would later realize, operates under similar conditions. It too, is haunted by a version of that question: How do you see this? Both photography and literature are disciplines of attention. They do not simply record reality. They train the eye and the mind to notice certain things and not others. They teach us what is worth looking at and how long we are allowed to look. They shape not only perception, but memory. What we remember is often what we were taught to see. When my friend asked how I saw her, she was not asking for description alone. She was asking, perhaps unknowingly, about my way of seeing. About the habits of attention that govern what comes into focus for me and what remains peripheral. In trying to answer her, silently at least, I began to understand that my attraction was inseparable from this way of looking. That desire itself is a form of attention, and that attention, when sustained, begins to resemble care.

> Desire itself is a form of attention.

Long before I had language for it, I understood that to look was to risk

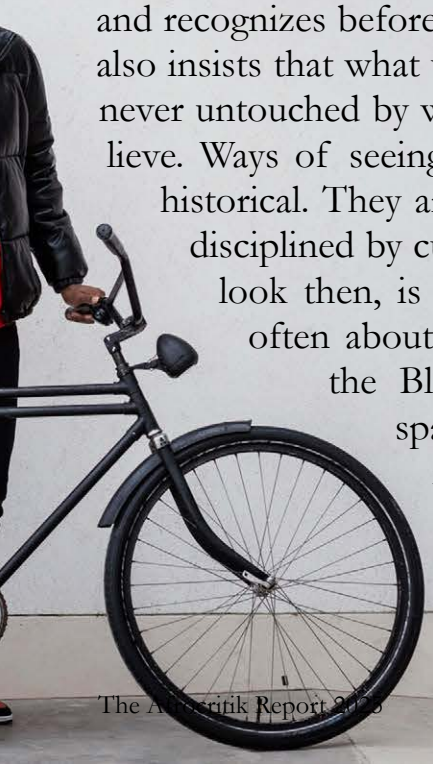


something. Looking too long could be interpreted as aggression. Looking away too quickly could be read as fear. I knew this as an undergraduate student in Ijebu Ode. I have heard women talk about it and I experienced it under the gaze of policemen while living as a young man in Abeokuta. There was a narrow corridor of acceptable attention, and learning to walk it felt like learning a second posture, a way of holding the body that was not quite natural but had become necessary. This is perhaps why photography appealed to me when it did. The camera offered a sanctioned excuse to look. It formalized attention, turned what might otherwise feel intrusive into something purposeful. But even then, I was drawn not to spectacle or drama, but to ordinary motion. I wanted to photograph people doing things, not performing themselves. The image, for me, was never about freezing time so much as about thickening it, allowing a moment to become legible in its density.

> There is a difference between being seen and being watched.

John Berger famously claimed that seeing comes before words, that the child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But he also insists that what we see is never pure, never untouched by what we know or believe. Ways of seeing, Berger argues, are historical. They are learned, inherited, disciplined by culture and power. To look then, is to interpret. I think often about how this applies to the Black body in public space. The problem is not simply that Black people are seen, but that we are seen too quickly, too confidently, as though our meanings are self-evident. The gaze arrives preloaded. Photography has played no small role in this economy of misrecognition, from colonial ethnography to contemporary surveillance. Images of Blackness have been made to stand in for whole narratives, whole arguments, whole fears. And yet, photography also holds the possibility of refusal. A refusal to simplify. A refusal to make the body yield all its meanings at once. The images I am drawn to are those that withhold. Images in which the subject remains partially opaque, engaged in their own world, not oriented toward the viewer's demand for access. The human as center, yes, but not as explanation.

This sensibility is mirrored in the writing I am drawn to. Essays that do not rush to clarify themselves. Sentences that allow for drift, for digression, for moments where meaning is suspended rather than resolved. Writing, like photography, can be an instrument of capture, but it can also be an instrument of care. It can linger without consuming. When Roland Barthes writes about photography, he distinguishes between the studium and the punctum. The studium names the cultural, historical, legible aspects of an image. What we can recognize, categorize, understand. The punctum, on the other hand, is what pierces us. A detail that escapes intention, that wounds us personally, that exceeds the photographer's control. What strikes me now is how often the punctum has to do with inattentiveness. A sleeve slightly rolled, a foot mid-step, a glance directed elsewhere. These are not

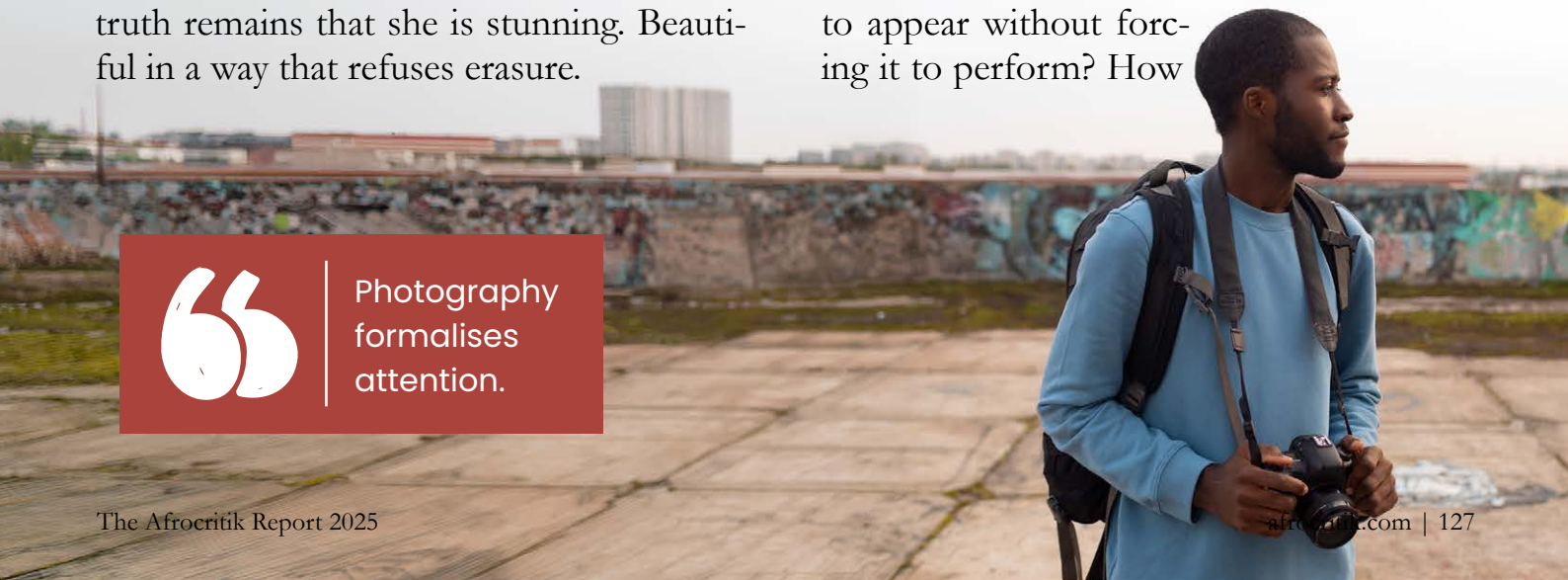


performances. They are accidents of being. They remind us that the subject of the photograph has a life beyond the frame, a continuity we cannot fully access.

This returns me to that walk with my friend. What I was responding to, when she asked how I saw her, was not a catalog of traits or impressions. It was a rhythm. A way of inhabiting space that felt unguarded. Her body did not seem to anticipate correction. She did not appear to be editing herself in advance of judgment. There was a generosity in this, but also a vulnerability. To notice this vulnerability is already to implicate oneself. Attention is not innocent. To look is to enter into a relation, however asymmetrical. This is where the ethics of both photography and writing come into play. Who gets to look? Who is looked at? Under what conditions does looking become a form of possession, and when does it become a form of witness? As a Black man, my awareness of being seen has sharpened my sensitivity to these questions. I am wary of the extractive gaze, the look that takes without giving. At the same time, I know the cost of invisibility. To not be seen at all is another kind of erasure. And yet there are people who are content with being unseen, my friend is one of such people. She was never one for unnecessary attention. She once told me that she wanted to live in a big city, to get lost amid millions of other bodies performing their existence. But the truth remains that she is stunning. Beautiful in a way that refuses erasure.

Writing offers a parallel tension. To write is to make oneself visible, but on negotiated terms. You choose the frame, the distance, the angle. You decide what enters the sentence and what remains just outside it. But once released, the text takes on a life of its own. It will be read through other histories, other desires, other ways of seeing. This is why I resist the idea that writing simply expresses what is already there. Writing, like photography, produces reality even as it records it. It teaches both writer and reader how to look. A sustained engagement with a piece of prose can recalibrate attention, slow it down, redirect it. It can make room for complexity where there was once only assumption. In this sense, the essay becomes a kind of darkroom. A place where impressions are developed slowly, where exposure is carefully measured. Too much light, and the image is washed out. Too little, and nothing emerges. The task is not to eliminate shadow, but to work with it.

The walk with my friend ended, as all walks do, without resolution. We said goodbye. I stood watching her, her back turned to me as she disappeared into the ether. She left town. What remained with me was not the ache of unreciprocated desire, though that was there, but the clarity of the question she asked. How do you see me? It is a question that haunts both photography and writing. How do you see the world, and how do you allow the world to appear without forcing it to perform? How

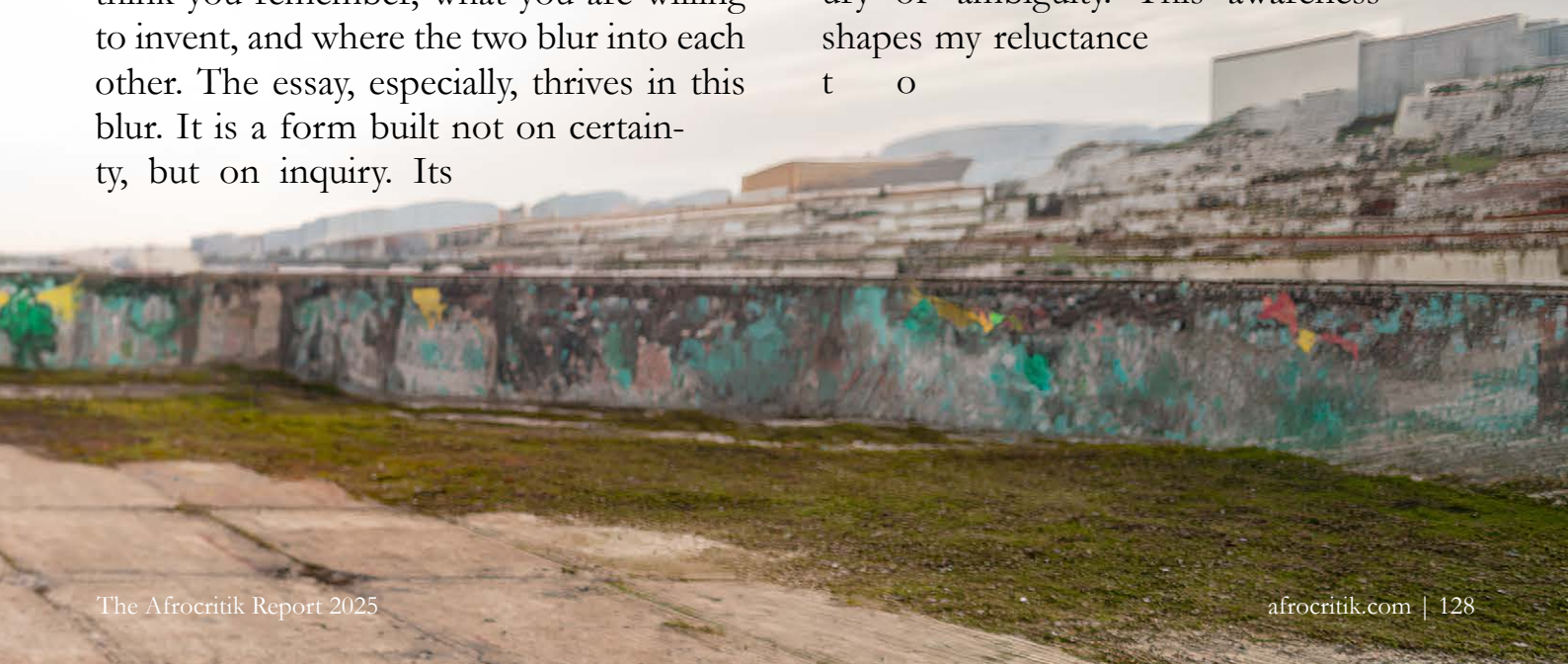


> Photography formalises attention.

do you honor the fact that what you are seeing is always partial, always conditioned, always in motion? Memory does not preserve experience so much as it edits it. What remains is rarely the event in full, but a fragment, a gesture, a color, a sentence overheard and slightly misremembered. In this sense, memory already behaves like an image. It frames, isolates, and repeats. It teaches us what mattered by returning to it, again and again, until it acquires the weight of inevitability. Photography formalizes this tendency. It declares a moment worthy of preservation and, in doing so, alters our relationship to time. The photograph does not simply show us what has been. It insists that what we are looking at has already passed. To look at a photograph is to encounter time as evidence.

There is a temptation to believe that photographing something secures it against loss. But often the opposite is true. The act of photographing can replace the act of remembering. The image becomes a surrogate for attention, standing in for the work of recollection. We look at the photograph instead of revisiting the experience. Memory is outsourced. Writing resists this substitution, at least when done slowly. To write from memory is to confront its instability. You are forced to decide what you think you remember, what you are willing to invent, and where the two blur into each other. The essay, especially, thrives in this blur. It is a form built not on certainty, but on inquiry. Its authority comes from sustained attention. This is why the essay has always felt, to me, like a moral form. Not moral in the sense of instruction or judgment, but moral in its insistence on care. To write an essay is to say: this deserves time. This deserves to be thought about again, from another angle, and then another. It is an act of patience in a culture that rewards immediacy.

For someone whose life has been shaped by hypervisibility, patience can feel radical. To refuse the quick read, the instant legibility, is to reclaim a measure of agency. In both photography and writing, I am drawn to moments that resist summary. Moments that do not announce their significance. Moments that ask the viewer or reader to meet them halfway. The archive complicates this further. Photographs and texts do not simply endure. They are stored, retrieved, misfiled, forgotten, rediscovered. What survives is often less a function of merit than of infrastructure. Who had access to preservation? Whose work was deemed worth keeping? Whose images were circulated, and whose were allowed to disappear? As a Black writer, I am conscious of how uneven this archive is. Of how many lives have been documented only as data, as evidence, as spectacle. Of how rarely Black interiority has been granted the luxury of ambiguity. This awareness shapes my reluctance t o



overexplain, to resolve, to make the image or sentence do too much work at once.

There is also the question of the future reader, the future viewer. Every photograph and every piece of writing anticipates someone who is not yet there. Someone who will encounter the work without the benefit of the original context. This imagined audience exerts pressure on the frame. Do you clarify for them? Do you protect them from confusion? Or do you trust them to linger, to sit with uncertainty? When I imagine someone reading this essay years from now, I wonder what they will see. Will they see a man nursing a quiet heartbreak? Will they see a meditation on race and perception? Will they see a theory of art smuggled in through anecdote? Or will they see something else entirely, something I cannot anticipate? This is the risk inherent in both photography and writing. Once released, the work no longer belongs to the maker alone. It enters other ways of seeing. It will be read through other lives. The best one can hope for, perhaps, is not that it be understood correctly, but that it be attended to with care.

> Attention, when sustained long enough, begins to resemble care.

In this sense, the photograph I never took and the sentences I am writing now perform a similar labor. They are attempts to honor a way of seeing without exhausting it. To acknowledge that attention itself is shaped by history, by desire, by fear, and by love. And that what we choose to frame, and how we choose to frame it, reveals as much about us as it does about the world. There is a difference between being seen and being watched, though the two are often confused. To be seen suggests recognition, perhaps even care. To be watched implies assessment, risk, a ledger quietly filling up. For many Black bodies, visibility has rarely arrived without its twin, surveillance. The gaze does not simply fall on us. It tracks, measures, and predicts. This distinction matters because photography has long occupied an uneasy position between seeing and watching. The camera can be a tool of witness, but it has also been a mechanism of control. From the mugshot to the passport photo, from plantation records to contemporary facial recognition systems, the image has often been enlisted to stabilize identity in ways that serve power. To photograph, in these contexts, is not to attend but to inventory. Writing, too, has its bureaucratic forms. Files, reports, case notes, and statements. Language that does not seek understanding but compliance. Language that reduces the human to what can be processed. Against this backdrop, the artistic impulse to look slowly and to write carefully takes on a political charge, whether or not it announces itself as such.

I became aware of this tension most acutely as my photographic interests matured. The more I understood the history of the medium, the more cautious I became about the act of taking images. Who benefits from this image existing? Who is rendered vulnerable by its circulation? What kinds of futures does it enable, and what kinds does it foreclose? These questions have no stable answers, but they make the act of framing feel consequential rather than casual. To raise a camera is to intervene in the world, however lightly. To write a sentence is to do the same. Authorship, in this sense, is not ownership but responsibility. There is a temptation, especially in an image-saturated culture, to treat visibility as an un-

qualified good. To be seen, we are told, is to exist. To be invisible is to be erased. But this logic ignores the asymmetries of power that govern how visibility operates. Some forms of visibility protect. Others expose. Some confer legitimacy. Others invite harm.

I return here to the way my friend moved through the world, the ease with which she occupied space. Her unawareness was not ignorance but insulation. A social buffering that allowed her to act without constantly rehearsing how she might be perceived. Watching her leave, I felt both admiration and a kind of grief. Not for myself alone, but for the labor of self-monitoring that had become so habitual I rarely named it. That labor is not only physical. It extends into narrative. African writers are often asked to explain, contextualize, translate. To make their experiences legible to an imagined default reader. This demand mirrors the photographic expectation that the image should tell us what it means immediately, without resistance. And yet, some of the most compelling work refuses this contract. It insists on opacity. Photography that honors opacity does not aim to decode its subject. Writing that honors opacity does not rush toward thesis or revelation. Instead, both cultivate conditions under which complexity can breathe. They trust the viewer or reader to remain present without demanding resolution.

> What we remember is often what we were taught to see.

To insist on slowness, then, is to push back against the logic of surveillance. Surveillance thrives on quick categorization. It requires the reduction of the person to a pattern. Art, at its best, interrupts this reduction. It introduces friction. It complicates the line of sight. I think of writing now as a way of reclaiming my own image. Not in the narcissistic sense, but in the ethical one. To write is to choose how and when I appear. To photograph, when I do, is to practice a form of looking that I wish had been extended to me more often. A look that does not assume it already knows what it sees. This does not mean abandoning critique or refusing clarity altogether. It means recognizing that clarity has a cost, and that cost is not evenly distributed. The question is not whether to be seen, but how. Under what conditions. At what pace.

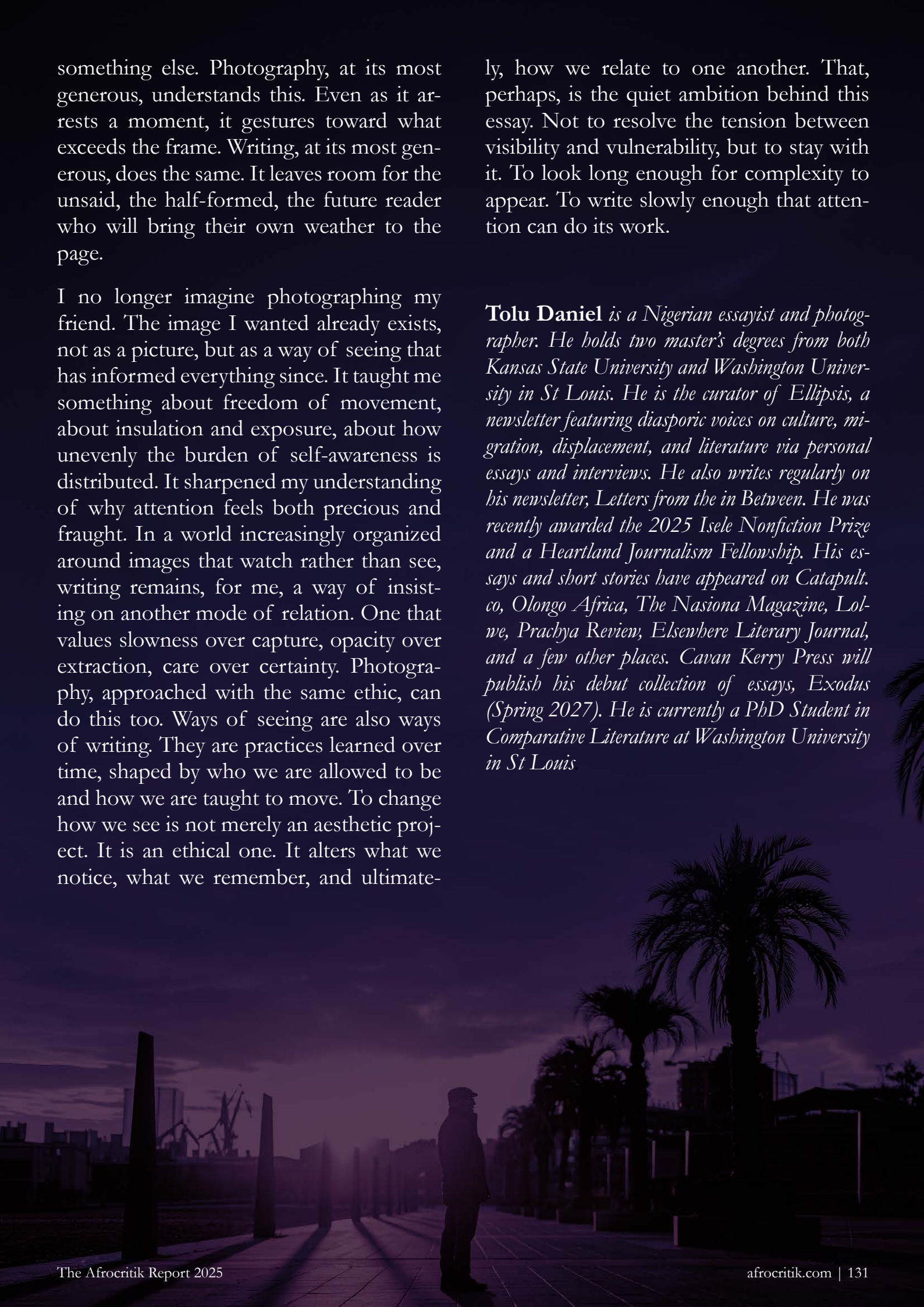
In the end, what binds photography and writing for me is not representation, but care. This is perhaps why that walk with my friend continues to matter to me. Not because of what did not happen between us, but because of the way the question she asked clarified something I had been circling for years. How do you see me? It is a question that belongs as much to intimacy as it does to art. To answer it honestly requires more than description. It requires an account of one's habits of attention. To see someone, really see them, is not to fix them in place. It is to allow for movement, for contradiction, for the fact that they are always becoming



something else. Photography, at its most generous, understands this. Even as it arrests a moment, it gestures toward what exceeds the frame. Writing, at its most generous, does the same. It leaves room for the unsaid, the half-formed, the future reader who will bring their own weather to the page.

I no longer imagine photographing my friend. The image I wanted already exists, not as a picture, but as a way of seeing that has informed everything since. It taught me something about freedom of movement, about insulation and exposure, about how unevenly the burden of self-awareness is distributed. It sharpened my understanding of why attention feels both precious and fraught. In a world increasingly organized around images that watch rather than see, writing remains, for me, a way of insisting on another mode of relation. One that values slowness over capture, opacity over extraction, care over certainty. Photography, approached with the same ethic, can do this too. Ways of seeing are also ways of writing. They are practices learned over time, shaped by who we are allowed to be and how we are taught to move. To change how we see is not merely an aesthetic project. It is an ethical one. It alters what we notice, what we remember, and ultimately, how we relate to one another. That, perhaps, is the quiet ambition behind this essay. Not to resolve the tension between visibility and vulnerability, but to stay with it. To look long enough for complexity to appear. To write slowly enough that attention can do its work.

Tolu Daniel *is a Nigerian essayist and photographer. He holds two master's degrees from both Kansas State University and Washington University in St Louis. He is the curator of Ellipsis, a newsletter featuring diasporic voices on culture, migration, displacement, and literature via personal essays and interviews. He also writes regularly on his newsletter, Letters from the in Between. He was recently awarded the 2025 Isele Nonfiction Prize and a Heartland Journalism Fellowship. His essays and short stories have appeared on Catapult.co, Olongo Africa, The Nasiona Magazine, Lolwe, Prachya Review, Elsewhere Literary Journal, and a few other places. Cavan Kerry Press will publish his debut collection of essays, Exodus (Spring 2027). He is currently a PhD Student in Comparative Literature at Washington University in St Louis*





Cosmo 105.5 FM and the Case for an Innovative Public Broadcaster for Nigeria

By Olivia Ndubuisi

Malaika Bowei was going to be a Doctor. When she scored 167 in her first JAMB, her first reaction was shock. She had never failed anything in school before. Determined, the straight A student wrote a second JAMB and scored 168. This medicine dream was not happening. She began to negotiate.

How about Microbiology? She didn't get in.

Biochemistry? No luck.

Nursing, surely? Nothing.

One day, Malaika was sitting on the steps outside the apartment in New Haven, Enugu, where her family lived in Flat Three, when the person who lived in Flat Six, a radio presenter called Finnesse, stopped and asked her if she was interested in a receptionist position in a newish radio station just off Otigba roundabout, Lower Chime.

She said yes.

On the day of her interview, she first met Wanita, host of the morning show, Hakuna Matata. Wanita was casually slouching on the desk and she, Malaika, was sitting on a chair while they chatted about all sorts.

"Okay, take care," Wanita said at the end.

"Yes, thanks," Malaika replied.

Now if they could just get to the interview?

But that was the interview. And because Wanita's assessment was positive, Malaika could go on to meet the man who was head of station, a man called Jika Attoh, a stocky bespectacled Onitsha man who spoke very good English and smiled easily and who everyone called Bossman.

More chitchatting and two weeks later, she resumed her role as the receptionist at Cosmo 105.5 FM.

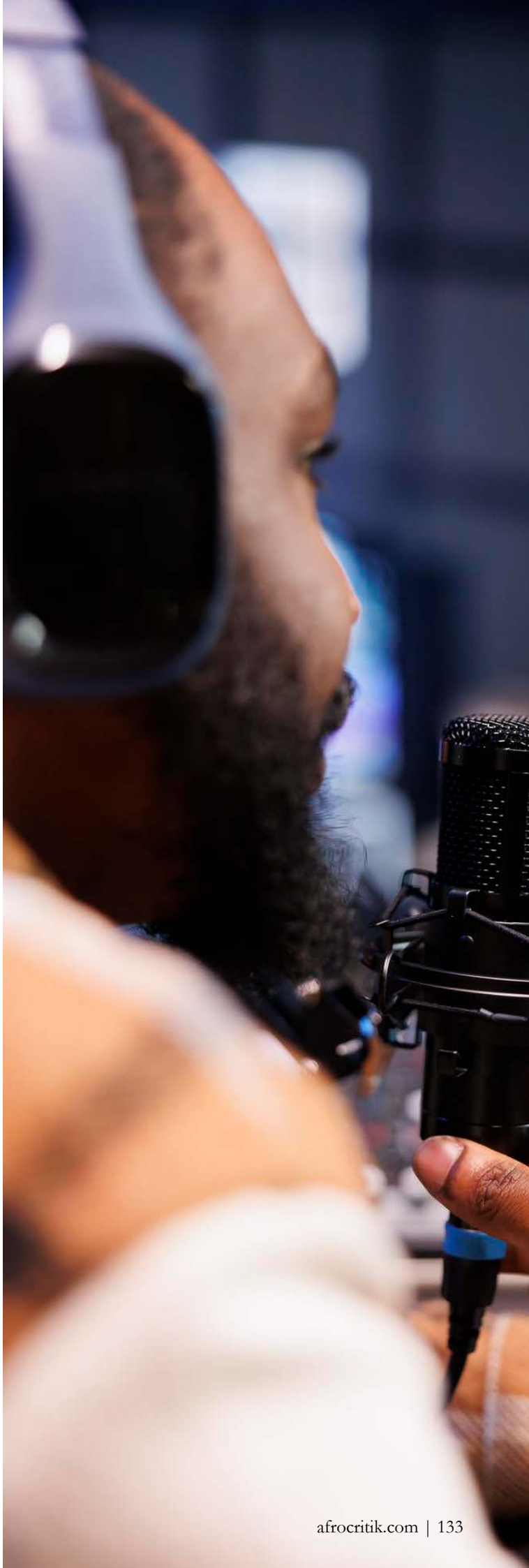
So, instead of a career in clinical medicine, an unexpected one began, one which changed the trajectory of her entire life. The year was 2005, and Chimaroke Nnamani was the Governor.

At the time, she had no idea what she was a part of making or what impact was possible. But as she rose through the ranks, becoming a producer in two years, taking Bossman's suggestion to get a Mass Communications degree within the city at the Institute of Management Technology (IMT), Cosmo FM's reach and adoption exploded. It was the first private radio station in the region, the first one to have 24hr programming. Suddenly, the state broadcaster, ESBS and the federal corporation's local Radio Nigeria branch, which closed with the national anthem at 9pm daily, modified their programing to stay on till midnight.

Bossman allowed Malaika to take the midnight production shift. This was the only way she could afford to pay for school. Decades before automated systems or streaming, her job each night was to download songs, edit them, burn them into CDs, and update the music library.

Until she resumed work one midnight and saw Bossman packing up.

"What's going on?" She asked.



The EFCC was at the station earlier. They said Bossman had to leave because they were confiscating property belonging to the former governor and had taken over the station.

That night, a few of the presenters went on a walk together. Bossman, Wanita, Malaika and Falcon.

They were all agreed, if Bossman was leaving, they were as well.

The year was 2007, and Sullivan Chime was the Governor.

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There are nearly 700 comments under the latest social media post to ask a variation of the question, "What do you remember about Cosmo FM?" It happens periodically. Someone mentions something they remember and a flood of others join in. Soon, people are typing word for word any of the station's promos and identifiers.

This happens too regularly for a station that has been off air for nearly 20 years.

Lean On Me was my favorite programme… I can never forget… I wish they'll come back… I got all my news from there… My heart was broken when they vanished… I bought a small radio then, I used to take it to school because of that radio station…

So how do you build an unforgettable radio station? You begin with a vision, first. For a product to meet the most basic media needs of an audience, you get a team of powerhouse presenters manning round-the-clock programming that addresses every need, no matter how niche. Then, you find a brilliant Bossman to be present and hands-on enough to ensure idea and team progressed. Malaika says Cosmo had it all.

Which is why when it went off air, an entire region and its environs lost their access to both high quality journalism and a media product very much ahead of its time.

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Successful media products, like Cosmo FM can achieve a lot for Nigeria's over 230 million people today. It can fill the desperate





need for a unifying cultural destination for its enormously diverse population; provide a place for the ideas and achievements and possibilities of the Nigerian to be represented and celebrated and exported; promote increasingly necessary messaging; but perhaps most importantly, be an affordable destination for quality, trusted journalism.

Nigerians often say they don't have many grandiose needs. Don't put a man in space, for example. Don't do anything too ambitious; just provide the basics: education, electricity, and if you're being ambitious, free and fair elections. The same is true of the country's means of distributing information.

A public broadcaster for Nigeria first needs to exist. Then, it can be made better. If it does exist, is it offering audiences any services meeting any of their ever expanding needs? Do they inform, update, offer perspective, hold power to account? Are there any services or programmes worthy of sustained, decades long fandom? And in today's digital-first era, are there any offerings or programmes there that audiences would spend their hard-earned data on?

Widespread internet use in big cities like Lagos and Abuja, where many can consume media and journalism digital-first, hides realities that are in fact, stark. Like multidimensional poverty.

The World Bank's definition of multidimensional poverty captures a more complete picture of poverty beyond just the monetary kind. It takes into account how much of the population are also deprived of basic infrastructure like education and electricity.

This matters for media in Nigeria, particularly because more than half of its population live in multidimensional poverty. 133 million people in all; 86 million in the North.

That's the population of the country deprived of the means to be digital-first consumers of media because they can neither afford it nor have access to other infrastructure, like education etc., to make sense of it.

Put another way, the number of Nigerians living in multidimensional poverty is greater than the populations of Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Togo

combined, with people left over. Should a national broadcaster exist which makes media and journalism for them? Absolutely.

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Falcon started at Cosmo as the Enugu State University of Technology (ESUT) correspondent for the Saturday morning program, Off Campus. She said it felt like walking into a battalion where everybody knew exactly what they were doing. It was there she learnt what it meant to actually do radio work and build programmes from scratch that appealed to primary, secondary and tertiary audiences. She has worked in production since, including as producer for the critically acclaimed C.J. Obasi film, Mami Wata (2023).

In one of her favorite memories of being at Cosmo, a listener visited the station who listened from Jos, 577 kilometers away from Enugu. The man said he came to visit Enugu but decided he must find the station and see for himself the human beings who had redefined what he thought was possible of a radio station.

But no one who worked in programming in Cosmo came fully made. They joined the team contracting the ambition from the top, then were trained and retrained until they shone.



Radio remains the cheapest way to reach rural audiences in Nigeria.

The station was in Enugu, a university town which attracted young people from across the country. It couldn't survive without relatability and programming targeting the upwardly mobile. Relatability was also one half of what informed Bossman's insistence on presenters using just one, ethnically unidentifiable name on air.

Getting ahead of the audience and removing from them any potential to spoil a good work with bigotry or tribalism which can be prevalent in Nigeria was the other. No one was considered worthier than the other because of where they came from.

Falcon came to the city and station as Adaugo.

"Bossman asked me, what would be your name for work?"

"Adaugo, so shortform it to Ugo, an eagle?" Adaugo thought it was too masculine.

"What about Falcon? Does Falcon work?" Adaugo agreed.

"I've been Falcon ever since. In all my work, professional credits, Falcon, and it was him, Bossman who named me."

***

To build for itself an unforgettable public broadcaster, a country must first consider the needs of the audience as deserving of being filled. Or at the very least, reckon with the danger of leaving millions of local people underserved.

When such a gap exists, sometimes others step in. But there are risks. Viral comic videos about international media depiction of Nigeria or the wider African continent often mean that, sometimes, audiences don't see themselves in the treatment of stories, or that those with the power to tell it are lacking context that local people recognise. This isn't ideal but is the safer consequence.

What is truly dangerous are the ways the vacuum can be and is being filled. By weaponised disinformation spreading unchal-

lenged, sometimes interfering with democratic systems, leading to audiences who live in the same country but in parallel realities. Urban and rural audiences believing opposite things and delivering a continued incentive for those in power to benefit from a fractured and divided population base unsure of what is true and what isn't.



When trusted journalism disappears, something else fills the vacuum.

A Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford Report summarises on this vacuum, or what it called "news deserts", that, "across many regions, traditional national outlets, headquartered in capital cities, have become either unwilling or unable to serve remote and underserved communities."

Radio, in this its 93rd year in Nigeria, remains the cheapest way to reach rural audiences and an innovative national broadcaster is the cheapest vehicle to achieve this aim.

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In 2013, Sullivan Chime decided he had had enough of the state public radio and TV. ETV Channel 50 and Sunrise 96.1 FM weren't working. He was governor and could do something about it. So, he called Bossman who had, since Cosmo FM, gone to set up and run Blaze FM for Anambra billionaire businessman, Sir Emeka Offor. The Governor asked him to do for the public broadcaster what he did at Cosmo FM.

And for the third time, Bossman assembled the team, and Malaika, Falcon and Wanita returned.

Wanita was in Lagos, working at Smooth FM when she got the call. She packed up, left Lagos and moved back to Enugu. Wanita said Bossman only had to ask. "All he needed to say to me was. Come, there's work to be done. Because first and foremost, I knew I would learn. I knew I would be better for it, I knew I would enjoy my work, and I knew it was going to be a challenge again."

To pull what was a civil service station into a modern competitive one, they first turned off the transmitters and overhauled programming. When it was turned back on, it was a whole new station. All new sweepers, station identity, presenters, and programming. After about a year, the two backwater channels could no longer recognise themselves.

Transforming media products had become a skill this team had. Done in different versions, three times. It's why Wanita is impatient with today's options or the lack therof.

When I said to her, "We had Radio Nigeria…"

"Would you listen to it?" She fired back.

I couldn't, even if I wanted to. You couldn't stream Radio Nigeria from within or outside Nigeria. It was serving no need for anyone. And then, she told me another Cosmo FM story.

The first night she presented the late-night programme, Lean On Me. A girl called in who was going to take her own life. They got into a chat on air and Wanita managed to talk her down. Then, she grabbed a colleague and went to find her. The girl became a friend of the programme and they checked in with her periodically. Once she got the opportunity to talk to anyone else feeling the same way she was that first night.

"I got off the show that night and cried and cried because there was so much pain in the world. Imagine people out there who just wanted someone to just listen, and then, Cosmo came and gave them an entire belt. So, it was literally a case of our programming helping people reprogram."

So what does Nigeria lose in the absence of an innovative public broadcaster? It is missing out on the chance to build community, to engage with generation after generation and show a media's capacity to be more than just a regular means of communication.

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Conversations about the place of radio in today's digital-first news environment are not new. All kinds of things were going to take the place of, and retire radio as a form. The Walkman, the iPod, streaming, digital media, AI.

Innovations like these have affected, sometimes modified the way radio is consumed. None has retired it yet. Not in more developed media markets, and certainly not in developing ones like Nigeria.

In 2027, BBC Hausa, the BBC's longest running African language service will be 70. Its over 20 million weekly listeners are able to access its media services online but continuously through daily radio broadcasts.

When bad actors turn off the internet, the BBC makes short wave radio fit for those areas so that both local and international audiences have continued access to trusted journalism. In this way, a public broadcaster being able to do its work fully in its home country, and still possessing the capacity to play such a vital role for others abroad, shows the behaviour of an experienced in-



novative public broadcaster. The gains are clear for the receiving country and enormous for the country providing it. Nigeria is a receiving country at the moment, but it can acquire the soft power of being the one that provides this service for itself and others.

Like Cosmo and the BBC, it can be run independently by visionary professionals but funded creatively so that, unlike even the BBC, it is not perpetually negotiating and defending the existence of its world service before successive governments; and unlike the much beloved Cosmo FM, it does not, one day, just disappear into thin air.

***

I sat at the back during the meeting and watched the place fill up. We were in the basement which doubled as the TV recording studio for the state broadcaster. A huge space, recording equipment hung from the ceiling and decommissioned ones were packed off at a corner. Some lights were turned on for the meeting. I was a line producer for the TV, breakfast show producer for the radio.

It was 2015 in Enugu, and Ifeanyi Ugwuanyi was the governor.

There had been rumors about incoming changes. So, most people were here. At the meeting, we heard it was true.

We were told the governor wanted both the radio and TV returned to the government. No more private management, no more modern programming. He said he needed the public broadcaster to become a "government service station." The man who would lead this was a career civil servant who had retired and was now unretired. One of his first moves, naturally, a rejigging of programming, refocusing them to be pro-government.

Some of the cancelled programmes were resurrected. DCA was returned. Duty Continuity Announcing, an ancient practice of

> Cosmo gave people an entire belt to lean on.



live back-announcing and pre-selling incoming programs. He said he was gunning for the "sound of the old state broadcaster."

He achieved it.

The presenters who did not leave before left after the meeting.

At the end, what was the foundation set by one governor with the vision for competitive broadcasting with Cosmo FM, a display of what was possible, solidified by a second governor who enabled the complete revamping of the state broadcaster, was ultimately undone by a third governor who displayed no understanding of what an innovative media can do for a society.

Again, Wanita, Falcon left the station and moved back to Lagos.

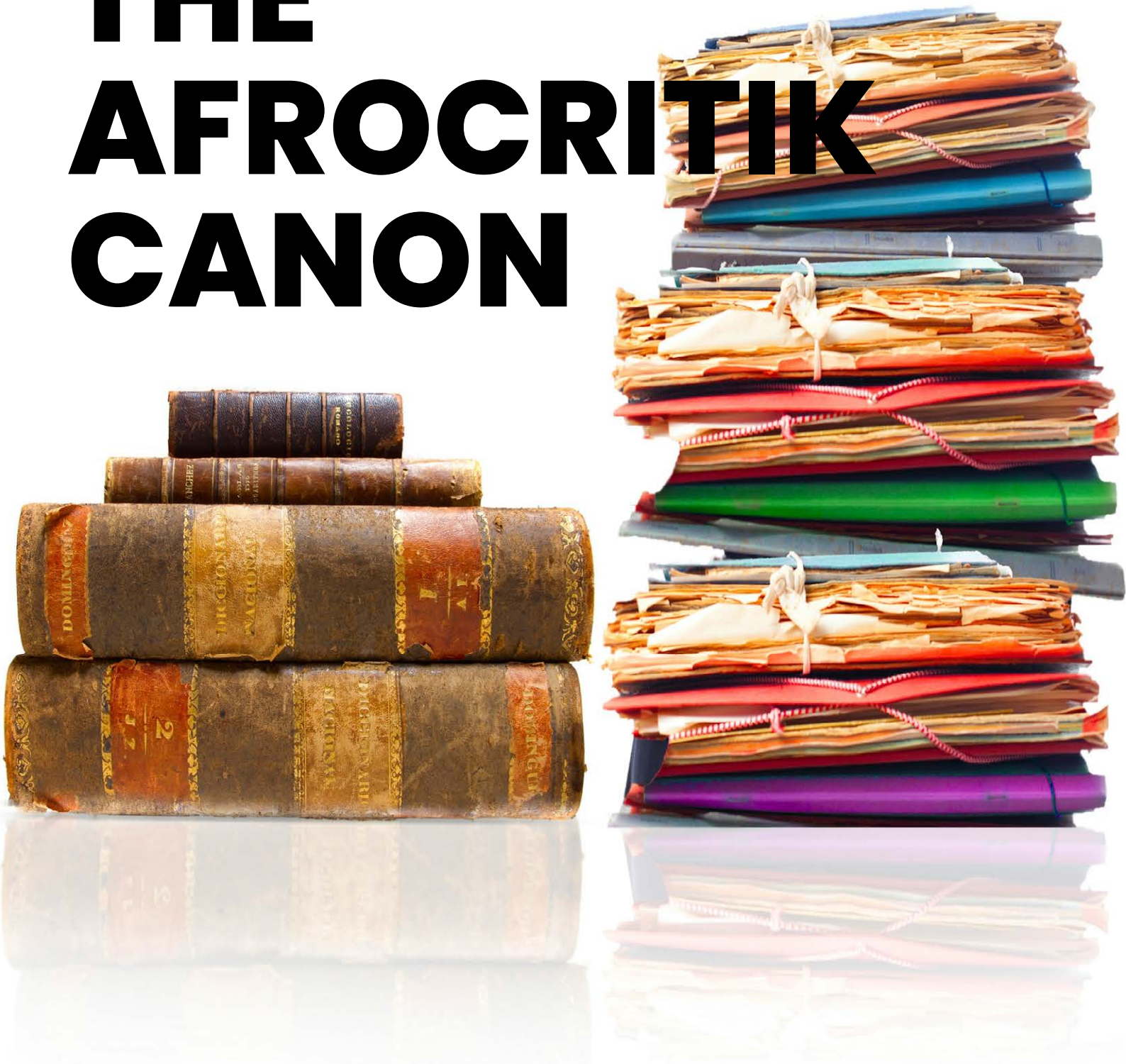
Olivia Ndubuisi *is the 2025 Joan Konner Journalism of Ideas Fellow. An Arthur J. Harris Memorial Prize Winner, she has an MA in Science, Narrative Medicine and Politics Journalism from Columbia University. She was a Senior Broadcast Journalist at BBC News World Service with the Planning and Commissioning team. Her work while there led to the commissioning of Audible's podcast of the year and Best Family podcast, Dear Daughter. Her career started in a local Newspaper in Asaba, but it was in Enugu with the team Jika Attoh put together that it took shape.*

> What Nigeria loses without an innovative public broadcaster is the chance to build a shared national conversation.



SECTION V

THE AFROCRITIK CANON



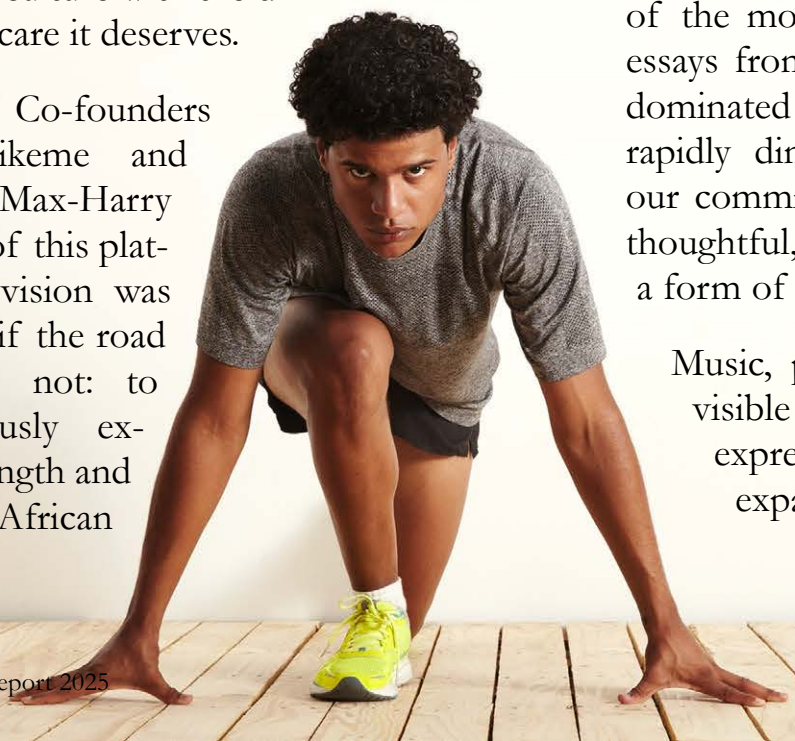
Afrocritik Canon:

The Essential Works of Afrocritik in Five Years

By Abioye Damilare Samson

It feels surreal that it has been exactly five years since Afrocritik launched. What began as a promising media platform with a clear but ambitious vision has grown into an institution that captures and contextualises the great African art renaissance unfolding across all sectors, with an unrelenting commitment to honest, empathetic storytelling, thorough reportage, and in-depth cultural criticism.

Half a decade in the field, and we stand stronger and more purposeful than ever, and in these years, we have weathered the volatility of an industry in constant flux, held the line against the pressure to chase trends at the expense of depth, and continued to show up for African culture with the diligence and care it deserves.



When our Co-founders Samson Jikeme and Owanate Max-Harry conceived of this platform, the vision was clear, even if the road ahead was not: to conscientiously explore the length and breadth of African and Black culture, to stir up conversations about people of colour globally, and to do all of this with the intellectual honesty and editorial rigour that African arts has long deserved but rarely received. To project Africa—not as a monolith, but through the sharp, native eyes of those who live it. In five years, that vision has not wavered. If anything, it has deepened.

Building the Archive: Our End-of-Year Lists

One of the most visible and enduring ways we have served African culture is through our annual end-of-year editorial lists. This is a tradition that has grown, year after year, into one of the most anticipated reckonings with African creativity across disciplines.

Our Annual List of Notable Essays launched in 2023 as "18 Notable Essays from Nigeria"—a focused and intentional curation that served as proof that the essay form in Nigeria was alive, thriving, and worthy of documentation. By 2024, we expanded it to "50 Notable Essays from Africa", in order to accommodate some of the most compelling and incisive essays from our continent. In an era dominated by short-form content and rapidly diminishing attention spans, our commitment to the essay—long, thoughtful, and substantive—is itself a form of cultural resistance.

Music, perhaps the most globally visible arm of African creative expression, has received equally expansive treatment. Our "Top

African Music Projects" list has grown from 25 to 50, and our "Top African Songs" list from 50 to 100, together forming one of the most comprehensive year-end documents of the continent's sonic output.

Film and literature have received their due as well. Our "Remarkable African Films" list—introduced at 25 feature films and now expanded to two lists of 30 feature films and 20 short films—ensures that African cinema, from mega-budget productions to modest independent films made against all odds, is held to a shared standard of excellence. Our "50 Remarkable African Short Stories" list acknowledges a form that African writers have long excelled in but that rarely receives the institutional recognition it deserves. And beyond the arts, we have extended our curatorial reach to sports with our "Top 25 Sports Personalities", initially introduced as "Top 20 African Athletes", because sports is culture too, and Africans who compete at the highest levels of global athletics deserve the same careful, nuanced appraisal that we give to our musicians and filmmakers.

But our end-of-year and new-year editorial work has never been purely retrospective. Each year, we also turn our ears across the continent to uncover its most promising emerging voices in our "Emerging African Artistes" features—an annual ritual and a deliberate commitment to championing talent from every corner of Africa, particularly those standing at the cusp of something transcendental. This is one of the features we are most proud of, because it is an act of faith in what African music is becoming.

We complement this with our "Predictions for Africa's Music Landscape", a feature in which we speculate and, most importantly, rigorously interrogate, by exploring the trends of the year past and searching for patterns that could illuminate the year ahead. In a bid to anchor our insights in real industry knowledge, we also speak directly to those who sit at the heart of the African music ecosystem: music executives, stakeholders, journalists, and critics from across the continent. This is one of the few features of its kind on the continent, and it has become essential reading for anyone who wants to understand not just where African music has been, but where it is going.

We extend the same forward-looking rigour to film with our annual "What Trends Will Drive Africa's Film Industry?" feature, a considered examination of the forces, themes, and movements shaping African cinema in the year ahead. Together, these features reflect something important about who we are: a platform that chronicles culture after the fact, and more importantly, actively participates in shaping the conversation about its future.

The Afrocritik Prize for Criticism

Perhaps no initiative better encapsulates what we stand for than the Afrocritik Prize for Criticism, which we launched in 2024. In a media environment that rewards speed over depth and virality over thoughtfulness, the Prize is our deliberate, principled act of counter-programming, because we believe that criticism is a craft, and that the craft deserves to be nurtured, rewarded, and taken seriously.

The inaugural edition, aimed at fostering critical cultural discourse in African literature, invited participants to review works by contemporary West African writers. The jury comprised Nigerian writers Adedayo

Agarau and Joshua Chizoma, alongside Kenyan writers Gloria Mwaniga Odary and Peter Ngila Njeri, ensuring that the Prize's integrity rested on the broader African literary community.

Evidence Egwuono Adjarho emerged as the winner for her review of three selected works by African writers, receiving a cash prize of $300. Olúwatúnmise Otolórìn Akìgbógun finished in second place with $200, and Daniella Oluwatomisin Kolade in third with $100. It is a model that speaks to everything we have always been: rigorous, pan-African, and deeply invested in the future of criticism as a living, necessary practice.

From the Festival Floor: Bearing Witness to African Cinema

We have never been content to cover African culture from a distance. Our festival coverage—spanning both international stages and homegrown celebrations—has placed us at the very heart of the global conversation about African film.

On the international circuit, we have reported from some of the most prestigious film festivals in the world, including the Sundance Film Festival, the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF), the BFI London Film Festival, the Blackstar Film Festival, and the African Diaspora International Film Festival (ADIFF) in New York. In these rooms where global cinema is shaped, we have ensured that the African perspective is present and heard in key conversations held internationally.

Closer to home, we have documented the growing and increasingly vibrant landscape of African film festivals: the Africa International Film Festival (AFRIFF), the S16 Film Festival, The Annual Film Mischief (TAFM), the iREP International Documentary Film Festival, the Eastern Nigeria International Film Festival, the Abuja International Film Festival, and the TSWA Film Festival. This dual commitment, to the global stage and the local scene, reflects our understanding that African cinema's story is not told only in Cannes or Toronto or the United States. It is told, too, in Lagos, Enugu and Abuja, in the festivals building the infrastructure for the next generation



of African filmmakers, brick by brick.

The Full Breadth of Our Coverage

Behind every list, every prize, every festival dispatch, lies the daily work that is harder to quantify but perhaps more consequential: the reviews, the critical essays, the interviews, the cultural commentaries that have, piece by piece, built one of the most substantive archives of African creative thought anywhere online.

We have reviewed albums with the seriousness usually reserved for literary fiction. We have interrogated films as cultural documents that say something true—or false, or complicated—about the societies that produced them. Our literary coverage has spotlighted works from across the continent and the diaspora, refusing the narrow geography that often passes for "African literature" in the Western imagination. We have profiled artists, musicians, writers, poets, filmmakers, directors, and athletes whose stories would otherwise have gone unheard, because the people who shape African culture deserve to have their full story documented and preserved on the record.

Through Afrocritik Spaces, our weekly live podcast on X, we have made intellectual engagement accessible and participatory, creating a community of listeners who do not merely consume culture commentary but actively debate and shape it. It is no coincidence that one of our website's headlines reads: "Don't just stan the artist, understand the art."

Our newsletter has extended that community further, delivering a curated weekly digest of reviews, features, and recommendations that has become essential reading for those who consume African art and participate in African culture.

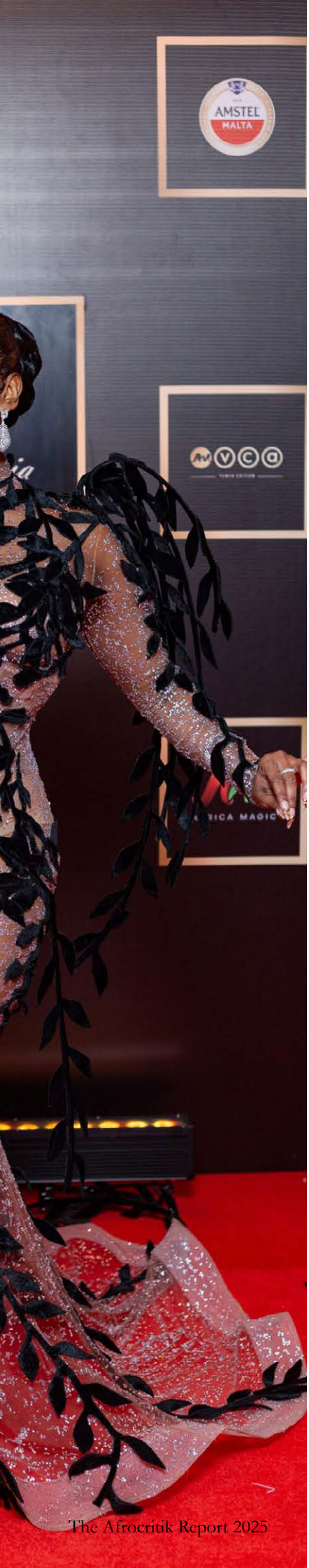
The Timeless and Pivotal Stories We Told

Across five years and every discipline we cover, some pieces have stood out as important journalism and as essential documents of this moment in African culture. They are the marquee essays, features, interviews, and criticisms that best capture what we have always been about and what we intend to keep doing.

Our culture coverage has always gone where mainstream media rarely ventures, into the intimate, the contested, and the ancestral. One of our standout culture pieces,



Source: www.bellanaija.com



a thought-provoking piece titled "Are African Women Doing Away with the Conservatism Behind Pregnancy Concealing?" examined the deeply personal but significant shift in how African women are reclaiming bodily autonomy and rewriting the terms of pregnancy visibility. "Ogbanje or Abiku Phenomenon: An African Spirit-Child Myth or the Enigma of Modern Health Struggles?" traced the myth of the Ogbanje and Abiku across African cultures, mapping its literary, spiritual, and medical dimensions and asking what it means when ancient belief systems collide with modern health discourse. And "What Being Disabled Taught Me About Nigerians" offered a searingly personal reflection on conditional empathy and the way Nigerian society navigates—and too often fails—those living with invisible disability.

Our music coverage has consistently resisted the temptation to treat Afrobeats as a monolith. This deeply researched essay titled "How Fuji Music Influences the Modern Afro-Pop Soundscape" made the case for Fuji's enduring fingerprints on contemporary Nigerian Pop, a reclamation of a genre too often overlooked in conversations about where the sound came from. Equally compelling was our feature, "Six Sub-Genres Expanding the Diversity of Afrobeats," which offered one of the most thorough structural breakdowns of Afrobeats as a layered ecosystem, mapping the sounds that exist beneath and beyond the mainstream.

As a publication that is always attuned to the culture and the pulse of the moment, we noticed the rise of the Mara sound—characterised by dense, polyrhythmic percussion and kicks that typically range between 140 + BPM—and so, "Mara: What to Know About the Viral Hyper-Fast and Energetic Sound" charted the rise of a street-rooted sub-genre from underground dance culture to TikTok phenomenon in real time. Across the continent, "Bongo Flava: The Evolution of East Africa's Soundtrack" traced how Tanzania's most beloved genre grew from Swahili adaptations of American Hip-Hop and R&B in the 1990s into a regional and international force, while "East Africa's Altè Movement: A New Era of Hybrid Sound" explored how East African music is embracing hybridity, experimentation, and genre-blurring innovation with increasing confidence.

Our film criticism has never shied away from the difficult conversations that Nollywood and African cinema need to have with itself. "Nollywood and the Evolution of

the Sacred Feminine" examined how the industry's portrayal of spiritually powerful women has evolved, from demonised figures shaped by patriarchal anxiety to more complex, reclaimed expressions of the feminine divine. Along the same lines, "Dear Nollywood, Stop Using Sexual Violence as a Plot Device" was a sustained and necessary argument against the industry's habitual use of sexual violence as narrative shorthand. "To Kill a Conversation: Nollywood, Criticism, and the Culture of Silence" interrogated Nigeria's fraught relationship with film criticism itself, revealing how defensiveness and fan loyalty stifle meaningful dialogue and artistic growth. And in "Animating Africa: Inside the Rise and Realities of African Animation", we gathered perspectives from established animation studios and emerging talents across South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, and Egypt to provide valuable insight into the rise, limitations, and possibilities of African animation.

Our literary coverage has asked the hardest questions about where African writing is going and what it owes to those who came before. At the height of the conversation about the death of Nigerian literature, sparked by Oris Aigbokhaevbolo's landmark essay, "The Death of Nigerian Literature" in 2023—which spurred a wave of critical essays and think pieces from writers across the continent—our own incisive long-form piece, "Is Nigerian Literature Truly Dying?" offered a methodical reckoning with the state of contemporary Nigerian writing: part historical survey, part critical provocation, and wholly necessary. "Who Wrote This? The Crisis of Criticism in the AI Era" asked what happens to literature and its evaluation when machines can produce texts that mimic human artistry, a concern that grows more urgent by the day. And our examination of the works and legacy of Cyprian Ekwensi offered a meticulous reappraisal of one of Nigeria's most prolific writers, arguing with care and evidence for where his brilliance truly lies.

Our fashion coverage has interrogated the industry not just as style but as culture, politics, and identity. "Size Bias on Our Runways: How Inclusive Are Fashion Competitions and the Industry?" ex-



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amined body inclusivity in Nigerian and global fashion with the rigour of a cultural investigation. Equally engaging, "The 'Yassification' of Thrift Clothing in Nigeria" explored how Nigeria's Okrika market has been transformed into a curated fashion phenomenon, examining the tensions between accessibility, affordability, and modern aesthetics. And "How Tightly Is Africa Embracing This Era of Fashion Fluidity?" mapped the rise of gender-neutral fashion across the continent, from designers like Orange Culture to the cultural figures reshaping how Africa thinks about style and self-expression.

Our sports coverage has always been rooted in the belief that sports is not separate from culture. "World Athletics' DNA Testing: How New Gender Rules Impact African Athletes" explored the controversy surrounding DNA-based sex verification policies and their disproportionate impact on female athletes from Africa, a piece that sat at the intersection of science, politics, and human dignity. "How Intra-Continental Cross-Border Coaching Appointments Are Redefining African Football" examined the rising trend of African coaches taking managerial roles across the continent and what it signals for the future of African football's self-determination. And "Why African Athletes Need Strong Public Relations" made the case that elite African athletes must invest in managing their image and narrative with the same intentionality they bring to their craft.

Some of our most memorable work has come from sitting down with the people who define African culture. Our exclusive profile of Mr Eazi, "The Ingenuity of Mr Eazi: An Exclusive Interview with a New Era Connoisseur for Art and Talent", served as both an artist portrait and a study in creative independence. "Yemi Alade: The Rebel Queen of Afro-Pop" traced her journey from breakout hitmaker to global icon with the nuance her career deserves. Our extensive profile of Nigerian Emmy-winning documentary filmmaker Joel 'Kachi Benson tracked a life and career dedicated to social impact filmmaking on the continent. Our conversations with the filmmaking brothers Akinola Davies Jr. and Wale Davies on My Father's Shadow, Nigerian history, and casting choices explored how a new generation of Nigerian filmmakers is shaping cinema and engaging the diaspora from a place of confidence

and intentionality. And our profile of Seun Kuti, spanning his Bird's Eye View podcast, Pan-Africanism, and the power of truth, captured one of Africa's most uncompromising voices in full, revolutionary flight.

Five Years and Still Counting

What five years has confirmed is that the gap we were founded to fill was real, and that the work of filling it is not yet done. African arts and culture continues to grow in global visibility and influence. African storytellers are reaching audiences their predecessors could only have imagined. And with that growth comes an even greater need for criticism that is equal to the work: informed, rigorous, honest, and deeply rooted in the context from which the art emerges.

At five, we can boldly state that with every review published, every essay championed, every voice platformed, every culture conversation sparked, we will keep doing what we have always done: projecting Africa. Boldly. Thoughtfully. One word, one story, one critic at a time.

Abioye Damilare Samson *is a music journalist and culture writer covering African entertainment, pop culture, and the stories that shape the continent's creative identity. His work has appeared in Afrocritik, Republic NG, Newlines Magazine, NATIVE Mag, Neun Magazine, Culture Custodian, 49th Street, and more.*



AFTERWORD

As the world grapples with existential reconfigurations of sorts, be they technological or socio-cultural, every African is at this moment faced with the stark reality of a changing world and is confronted with various questions. How do we make sense of these rapid socio-cultural and economic changes, as they relate to the African reality? Are our institutions already responding inevitably to these changes? Does our culture, both popular and structural, have the capacity to survive these frictions? Conversely, the demise of the century-long social and moral order evinces new standards and systems—new winners and losers will emerge. Are we primed for any of these?

Such questions, necessary as they are, require a candid reckoning, as multi-disciplinary thought leaders across the board must painstakingly provide fresh perspectives on the pathway forward for the African.

The perspectives shared in The Afrocritik Report 2025 therefore carry heightened urgency, as it has become inevitable for industries and institutions to proffer practicable solutions to today's challenges.

To this end, the need for trustworthy, dependable social commentators and culture critics has never been greater, as we just might be living through Africa's most consequential times in decades.

Owanate Max-Harry
Co-founder,
Afrocritik




afrocritik