

Exploring Effective Solutions to Address Cultural Misrepresentation in Nigerian Movies: Lessons from the Criticism of *Gangs of Lagos*

Solomon Idyo

Department of Film and Photography
University of Malawi, Zomba

Abstract

This study investigates effective solutions to cultural misrepresentation in Nigerian cinema, focusing on the controversies surrounding Jade Osiberu's *Gangs of Lagos* (2023). While Nollywood has emerged as a powerful global platform for projecting Nigerian identities, its portrayals have frequently been criticised for oversimplifying or distorting cultural traditions, thereby reinforcing stereotypes and undermining national image. Anchored in Stuart Hall's Representation Theory, the research adopts a qualitative approach, combining content analysis of the film with reviews, press commentary, and social media responses. Findings reveal that misrepresentation often arises from inadequate research, weak cultural policy frameworks, and insufficient consultation with communities. The case of *Gangs of Lagos*, especially its depiction of the Eyo masquerade, exemplifies how cultural symbols can be stripped of meaning when reframed solely for narrative spectacle, prompting backlash from both local communities and state authorities. The study argues that Nollywood must embrace a paradigm shift in which filmmakers balance artistic freedom with social responsibility. Solutions proposed include collaborative engagement with cultural custodians, embedding authenticity in production processes, and fostering audience dialogue to ensure respectful and nuanced portrayals. Ultimately, the research positions Nollywood not merely as an entertainment industry but as a cultural custodian with the potential to preserve heritage, strengthen national identity, and contribute to global discourse on African culture.

Keywords: Nollywood; Cultural Misrepresentation; *Gangs of Lagos*; Stuart Hall; Representation Theory; Nigerian Cinema; Audience Reception; Authenticity

Introduction

Culture remains a central concept in the humanities and social sciences, yet its definition has often proven elusive, varying across disciplines and contexts. At its broadest, culture may be understood as the sum of practices, values, beliefs, and artefacts through which a community sustains its identity and negotiates its place in the world. Firth describes culture as "the component of accumulated resources, immaterial as well as material, which people inherit, employ, transmit, add to and transmit" (13). In a similar vein, Igwe defines it as "the total way of life of a people which includes their art and other demonstrative evidence of their intellectual accomplishments which are regarded collectively and, over time, come to be used to describe them" (59). Culture thus operates as both inheritance and performance, simultaneously stable

and dynamic. Tylor's classic formulation that culture is "a complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, crafts, law, moral, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (33) underscores this integrative quality, reminding us that culture encompasses both tangible practices and the intangible frameworks of meaning that underpin them.

In contemporary Nigeria, however, the erosion of cultural values has become a pressing concern. The younger generation, particularly millennials and Gen Z, often gravitate towards global popular culture products, privileging imported media over indigenous traditions. This attraction is not inherently negative, but it has created a widening gap in the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge, raising urgent questions about heritage sustainability (Adebanwi and Obadare 42). Without deliberate interventions, younger Nigerians may inherit only fragments of their cultural legacy, leaving them vulnerable to identity dislocation. Scholars such as Akinola argue that "cultural continuity cannot be assumed in the age of global flows; it must be actively curated and performed" (115). In this light, cinema emerges as a powerful medium, not only as a vehicle for entertainment but also as a pedagogical tool capable of transmitting values, challenging misconceptions, and preserving communal memory.

Film, as both an artistic and cultural artefact, embodies a dual function: it reflects the society from which it emerges while simultaneously shaping social imagination. Igwe captures this dialectic by asserting that film is "an important art form, a source of popular entertainment and a powerful method for educating or indoctrinating the citizens" (57). Supiarza, Rachmawanti, and Gunawan expand this point by noting that film "enhances the resilience of the nation's culture... as a medium of mass communication and moral development" (217). Nigerian cinema, particularly Nollywood, demonstrates this dual role vividly. As the world's second-largest film industry by volume, Nollywood has become both a mirror of Nigerian cultural diversity and a global platform through which Nigerian identities are projected (Haynes 2016; Adejunmobi 2019).

Yet this visibility has also generated contestations. While Nollywood has succeeded in showcasing Nigeria's varied cultures, it has frequently been criticised for misrepresentation. From cuisine and costume to ritual and folklore, films often oversimplify, distort, or homogenise complex traditions, thereby reinforcing stereotypes rather than dismantling them (Endong 18). This problem is not trivial: as Stuart Hall reminds us, representations are not merely reflections but sites of power, where meanings are fixed, circulated, and naturalised (Hall, *Representation* 25). Consequently, Nollywood's missteps risk producing cultural caricatures that alienate communities and entrench harmful perceptions both locally and globally.

The controversy surrounding Jade Osiberu's *Gangs of Lagos* exemplifies these tensions. While the film garnered praise for its narrative ambition and production quality, it was condemned for its depiction of the Isale Eko community and its treatment of the Eyo masquerade, a sacred cultural symbol reduced to a cinematic motif for gang violence. The backlash from the Lagos State Government and the Isale Eko Descendants' Union reflects broader anxieties about the ethical obligations of filmmakers and the social consequences of cultural misrepresentation (Ajose; Medeme). Against this backdrop, this study examines how Nigerian cinema can move beyond recurring inaccuracies and towards more respectful, nuanced portrayals of cultural traditions. By integrating Stuart Hall's Representation Theory, the research seeks to uncover the mechanisms through which meaning is encoded, misrepresented, and contested in Nollywood, and to propose solutions for fostering authenticity and inclusivity.

Ultimately, the paper argues that Nollywood must embrace a paradigm shift—one that acknowledges cinema as both entertainment and cultural stewardship. Such a shift requires filmmakers to undertake rigorous research, consult with cultural custodians, and balance artistic freedom with social responsibility. In doing so, Nollywood can position itself not merely as a global entertainment powerhouse but also as a guardian of Nigeria's cultural memory and a mediator of national identity in an increasingly interconnected world.

Literature Review

Cultural misrepresentation in film is not unique to Nigeria, but Nollywood's prominence as the nation's leading cultural export makes the issue particularly salient. Scholars have long observed that while the industry has expanded rapidly in terms of production and distribution, questions of authenticity and responsibility remain underexplored (Okome 2020). Adesemoye, Hamed, and Sarmiti contend that "Nollywood films, Nigeria's largest cultural export, have been inundated with frequent cultural misrepresentations," which they trace to the absence of a coherent cultural film policy that might guide creative practices (117). They argue that existing frameworks are outdated, underfunded, and ill-suited to address the complexities of a globalised media economy (177). Their study suggests that only through policy reform, increased investment, and evidence-based regulation can Nollywood align entertainment with cultural preservation.

Complementing this policy perspective, Asogwa, Onoja, and Ojih highlight the role of cinema in shaping individual identity within cultural contexts. They assert that "the functioning of every human body is not only moulded by the culture within which the individual has been reared but also by the way he was born into society with a definite culture he has been fed and disciplined, fondled and put to sleep, punished and rewarded" (98). Their argument underscores the formative power of cultural environments, suggesting that Nollywood, as Africa's most dominant film industry, bears a responsibility to project indigenous values rather than recycle negative or outdated stereotypes. They advocate for a dual strategy: localising global cultural influences while simultaneously globalising Nigeria's rich cultural experiences (105). This approach, if effectively implemented, could mitigate the contradictions produced by Nollywood's hybrid identity as both local storyteller and global commodity.

Endong takes a more critical stance, arguing that Nollywood's representations frequently rely on stereotypes, myths, and archetypes that distort reality rather than reflect it. He observes that "filmmakers have been exploiting film audiences' expectations to fabricate a form of social reality through the agency of representation," often drawing on "global truths and realities" that are neither accurate nor benign (19). For Endong, the problem lies not only in the misrepresentation of Nigerian cultures but also in the perpetuation of a national image crisis, where cinema amplifies rather than resolves existing tensions (16). His critique echoes broader debates in media studies about the politics of representation, where audience expectations and market pressures intersect with cultural ethics.

Glotov situates these debates within a broader theoretical framework, defining cultural misrepresentation as the simplification of minority cultures in ways that promote racism, nationalism, and the erosion of democratic discourse. He warns that repeated distortions can "eventually weaken democracies by spreading false information through audio-visual media" (31). Hall's seminal insight that "it is we who fix the meaning so firmly that, after a while, it comes to seem natural and inevitable" (qtd. in Glotov 21) reminds us that representations are never innocent: they are processes of construction with material consequences. Misrepresentation, when entrenched, can therefore foster discriminatory practices and reinforce hierarchies, a dynamic Klein and Shiffman describe as "symbolic annihilation" (qtd. in Glotov 32).

While critiques of Nollywood's portrayals often focus on policy gaps and audience reception, other scholars have examined how films structurally distort cultural realities. Mekanishe and Khuluse note that cinema often presents culture as "homogenous and frozen in time" (17–18), thereby flattening the complexities of lived traditions into static images. Such simplifications align with what Nendauni identifies as the historic tendency of media to prioritise reductive portrayals of minority lifestyles, which in turn reinforce inequitable patterns of representation (2). In this sense, Nollywood's cultural missteps are part of a broader global pattern in which marginalised identities are simplified for mass consumption. The risk is not merely academic; it has practical implications for how communities understand themselves and how they are perceived by others.

Scholars such as Mallinger and Rossy provide further insight into why such distortions persist. They identify three limitations inherent in cinematic portrayals of culture. The first lies in the director's personal perspective, which may inadvertently overshadow or distort the culture being depicted. The second limitation concerns spectators' interpretations, which can vary widely, sometimes resulting in appreciation but often reinforcing stereotypes. Finally, there is the "time-period effect," where films reflect the ideological concerns of their production moment rather than the historical period they aim to portray, leading to anachronisms (609). While these limitations may not always be avoidable, Mallinger and Rossy contend that deeper cultural understanding and consultation with experts can mitigate their effects. Their argument highlights the importance of collaborative filmmaking practices that acknowledge the interpretive complexities of cultural representation.

Yet Nollywood is not solely a site of misrepresentation. Scholars such as Okuyade stress the industry's positive contributions to articulating national consciousness. She observes that "if there is any single popular art form that can be considered the most significant in the representation of postcolonial life in Nigeria today, it is, without question, Nollywood" (1–2). This assertion highlights the paradox at the heart of the industry: Nollywood both reflects and constructs Nigerian realities, sometimes problematically, yet always with significant cultural impact. The challenge, then, is not to diminish Nollywood's role but to encourage a more deliberate engagement with accuracy and cultural sensitivity.

Recent studies have also broadened the conversation by situating Nollywood within the transnational circuits of global media. Adejunmobi argues that Nollywood's expansion into international markets has intensified pressures to balance local specificity with global accessibility, often leading to compromises in authenticity (112). Similarly, Krings and Okome contend that as Nollywood increasingly targets diasporic audiences, it risks prioritising commercial viability over cultural fidelity (Krings and Okome 2019). These critiques resonate with Hall's observation that representations are shaped within power dynamics: filmmakers must navigate not only local cultural politics but also global market forces that influence what kinds of stories are told and how they are framed.

At the same time, there is a growing recognition that audiences are not passive consumers but active interpreters of cultural texts. Scholars such as McCain (2021) have demonstrated that Nigerian audiences frequently contest filmic representations online, especially through social media platforms, where they voice disapproval of misrepresentations and call for accountability. This dynamic underscores the dialogic nature of representation: meanings are encoded by filmmakers but decoded, negotiated, and often resisted by viewers (Hall, *Encoding/Decoding*). The backlash against *Gangs of Lagos*, for example, illustrates how communities can mobilise to challenge cinematic portrayals, transforming what might have been a one-way cultural export into a contested site of meaning-making.

Taken together, the literature highlights a constellation of issues: the lack of cultural policy frameworks, the dangers of stereotyping and homogenisation, the structural limitations of cinematic practice, and the pressures of globalisation. Yet it also suggests pathways forward. Collaborative practices, deeper engagement with cultural custodians, and attention to audience feedback can foster more authentic portrayals. As Wilson argues, "cultural misrepresentation is not inevitable but results from a failure of dialogue between filmmakers and the communities they depict" (74). For Nollywood, then, the challenge lies not only in recognising its shortcomings but in harnessing its position as a cultural powerhouse to promote nuanced and respectful narratives that resonate both locally and globally.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Stuart Hall's Representation Theory, a cornerstone of media and cultural studies that explores the relationship between meaning, culture, and communication. Hall conceptualises representation as "the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture through the use of language, signs and images which stand for or represent things" (*Representation* 97). This approach foregrounds the ways in

which cultural meanings are not passively reflected but actively constructed, circulated, and contested through systems of representation. Hall distinguishes three main approaches: the reflective, the intentional, and the constructionist. The reflective approach treats language as a mirror, imitating a pre-existing reality, an idea rooted in the Greek concept of *mimesis*. The intentional approach, by contrast, emphasises the author's agency, suggesting that language signifies only what the author intends to communicate. The constructionist approach, which Hall himself privileges, recognises that meaning is not inherent in objects or signs but socially produced through cultural codes and shared conventions (25).

The constructionist perspective is particularly relevant to the study of Nollywood because it highlights the active role of filmmakers as “encoders” of meaning and audiences as “decoders” who may interpret texts in dominant, negotiated, or oppositional ways (Hall, *Encoding/Decoding* 136). Films, therefore, do not merely portray Nigerian culture; they construct versions of it that are shaped by political economy, directorial choices, and audience expectations. The controversy over *Gangs of Lagos* illustrates this dynamic vividly: while the filmmakers arguably intended to dramatise socio-political realities in Lagos, audiences, particularly the Isale Eko community, decoded these portrayals as reductive and disrespectful. Such disjunctures underscore Hall's point that meaning is never fixed but contested across multiple sites of interpretation.

Representation Theory also draws attention to power relations embedded in cultural production. Hall, influenced by Foucault, argued that representation is inseparable from questions of power, since it determines who has the authority to define reality, whose voices are amplified, and whose experiences are marginalised (Hall, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* 223). In Nollywood, dominant production houses, often catering to commercial imperatives, may perpetuate stereotypes that resonate with mass audiences but distort cultural realities. Independent filmmakers, by contrast, may attempt to resist such tendencies by foregrounding marginalised voices, though often with limited reach. Analysing these dynamics allows us to see cultural misrepresentation not merely as an aesthetic failure but as a political and ideological act.

Scholars such as Shohat and Stam have expanded this critique by showing how postcolonial cinemas often grapple with similar tensions, navigating between reclaiming indigenous narratives and conforming to global market demands (Shohat and Stam 2014). For Nollywood, the stakes are particularly high, given its position as both a local cultural custodian and a global media export. Misrepresentation in this context cannot be disentangled from the commercial and ideological pressures that shape film production. Representation Theory thus offers a critical lens for interrogating not only how Nigerian culture is depicted but also why certain portrayals gain traction over others.

Furthermore, Hall's framework underscores the fluid and contested nature of cultural identity. He argued that identities are never fixed essences but “points of temporary attachment to subject positions constructed within discourses” (*Cultural Identity and Diaspora* 226). This insight is crucial in understanding Nollywood's tendency to present Nigerian culture as static or homogenous, rather than as dynamic, plural, and evolving. By treating culture as a living process rather than a relic, filmmakers can move away from reductive stereotypes and instead highlight the complexities of contemporary Nigerian life.

In summary, Representation Theory provides a robust framework for analysing cultural misrepresentation in Nollywood. It illuminates how meaning is encoded by filmmakers, decoded by audiences, and shaped by broader structures of power and ideology. By applying Hall's insights, this study seeks to unpack the mechanisms through which misrepresentation occurs in Nigerian cinema and to propose strategies for fostering more accurate and respectful cultural portrayals. Ultimately, this theoretical lens allows us to see Nollywood not merely as a site of cultural expression but as an arena where competing meanings, identities, and power relations are negotiated.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach, appropriate for exploring the nuanced processes through which cultural misrepresentation occurs and is perceived in Nigerian cinema. Qualitative research, by privileging depth over breadth, enables the investigation of meaning-making practices, audience responses, and the socio-cultural contexts of representation (Creswell and Poth 2018). The study draws on both primary and secondary sources, combining film analysis with the review of public responses in order to triangulate findings and ensure interpretive richness.

The primary text under examination is *Gangs of Lagos* (2023), directed by Jade Osiberu, which serves as a case study for analysing how Nollywood encodes cultural narratives. Content analysis was employed to identify moments of cultural misrepresentation within the film, particularly in its depiction of the Isale Eko community and the Eyo masquerade. Content analysis, in this context, was not limited to thematic coding but extended to semiotic interpretation, paying attention to visual, linguistic, and narrative cues that construct cultural meaning (Krippendorff 2019). This analytical lens allowed the researcher to situate the film within broader discourses of cultural authenticity, stereotyping, and representation.

Secondary data were gathered from interviews, press reports, and reviews in newspapers, magazines, and online platforms. These sources were particularly valuable in capturing the wave of controversies that followed the film's release. Critical voices from the Lagos State Government and the Isale Eko Descendants' Union were reviewed to assess institutional and communal reactions. Such responses highlight the social stakes of representation, underscoring the extent to which film can shape cultural self-perception and community identity. To complement this, scholarly critiques of Nollywood's representational practices were incorporated to situate *Gangs of Lagos* within existing debates.

In addition, the study engaged with social media commentary, albeit in a limited manner. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook provided insight into informal, grassroots reactions from audiences. While these comments were not subjected to systematic quantitative coding, they offered valuable nuance by highlighting how everyday viewers negotiated and contested the film's portrayals. This aspect of the methodology reflects Hall's *encoding/decoding* model, which emphasises that meaning is not unilaterally transmitted by filmmakers but actively decoded, often in resistant or negotiated ways, by audiences (Hall 1980).

Ethical considerations were carefully observed. Direct quotations from social media users were avoided to protect privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality. Instead, general patterns and sentiments were paraphrased to ensure that the research respected participants' digital identities while still capturing the tenor of public debate. The combination of content analysis, formal reviews, and informal audience responses provided a triangulated dataset that allowed for a holistic exploration of the controversy.

Finally, the analysis synthesised the data by drawing on a combination of factual evidence, scholarly perspectives, and interpretive insights. The aim was not only to document instances of cultural misrepresentation but also to examine their implications for Nollywood's ethical responsibilities and cultural authority. By using this multi-pronged approach, the methodology ensured that the findings were grounded in both textual evidence and audience perception, thereby enriching the study's conclusions about representation in Nigerian cinema.

The Criticism of Jade Osiberu's *Gangs of Lagos*

Among the most notable Nigerian releases of 2023 is *Gangs of Lagos*, a crime thriller directed by Jade Osiberu. The film follows the intertwined lives of three childhood friends—Obalola (Tobi Bakre), Ify (Chike), and Gift (Adesua Etomi-Wellington)—who grow up in Isale Eko, a historic Lagos neighbourhood. As they mature, the characters become deeply entangled in the violent underworld of gang politics and corruption, with survival often hinging on loyalty and ambition. While the film has been praised for its gripping narrative, polished action sequences,

and strong performances, it has equally been criticised for the way it frames Lagos Island as a crime-ridden terrain. These conflicting responses point to a central question in Nollywood: how can filmmakers balance the demands of drama with the ethical responsibility to portray communities with accuracy and respect (Sulaimon; Ajose)?

The backlash against *Gangs of Lagos* was particularly fierce from members of the Isale Eko community and the Lagos State Government. Central to their critique was the portrayal of the Eyo masquerade, a revered cultural symbol, as a façade for criminal activity. In the film, the masquerade appears not as a sacred institution linked to peace, purity, and the preservation of heritage, but as a costume for gangsters, thereby reducing a centuries-old cultural practice to a cinematic prop. The Isale Eko Descendants' Union (IDU) issued a statement condemning this portrayal, arguing that it distorted the community's image and dishonoured its traditions (Medeme; Lagos Global). For many residents, this misrepresentation carried tangible consequences: it risked stigmatising their neighbourhood while erasing its cultural richness in the eyes of local and global audiences.

Isale Eko itself is not merely a physical location but a cultural and historical hub of Lagos. It is home to the Eyo Festival, widely regarded as one of the city's most significant cultural events, with roots predating even Brazil's famed carnival (Lagos Global). The festival is closely tied to the Oba of Lagos and to traditional institutions that embody the city's royal and spiritual lineages. To represent this heritage solely as a backdrop for violence was, in the view of critics, to diminish its significance and undermine communal pride. Such portrayals risk what Hall terms "fixing meaning," where repeated misrepresentations come to appear natural, ultimately reinforcing stereotypes (Hall, *Representation* 25). In this sense, the criticism of *Gangs of Lagos* was not only about aesthetic choices but about the broader politics of representation and cultural identity.

The controversy also reflects anxieties about Nigeria's image in the global arena. Lagos, in particular, has worked to brand itself as a cosmopolitan hub of innovation, commerce, and creativity. Yet cinematic portrayals such as *Gangs of Lagos* threaten to overshadow these efforts by recycling narratives of chaos, criminality, and disorder. The Lagos State Government argued that such representations were damaging, not only to the city's reputation but also to its tourism and investment prospects (Ajose). This perspective underscores the ways in which film is entangled with political economy: beyond questions of culture, misrepresentation can carry material consequences for how a city or nation is perceived internationally. Thus, debates about authenticity in Nollywood cannot be divorced from the broader stakes of nation branding and soft power.

Audience responses further complicate the picture. While some critics, such as Sulaimon in *The Cable Lifestyle*, praised the film's technical achievements and thematic exploration of survival in an unforgiving urban environment, many viewers—particularly those from Lagos—felt alienated by its representation of their community. Social media amplified these tensions, with users voicing strong disapproval and demanding greater accountability from filmmakers. This divergence illustrates Hall's *encoding/decoding* model: while Osiberu may have intended the film as a critique of systemic corruption and social inequality, audiences decoded it through the lens of cultural pride and identity, often rejecting the filmmaker's preferred reading (Hall, *Encoding/Decoding* 137). The result was a polarised reception in which aesthetic appreciation was overshadowed by cultural offence.

Ultimately, the *Gangs of Lagos* controversy illuminates the fragile boundary between artistic freedom and social responsibility. Filmmakers are, of course, entitled to creative expression, yet when stories engage with real communities and traditions, the stakes are heightened. Misrepresentation can perpetuate harmful stereotypes, weaken cultural confidence, and strain the relationship between filmmakers and audiences. As scholars such as Shohat and Stam argue, cinema in postcolonial contexts carries an ethical burden to avoid reproducing the distortions of earlier colonial discourses (2014). In this sense, *Gangs of Lagos* serves as a case study in both the risks and responsibilities of cultural representation in Nollywood, reminding us that cinematic storytelling cannot be disentangled from the lived realities of the people it depicts.

Lessons from the Criticism of *Gangs of Lagos*

The controversy surrounding *Gangs of Lagos* underscores the ethical obligations filmmakers face when representing real communities and cultural symbols. While artistic freedom remains central to cinematic practice, the case illustrates the risks of neglecting cultural sensitivity. The depiction of the Eyo masquerade as a vehicle for criminality exemplifies the consequences of inadequate consultation with cultural custodians. Traditionally associated with purity, continuity, and communal identity, the masquerade was stripped of its symbolic depth and reframed as a superficial costume. This reductionist portrayal not only offended members of the Isale Eko community but also revealed the broader challenge facing Nollywood: how to balance compelling storytelling with respect for cultural heritage (Ajose; Medeme).

The Lagos State Government's swift condemnation of the film demonstrates how cultural misrepresentation can intersect with political and economic concerns. Lagos has positioned itself as an emerging cosmopolitan city, with ambitions to project a global image of innovation and resilience. Portrayals that emphasise crime and disorder, while not entirely divorced from reality, risk entrenching reductive stereotypes that undermine this effort. As Adebaniwi notes, "cities live and die by their narratives; reputation becomes as valuable as infrastructure" (64). From this perspective, films like *Gangs of Lagos* have consequences beyond cultural pride: they shape how cities and nations are imagined on the global stage, influencing tourism, diplomacy, and investment. Filmmakers, therefore, operate not only as artists but also as informal diplomats whose work circulates as cultural soft power.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge filmmaker intent. Jade Osiberu has earned a reputation for exploring urban Nigeria's contradictions, as evident in her earlier works such as *Brotherhood* (2022) and *The Trade* (2023). In interviews, she has expressed a desire to portray the harsh realities of Nigerian society, blending entertainment with social critique (Okiche). From this perspective, *Gangs of Lagos* may be read as an attempt to dramatise systemic inequalities, not to disparage cultural traditions. Yet the reception highlights a recurring disjuncture between intention and interpretation. Audiences, especially those with direct cultural ties, may reject narratives they perceive as reductive, regardless of authorial purpose. This tension speaks directly to Hall's notion of contested decoding, where meaning is co-produced in dialogue between texts and their consumers (Hall, *Encoding/Decoding* 141).

The ethical lesson here is not to restrict creativity but to recognise the need for dialogue between filmmakers and the communities they depict. Misrepresentation often arises not from malice but from a lack of research, consultation, or cultural literacy. Greater collaboration with cultural historians, community elders, and local artists could mitigate these risks. As Adejunmobi argues, "authenticity in African film is not achieved through isolation but through consultation and dialogue" (118). By integrating local perspectives, filmmakers can retain narrative freedom while ensuring that cultural symbols are treated with accuracy and respect. This collaborative approach not only enhances authenticity but also fosters a sense of ownership among communities, reducing the likelihood of backlash.

Moreover, the case highlights the necessity of distinguishing between critique and caricature. Cinema has long served as a medium for exposing injustice, and Nigerian filmmakers should not shy away from addressing issues of corruption, violence, or inequality. However, such themes must be handled with nuance, avoiding representations that collapse entire communities into stereotypes. Wilson cautions that "the danger lies not in depicting social problems, but in reducing cultures to backdrops of pathology" (76). Striking this balance requires both artistic sensitivity and ethical foresight. It is possible to dramatise urban struggles while still affirming the dignity and complexity of the communities portrayed.

Finally, the controversy demonstrates the growing agency of audiences in shaping representational politics. The widespread criticism on social media, alongside official responses, shows that Nigerian audiences are no longer passive consumers but active stakeholders in cultural discourse. Their ability to mobilise, contest, and demand accountability reflects a broader shift in global media cultures, where publics increasingly participate in co-defining

meaning (McCain 2021). For Nollywood, this trend presents both a challenge and an opportunity. It obliges filmmakers to engage more thoughtfully with their audiences but also opens the possibility for richer, dialogic storytelling that reflects the diversity of Nigerian voices.

In sum, the lessons of *Gangs of Lagos* emphasise the need for Nollywood to navigate the delicate intersection of art, culture, and responsibility. By recognising the power of representation, acknowledging audience agency, and cultivating respectful collaborations, Nigerian filmmakers can craft stories that are both socially resonant and culturally authentic. In doing so, Nollywood can avoid the pitfalls of misrepresentation while consolidating its role as a guardian of cultural heritage and a catalyst for global dialogue.

Conclusion

Over the past three decades, Nollywood has evolved into one of the most prolific film industries in the world, producing stories that resonate not only with Nigerian audiences but also with viewers across Africa and the global diaspora. Its rapid growth has transformed it into a major cultural and economic force, contributing to Nigeria's GDP while providing employment opportunities and projecting aspects of national identity abroad. Yet, as this study has demonstrated, the very visibility that has propelled Nollywood to prominence also amplifies its shortcomings. Chief among these is the persistent issue of cultural misrepresentation, a problem that undermines the industry's credibility and risks distorting Nigeria's diverse heritage in the eyes of domestic and international audiences.

The criticism directed at *Gangs of Lagos* illustrates how cinematic missteps can ignite widespread controversy, revealing the stakes of cultural representation in contemporary Nigeria. The film's depiction of the Eyo masquerade and its framing of the Isale Eko community sparked outrage not only for aesthetic reasons but also because of the broader implications for cultural pride, national image, and global perception. These reactions reinforce Stuart Hall's insight that representation is never a neutral reflection but a process of constructing meaning, deeply embedded in power relations. As such, misrepresentation in Nollywood is not simply a question of artistic licence; it is an ethical issue with tangible cultural, social, and political consequences.

This study has argued that Nollywood must embrace a paradigm shift in its approach to cultural storytelling. Such a shift requires filmmakers to balance creative freedom with social responsibility, ensuring that their narratives respect the complexities of Nigerian traditions while remaining compelling to audiences. Rigorous research, consultation with cultural custodians, and dialogue with affected communities should become standard practice. By embedding collaborative methods into production, Nollywood can avoid superficial portrayals and instead offer nuanced depictions that both entertain and educate. As Adejunmobi and Okome suggest, authenticity in African cinema is less about rigid fidelity and more about creating respectful, dialogic narratives that affirm cultural dignity while engaging critically with social realities (Adejunmobi 118; Okome 2020).

Furthermore, the increasing role of audiences in shaping representational politics should not be underestimated. Through social media and public discourse, Nigerian viewers are actively contesting misrepresentations and demanding accountability from filmmakers. This development marks a significant shift from passive consumption to active participation, creating an environment in which Nollywood must continually negotiate meaning with its publics. Rather than viewing this as a constraint, filmmakers should see it as an opportunity to enrich their work with multiple perspectives and to foster a more inclusive cinematic culture.

Ultimately, Nollywood possesses the potential to act not only as a source of entertainment but also as a tool for cultural preservation, education, and nation-building. If harnessed responsibly, film can serve as a repository of collective memory and a medium through which Nigerians engage with their past, present, and future. By committing to more respectful and authentic representations, the industry can reposition itself as both a national treasure and a global

cultural ambassador. In doing so, Nollywood will not only elevate its artistic standing but also contribute to a richer, more dignified global discourse on African identity, ensuring that Nigeria's stories are told with the depth, integrity, and respect they deserve.

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