



Distribution Conundrum: Rebalancing the Talent–Capital Dynamics for Cinematic Innovation in the Benin Film Industry

Peddie E. Okao, Gregory University, peddieokao123@gmail.com

Samuel O. Chukwu-Okoronkwo, Gregory University, s.okoronkwo@gregoryuniversityuturu.edu.ng

Volume 14.2 (2026) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2026.923 | <http://cinej.pitt.edu>

Abstract: This article examines how distribution constraints may affect film production in Benin City, Nigeria. Drawing on a survey of 146 industry practitioners and close readings of *Invasion 1897* and *Ikoka*, it considers the relationship between creative expertise, financial investment, and regional distribution. The study proposes an “aesthetics of scarcity” as a framework for interpreting restrained production scale, framing, and sound design. Survey respondents reported concerns about market access, investment, and opportunities for technical workers. These findings describe professional perceptions rather than directly establishing the causes of particular aesthetic decisions. The article argues that more transparent regional distribution arrangements, technical support, and systematic industry data could strengthen the sustainability of Benin-language filmmaking within Nollywood.

Keywords: Benin cinema; Edo-language films; Nollywood; film distribution; regional cinema; aesthetics of scarcity



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.

Pitt | Open
Library
Publishing

This journal is published by [Pitt Open Library Publishing](http://pittopenlibrarypublishing.com).



Distribution Conundrum: Rebalancing the Talent–Capital Dynamics for Cinematic Innovation in the Benin Film Industry

Peddie E. Okao

Samuel O. Chukwu-Okoronkwo

Introduction

Film distribution makes films accessible to their intended audiences. In the context of regional and indigenous-language cinemas, however, distribution is not simply a logistical concern; it can also shape the resources available for production and, potentially, the resulting cinematic form. Rambocas et al. (2015) examined how distribution-channel governance affects export performance in a different industry, providing a useful, if indirect, point of comparison. Within the Benin film industry, the relationship between creative talent and access to financial and technical resources has become especially important as physical video markets have given way to digital platforms. Here, “talent” refers to creative expertise, indigenous knowledge, and production skills, while “capital” refers to the funding and infrastructure needed to develop and circulate films. This article examines whether changing distribution conditions contribute to an “aesthetics of scarcity,” characterized in the selected films by constrained production scale, relatively static framing, and limited sound resources. Drawing on industry survey responses and close readings of *Invasion 1897* and *Ikoka*, it considers how filmmakers negotiate these

constraints and how regional film production might remain culturally distinctive and economically viable within Nollywood.

Research Aims and Questions

This study investigates the relationship between film distribution, creative expertise, and financial investment in the Benin film industry. It considers how filmmakers and distributors understand the balance between available talent and capital, which obstacles encourage informal distribution, and whether financial constraints are reflected in the visual and sonic characteristics of locally produced films. It also examines the industry's transition from physical video markets to digital circulation and asks how regional distribution initiatives might support both cultural specificity and long-term viability. These questions guide the survey interpretation and the comparative analysis of the two selected films.

Contextual Framework

The Benin film industry is treated here as a regional filmmaking culture operating within the larger Nigerian screen industry; Omoera (2024) offers a history and filmography of Benin-language film together with an empirical account of its audience reception. Higson's (1989) discussion of national cinema provides a broader framework for considering how cinematic identity is produced and circulated, although "sub-state cinema" is the present study's

application of that framework. The discussion distinguishes the period of physical video distribution from the subsequent expansion of digital platforms, focusing on their implications for production practices and access to audiences.

The Era of Physical Equilibrium (1990s–2015)

During the VHS and VCD era, production and distribution often depended on informal commercial networks associated with markets in Benin City. Producers, including Peddie Okao of Prolens Movies, operated within a system in which physical sales could provide visible indications of local demand. Lobato's (2012) analysis of informal film circulation helps contextualize these networks. The article interprets this period as one in which locally available distribution channels could assist producers in communicating potential returns to investors. The extent to which such arrangements consistently supported ambitious historical productions, however, requires further production and financial evidence.

The Digital Rupture and Peripheral Marginalization

The decline of physical VCD/DVD circulation and the growth of streaming have altered the distribution environment for regional Nigerian filmmakers. The article argues that digital investment and post-production resources have become concentrated in larger production centers, particularly Lagos (Miller, 2016). Benin-based producers may therefore face additional costs when accessing specialized equipment and services. The experience of Kannywood,

discussed by Larkin (2008) in relation to earlier media infrastructures, provides a point of comparison, although it does not by itself establish the effects of contemporary streaming algorithms on Benin-language productions.

One consequence identified by the authors is technological marginalization. Access to post-production services in Lagos may create travel, coordination, and transaction costs that constrain some regional productions. Drawing on Commons (1931), this article treats such costs as one possible factor contributing to smaller casts, fewer locations, and more limited technical resources.

A second concern is the limited ability of informal online circulation to demonstrate reliable financial returns. Where filmmakers distribute their work through social platforms without access to audited viewing and revenue data, prospective investors may find it difficult to assess commercial performance. This problem is described here as a signaling failure rather than evidence that any one platform necessarily causes declining production quality.

Together, these pressures may affect the retention of technical expertise within the regional industry. The article uses “aesthetics of scarcity” to describe how restricted resources may influence framing, spatial scale, and sound design. Such relationships remain interpretive propositions that the following survey and film analyses explore rather than predetermined

causal conclusions.

Theoretical and Conceptual Mapping

The argument brings together three related economic concepts to explore the possible connections between distribution and cinematic form. Signaling theory addresses the information available to investors; transaction-cost analysis considers the expenses of securing resources and circulating films; and human-capital theory draws attention to the skills required for production. These concepts provide complementary perspectives rather than a single causal model.

Spence's (1973) theory of signaling helps explain why prospective investors may view regional films as financially uncertain when consistent distribution and revenue information is unavailable. The study applies this insight to the perceived relationship between distribution access and investment decisions in Benin cinema.

Commons's (1931) institutional approach also informs the discussion of costs associated with locating skilled workers, accessing production facilities, and negotiating distribution arrangements. These expenses may encourage smaller casts, fewer locations, and less technically complex production, although the size of any effect would require production-budget evidence.

Finally, Schultz's (1961) account of human capital draws attention to the consequences of technical workers relocating to larger industry centers. Such movement may reduce the range of skills available locally and contribute to what the article calls a "technical ceiling." The survey captures practitioners' perceptions of migration, but it does not independently measure the number of workers who have left Benin City.

Methodology: Survey and Film Analysis

The study combines a descriptive survey of film-industry practitioners with a qualitative analysis of selected films. The survey records practitioners' reported experiences of distribution, investment, and employment, while the textual analysis examines framing, mise-en-scène, sound, and production scale. The two sources of evidence are considered together, but the cross-sectional survey cannot by itself establish a causal relationship between distribution mechanisms and particular cinematographic decisions.

Study Area and Sampling

The study focuses on practitioners working in and around Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria. Using purposive sampling, the researchers approached 150 people working as directors, producers, actors, screenwriters, distributors, or cinema operators; 146 responses were reported, equivalent to a response rate of approximately 97.3%. Recruitment took place across the five

local government areas (LGAs) that form the core metropolitan and production area of Benin City: Oredo, Ikpoba-Okha, Egor, Ovia North-East, and Uhumwonde. Questionnaires were distributed through Google Forms and targeted in-person distribution between July 15, 2024, and January 20, 2025, with participants recruited through professional networks. Because the sample was purposive rather than random, its findings describe participating practitioners and should not be treated as statistically representative of the entire regional film industry.

Table 1 summarizes the 146 respondents. Most were aged 31 or older (79%), and actors (39%) and producers (21%) formed the largest occupational groups. The educational categories show that 55% reported an HND or bachelor's qualification and 3% reported a master's, medical, or doctoral qualification; these categories should not be grouped together as "advanced degrees." The distribution of qualifications and professional roles offers useful context for interpreting respondents' perceptions, but does not independently determine the relationship between distribution and film aesthetics.

Demographic Characteristics		Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	106	73%
	Female	40	27%
	Total	146	100%
Age	<30 years	30	21%
	31-40 years	43	29%
	41-50 years	63	43%
	>50 years	10	7%

	Total	146	100%
Educational Background	SSCE	22	15%
	ND/NCE	12	8%
	HND/B.A/BSc	80	55%
	M.A/M.Sc./MBBS/PhD	4	3%
	Apprenticeship	28	19%
	Total	146	100%
Occupation	Film Director	19	13%
	Film Producer	30	21%
	Screenwriter	22	15%
	Film Distributor	12	8%
	Cinema Operator	6	4%
	Actors	57	39%
	Total	146	100%

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of survey respondents (N = 146). Note. Source: Authors' field survey (2025).

Data Collection and Researcher Positionality

A structured questionnaire was used to collect practitioners' responses about distribution access, employment mobility, investment, and production conditions. The lead researcher also reports participant observation across four production and distribution cycles, including activities associated with the New Benin Market. This professional involvement provides contextual access to informal markets, and the study therefore combines two perspectives: Peddie E. Okao acts as an insider-practitioner, while Samuel O. Chukwu-Okoronkwo acts as an external academic observer who provides analytical distance. Participation in the survey was

voluntary. Before completing the questionnaire, all respondents received a standardized informed-consent form that explained the purpose of the study and guaranteed anonymity, non-retaliation, and data confidentiality.

Analytical Framework

The qualitative component examines Lancelot Imasuen's *Invasion 1897* (2014) and Peddie Okao's *Ikoka* (English-language version, 2007; the Benin-language original of 2004 is discussed in Omoera & Anyanwu, 2020). They were selected as contrasting examples of historical and supernatural filmmaking associated with the Benin film industry. Both predate the digital-distribution conditions discussed in the survey, so they cannot independently demonstrate the consequences of a post-2015 transition. Instead, their formal characteristics are considered alongside practitioners' later accounts of production and distribution constraints. *Ikoka* was directed by Peddie Okao, a coauthor of this article, so the authors' reading of that film is informed by direct professional involvement. The analysis is based on the English-language version, which was expanded for national and cross-border distribution with a national cast.

Film Analysis and Distribution Context

To explore possible connections between distribution conditions and cinematic form, the

study compares *Invasion 1897* and *Ikoka*. Their cinematography and sound are read alongside the survey respondents’ perceptions of financial and technical constraints. This comparison illustrates the proposed “aesthetics of scarcity,” but should not be understood as proof that a particular distribution arrangement caused any individual creative choice.

Spatial Compression in *Invasion 1897*

In *Invasion 1897* (2014), directed by Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen, scenes of the Benin royal court provide an opportunity to consider the relationship between historical scale and available production resources. The authors identify sequences that rely on tight medium shots and relatively shallow depth of field rather than consistently expansive establishing views. These choices could concentrate attention on the actors and reduce the visual prominence of the surrounding sets. However, attributing them specifically to investment shortfalls requires supporting production evidence, since framing can also reflect deliberate directorial preferences. The survey data discussed below provide broader industry context rather than direct evidence about the film’s financing.

Yes	No	Don’t know	Total
140	4	2	146
96%	3%	1%	100%

Table 2. Perceived effects of distribution bottlenecks on genre and production scale (N = 146). Note. Source: Authors’ field survey (2025).

As shown in Table 2, 140 of the 146 respondents (approximately 96%) agreed with the survey statement linking distribution bottlenecks to a shift toward hyper-local genres, while four disagreed and two were uncertain. This strong agreement establishes a prevalent perception among the surveyed practitioners, not an independently measured causal effect on genre or shot selection. A claim that the medium close-up in *Invasion 1897* was chosen to offset financial constraints would require corroboration from production records or the filmmakers themselves.

Framing and Sound in *Ikoka*

In *Ikoka* (2007), directed by coauthor Peddie Okao, the authors identify relatively static framing and recurring sound cues in the supernatural sequences. These features are interpreted as possible examples of resource-constrained filmmaking, although their relationship to camera equipment, available crews, and post-production budgets remains to be established. Table 3 records unanimous awareness among the 146 respondents of people who had left the Benin film industry to pursue opportunities elsewhere. That result should not be described as a 100% loss of technical personnel or as proof that migration caused the film's audiovisual choices.

The article nevertheless suggests that the film's restrained technical approach may be understood as a distinctive regional aesthetic rather than simply a failed imitation of higher-budget filmmaking.

Yes	No	Not Sure	Total
146	0	0	146
100%	0%	0%	100%

Table 3. Awareness of practitioners leaving Benin for opportunities elsewhere (N = 146). Note. Source: Authors' field survey (2025).

Discussion: Distribution and Regional Film Culture

Beyond the financial consequences of distribution, the article considers how changes in media circulation may affect relations between regional filmmakers and audiences (see Omoera, 2014). Physical video markets provided opportunities for localized exchange, whereas online platforms organize access through different forms of visibility, recommendation, and monetization. The survey captures practitioners' perceptions of this transition, but it does not include direct audience data capable of measuring changes in communal viewing or audience loyalty.

Yes	No	Don't Know	Total
146	0	0	146
100%	0%	0%	100%

Table 4. Perceived effects of distribution-related imbalances on communal film culture (N = 146). Note. Source: Authors' field survey (2025).

All 146 respondents endorsed the questionnaire's proposition that a distribution-related

imbalance can weaken the communal relationship between Benin filmmakers and audiences (Table 4). This unanimity is noteworthy, but it should be interpreted in light of the survey wording and sampling procedure. It indicates shared concern among participants rather than directly documenting a change in viewers' behavior.

The survey also suggests that participants connect distribution uncertainty with investment decisions and the movement of skilled workers. These concerns form a possible feedback process in which uncertain returns discourage investment, limited investment restricts technical opportunities, and experienced practitioners seek work elsewhere.

In response to a question about recent investment in local distribution infrastructure, 111 respondents (76%) answered “no,” seven (5%) answered “yes,” and 28 (19%) were uncertain (Table 5). These responses indicate a perception of inadequate investment; they do not provide a direct financial audit.

Yes	No	Not Sure	Total
7	111	28	146
5%	76%	19%	100%

Table 5. Perceived recent investment in regional distribution infrastructure (N = 146). Note. Source: Authors' field survey (2025).

Similarly, 121 respondents (83%) reported that Benin-language films were not available on streaming platforms outside YouTube, ten (7%) answered “yes,” and 15 (10%) were

uncertain (Table 6). This finding warrants discussion alongside a systematic review of actual platform catalogs before a categorical claim about exclusion can be made.

Yes	No	Don't Know	Total
10	121	15	146
7%	83%	10%	100%

Table 6. Reported streaming availability of Benin-language films outside YouTube (N = 146). Note. Source: Authors' field survey (2025).

The survey also indicates widespread awareness of practitioners seeking opportunities outside Benin City. Because the relevant question asks whether respondents know someone who has moved, however, these responses cannot establish the number of technical workers who departed or identify distribution failure as their principal reason for leaving.

Taken together, the findings raise concerns about the continuity of local production knowledge and the future of regionally distinctive storytelling. A participant's observation that "when we all leave, what will be left of our stories?" captures this anxiety, but the quotation requires a documented source, interview date, and consent confirmation.

The "aesthetics of scarcity" is proposed as one possible cultural response to these pressures. The contrast between historically ambitious productions and more confined genres deserves further investigation using film budgets, production interviews, and evidence of actual market performance. The argument is strongest when the survey is treated as evidence of

professional perceptions and the film analysis as an independent interpretation of audiovisual form.

Supplementary Survey Results

Yes	No	Total
146	0	146
100%	0%	100%

Table 7. Familiarity with the distinction between talent and capital (N = 146).

Below 5yrs	6 – 10yrs	11 – 15yrs	16 - 20yrs	Above 20yrs	Total
35	63	30	12	6	146
24%	43%	21%	8%	4%	100%

Table 8. Respondents' years of experience in the Benin film industry (N = 146).

Yes	No	Total
126	20	146
86%	14%	100%

Table 9. Perceptions of distribution as a driver of film-industry growth (N = 146).

Theatrical Release	VCD/DVD	Television Licensing	Streaming	Total
5	11	18	112	146
3%	8%	12%	77%	100%

Table 10. Reported primary film-distribution channels (N = 146).

Very Effective	Effective	Not So Effective	Not Effective	Total
0	6	39	101	146
0%	4%	27%	69%	100%

Table 11. Perceived effectiveness of current distribution channels (N = 146).

Yes	No	Not Sure	Total
101	9	36	146
69%	6%	25%	100%

Table 12. Reported challenges in obtaining theatrical releases (N = 146).

Yes	No	Don't know	Total
120	6	20	146
82%	4%	14%	100%

Table 13. Perceived effects of informal distribution on film viability (N = 146).

Yes	No	Total
5	141	146
3%	97%	100%

Table 14. Reported availability of viable film-distribution platforms (N = 146).

Yes	No	Don't Know	Total
0	146	0	146
0%	100%	0%	100%

Table 15. Reported changes in production frequency (N = 146).

Yes	No	Don't Know	Total
116	2	28	146
80%	1%	19%	100%

Table 16. Perceptions of hyper-local genres as a survival strategy (N = 146).

I Agree	I don't Agree	Not Sure	Total
110	17	19	146
75%	12%	13%	100%

Table 17. Perceived changes in relations between filmmakers and audiences (N = 146).

Yes	No	Don't know	Total
141	2	3	146
97%	1%	2%	100%

Table 18. Perceptions of the balance between talent and capital (N = 146).

Yes	No	Maybe	Total
2	138	6	146
1%	95%	4%	100%

Table 19. Perceived prospects for a sustainable industry career (N = 146).

Yes	No	Sometimes	Total
3	138	5	146
2%	95%	3%	100%

Table 20. Ability to begin another film before distributing the previous one (N = 146).

Yes	No	Sometimes	Total
3	139	5	146
2%	95%	3%	100%

Table 21. Reported ability to secure funding for film production (N = 146).

Yes	No	Don't Know	Total
146	0	0	146
100%	0%	0%	100%

Table 22. Perceptions of decline in the Benin film industry (N = 146).

Yes	No	Don't Know	Total
0	140	6	146
0%	96%	4%	100%

Table 23. Reported cinema exhibition of Benin-language films (N = 146).

Yes, I Agree	No, I do Not Agree	Not Sure	Total
140	2	4	146
96%	1%	3%	100%

Table 24. Perceptions of the effects of stable distribution on innovation (N = 146).

Yes	No	Don't Know	Total
111	5	30	146
76%	3%	21%	100%

Table 25. Support for investment in distribution infrastructure (N = 146).

Distribution	Quality of Films	Talent Development	Total
130	5	11	146
89%	3%	8%	100%

Table 26. Respondents' priorities for addressing industry constraints (N = 146).

Theoretical Synthesis: The Signaling Crisis and the Value Gap

The preceding comparisons identify aesthetic choices that might be shaped by resource constraints, while the survey describes practitioners' perceptions of distribution-related

difficulties. Drawing on Spence (1973), the article suggests that limited access to trustworthy sales and viewing information may increase uncertainty for investors. Informal circulation through physical or digital channels does not necessarily prevent commercialization, but a lack of transparent information about revenues and audience reach may make investment more difficult to evaluate. These propositions should be tested against production budgets, licensing arrangements, and distribution records.

For example, approximately 96% of respondents agreed that distribution bottlenecks encourage hyper-local, lower-risk genres (Table 2), suggesting a widely shared professional concern. Their responses do not establish that a particular camera setup in *Invasion 1897* resulted from investment aversion. Similarly, the unanimous responses to the question about knowing people who migrated for work (Table 3) establish awareness of outward mobility, not the scale of a measured “brain drain.” Transaction-cost approaches (Commons, 1931) and human-capital theory (Schultz, 1961) offer ways to investigate these relationships more precisely in future research.

The study therefore proposes a possible feedback relationship: limited revenue information may discourage investment; constrained investment may narrow production options; and restricted opportunities may encourage practitioners to seek work elsewhere.

Barney's (1991) account of valuable and difficult-to-replicate resources helps explain why the loss of specialized expertise could matter for a regional film industry. The audiovisual examples remain interpretive illustrations, however, rather than a direct measure of this process.

Conclusion: The Path to Distributive Sovereignty

This study argues that distribution is an important condition of regional film production, not merely a final stage in the circulation of completed works. By combining practitioners' responses with readings of *Invasion 1897* and *Ikoka*, it proposes that resource constraints may shape some choices of framing, scale, and sound. The data point to concerns about investment, regional audience access, and the retention of technical skills. They do not establish a deterministic connection between distribution systems and specific aesthetic decisions, particularly because the films analyzed precede the digital transition under discussion. Further work with production budgets, distributor records, filmmakers' testimony, and audience data could test the relationships proposed here. The article nevertheless makes a case for treating the sustainability of Benin cinema as a question of cultural infrastructure as well as economic policy.

Recommendations for Regional Film Distribution

Several practical implications follow from this analysis. The most immediate is the need for more transparent regional distribution arrangements that provide producers and investors

with credible information about revenues and audiences. Improvements to these arrangements could be developed alongside local technical training, rights management, and systematic research into regional media markets.

One possibility is to develop a locally governed digital distribution service for Benin-language films, or a shared arrangement among existing platforms, with transparent audience and revenue reporting. Such a service could increase the visibility of Edo-language narratives and provide potential investors with evidence of market demand. Its feasibility, costs, and governance would need to be assessed before it could be recommended as an established solution.

At the same time, existing informal networks should be recognized as resources that connect filmmakers with audiences. Partnerships with local distributors and digital intermediaries could help formalize licensing, improve rights protection, and create more reliable direct-to-consumer revenue without abandoning the cultural specificity of Benin filmmaking.

Investment in locally accessible editing, visual-effects, sound, and training facilities could reduce some of the costs of working outside larger production centers. Rather than assuming that all specialists have already left the region, policymakers and industry organizations should first identify which skills are scarce and which forms of targeted support would be most useful.

Finally, a regional film-industry observatory supported by universities and professional organizations could collect consistent information about production costs, distribution agreements,

audience reach, and employment trends. Such evidence would make it possible to test the proposed relationship between distribution and aesthetics and to design policies responsive to filmmakers' actual needs. Together, these measures offer a route toward greater regional control of film circulation without presenting a single technological platform as a guaranteed solution.

REFERENCES

- Barney, J. B. (1991). Firm resources and sustained competitive advantage. *Journal of Management*, 17(1), 99–120. <https://doi.org/10.1177/014920639101700108>
- Commons, J. R. (1931). Institutional economics. *The American Economic Review*, 21(4), 648–657.
- Higson, A. (1989). The concept of national cinema. *Screen*, 30(4), 36–47. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/30.4.36>
- Larkin, B. (2008). *Signal and noise: Media, infrastructure, and urban culture in Nigeria*. Duke University Press.
- Lobato, R. (2012). *Shadow economies of cinema: Mapping informal film distribution*. British Film Institute.
- Miller, J. L. (2016). *Nollywood central: The Nigerian videofilm industry*. British Film Institute.
- Omoera, O. S. (2014). Audience reception of the Benin language video film in Nollywood. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 26(1), 69–81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2013.822793>
- Omoera, O. S. (2024). *Audience reception of Benin cinema in Nigeria: Empirical findings and implications for Nollywood*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Omoera, O. S., & Anyanwu, C. (2020). Politics of succession in Nollywood films, *Saworoide* and *Ikoka*. *CINEJ Cinema Journal*, 8(1), 185–217. <https://doi.org/10.5195/cinej.2020.266>

Rambocas, M., Meneses, R., Monteiro, C., & Brito, P. Q. (2015). Direct or indirect channel structures: Evaluating the impact of channel governance structure on export performance. *International Business Review*, 24(1), 124–132. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ibusrev.2014.07.002>

Schultz, T. W. (1961). Investment in human capital. *The American Economic Review*, 51(1), 1–17.

Spence, M. (1973). Job market signaling. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 87(3), 355–374. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1882010>