

CONVERSATIONS

Isioma Idigbe
Nigeria's
Entertainment
Law Evangelist.

Isioma Idigbe holds a Bachelors of Law(Hons) degree from the Faculty of Law at the University of Kent, Canterbury, United Kingdom and a certificate of entertainment Law from the Osgoode Hall Law School at the York University, Toronto Canada. She attends a lot of International media and law conference around the world, speaking at panels and contributing largely to the growth of the media and entertainment industry.

By Efeiong Udo Akpan



After spending well over 4 hours trying to navigate the Island from the mainland, the car air conditioner stopped working. Our driver comes down but realizes that the car's fan belt had shredded to pieces. We all come out and order an Uber to catch up with the appointment before close of work. Isioma Idigbe had left office for a quick meeting but promised to return in 30 minutes. Time was 4.38pm; staff are seen very busy wrapping up work for the year, the Christmas feeling permeates the atmosphere.

We sit calmly in the lobby, comforted by the smiles of a cheerful receptionist. Almost an hour later we meet up with resourceful lawyer Isioma Idigbe, for the thrilling reason of her being Nigeria's evolving media and entertainment law advocate. The PUNUKA attorneys and Solicitors lawyer, globally networked Lawyers Associated Worldwide (LAW) member and Certified Entertainment Lawyer speak with a motherly passion. Idigbe intuitively solution provider and desirous of a future political role in Nigeria embraced the magical world of media and entertainment by chance. Today she advocates need for Nigerian media and entertainment professionals to be legally bound to industry structures and transactions and set up plan to build a real Nigerian film culture. Isioma, who just recently got married, considers Lagos her home state, aside origins in Asaba, Delta State. She has lived most of her life in Yaba and Lekki, Lagos; apart from studying abroad in the UK and Canada.



Everything Nollywood: How did you get into a seemingly unknown entertainment sector of legal practice?

Isioma: When I was in law school many of my friends desired to be in the Nigerian film industry after graduation. We discussed a lot of the issues that sounded to me like legal issues. I took notes of certain problems or issues discussed and researched the internet later. I never knew about media and entertainment law.

Everything Nollywood: That became your starting point?

Isioma: That became my starting point.

Everything Nollywood: Why did you choose law in the first place?

Isioma: It is almost as if I was born to be a lawyer. I resented that fact the longest time in my life. My grandfather, Chief Justice Chukwuike Idigbe was a lawyer and a very well respected Supreme Court judge till his death. My father is also a lawyer and Senior Advocate of Nigeria. I have a ton of uncles, who are lawyers. Everywhere I turned there was a lawyer in the family.

There was always an assumption that I was going to practice law. I actually didn't want to study law or become a lawyer. I wanted to be a politician, to solve Nigeria's

problems.

Everything Nollywood: Will it be same motivation for media and entertainment after listening to your friends discuss issues?

Isioma: Honestly 100 percent I will make the same link. I remember this blowout argument with my mum, over my university application to do political science. She asked me, "What job do you do, when you study politics; here in Nigeria or abroad?" I ended up studying law, but didn't really enjoy much of it.

After graduation in the UK, I returned for law school through a year and a half before qualification to practice in Nigeria. I could have decided whether to do something else.

During this period I interacted with filmmakers and their challenges. I analyzed and found those needed legal considerations.

Everything Nollywood: Those were your motivations.

Isioma: Initially to solve my boyfriend, now husband and his friends' problems. I just stumbled in at just the right time; for that part of me that always wanted to solve a problem. Fixing Nigeria is still one of my greatest passions; aligned with something else others tried to impose on me.

I've always been involved in creative endeavors over the course of my entire life. Drama club;

culinary business on campus: certainly not the most talented person. I always had done something with some level of creativity and appreciating the arts.

I did not realize my legal skill could align with my passion; that opened an entire world for me. So after all those intense discussion, I would research online.

I came over to my dad's law firm and asked a lawyer, for clarifications. The best example is advising my clients on Special Purposes Vehicle (SPV). That is about every film becoming a Special Purposes (Vehicle) Company. In the US every film is a Limited Liability Company. So I asked, "What is the equivalent in Nigeria?" I was told its SPV.

Everything Nollywood: And SPV is always perfect.

Isioma: Exactly! The idea is that amidst mitigations, for every production, your production company should only be an incubator. There you develop a project to a certain point. When you're ready to go into principal photography or full production, you isolate for a special company, built to house that project.

These were things I learnt from amazing entertainment lawyers all over the world. I actively localized these ideas.

Everything Nollywood: While localizing what was your total evaluation of the environment you found yourself?

Isioma: It was an extremely underserved sector. Some people had lawyers, who didn't understand their problems. Most people didn't have lawyers at all.

My first set of clients was my husband and his friends. That meant a lot of work and know-how so I did a certificate course in media and entertainment law at Osgoode Hall, York University, Canada.

Another mind-blowing experience, because I went in-depth. I gained knowledge and made sense of it locally. I met an incredible mentor in Susan Abramovitch, while studying about proper processing.

She is one of the best media and entertainment lawyers in Canada. I remember telling her my story and she said "Oh that's exactly how I started." That's how almost all of us started, you know?

It was nice to feel there wasn't anything strange about my story; through a path that people at their career peaks also experienced.

Fast tracked how many years now and crazy people like Mykel would say I'm one of the top and most important entertainment lawyers in Nigeria. I don't take that accolade, but people are beginning to appreciate the value that lawyers bring.

Everything Nollywood: How would you compare Canadian and Nigerian film industries?

Isioma: People say I'm biased, because Canada is where I learnt a lot of stuff. The peculiarity of Canadian situation and circumstances helped it navigate and achieve success.

Canada has the unfortunate disadvantage of being right beside America; indeed Hollywood. Canadians are neither as interesting nor eccentric as Americans. It's a cold place. It does have all the excitement that comes with America and Hollywood.

However they have a bustling and thriving film industry: because they had made very intentional decisions. They decided how they wanted their industry to compete and function and accepted they could not compete with Hollywood. They make it cheaper for Hollywood to shoot in Canada.

Most of your television shows and many of your movies are shot in various locations in Canada. Popular places: Vancouver, Toronto, you know? They make sure they have strong skilled force. You can shoot in Canada using Canadian filmmakers.

Everything Hollywood: Toronto also looks like New York.

Isioma: Yes, because they have very good infrastructure. They have many alternative locations to places in the US.

Everything Hollywood: What can Nigeria give to the US for benefits like Canada?

Isioma: I don't even agree with that question; because I was still comparing. Look at Nigeria as a contrast. We can compete with Hollywood in terms of stories and excitement. People are fascinated with Nigeria and Nigerians. Okay? So we have that 'itch factor!' Nollywood can compete on the basis of curiosity about our stories. But we do not have the infrastructure for proper distribution or maximized exploration.

Nollywood is like a spoilt child with the silver



spoon; not in terms of money, but in terms of content. Canada is the child that had one leg, didn't walk very well, but learnt how to walk straight. The key thing is they had a plan, now they have an industry. What we have in Nollywood is just a bunch of people making films.

Everything Nollywood: Look at that plan; call it film culture. Do you think Nigeria has a film culture?

Isioma: I think Nigerians like entertainment; but some things that are just entertainment, should be left as entertainment. You can argue it is either way.

Anyhow at some point Nigeria had film culture, but I think it's very important to put Nollywood in context. People feel or only started thinking about Nollywood from the 1990s. That's not true! We have the Tunde Kelanis of the world.

Everything Nollywood: Ali Balogun, Eddie Ugboma in the 1970s.

Isioma: My dad tells me stories of going to watch films in cinemas in 1970s. But with military incursions, economic issues, this like every other industry took a major beating.

One of the reasons it continues so is to not pay attention to its potentials. There was never a plan in the 70s to prove this was and still is a viable economic contributor. It is an important sector of our economy and our social system.

When I say plan people assume it is a government issue. No! The filmmakers themselves from the 1970s till now date don't really think their jobs are important. When I say think: it's not about those, who stand and shout and all that. No! No! No!

You all should sit down and have five, ten or twenty years for your industry. After that you engage government to show where, it can key in. This is the value we can bring to our economy and society. This is why you should take us seriously.

Should I believe we have film culture? It's rather an entertainment culture. We lost a film culture at some point in the 1970s. In the 90s we developed a VHS, VCD culture and you're seeing cinema culture resurgence now.

Ironically I had this discussion with a group of filmmakers at the opening of a cinema. I told them Wedding Party 1 did something phenomenal for Nollywood. People saw



Nollywood in the cinema: the first time they watched a Nollywood movie, instead of an American film.

Excited, they were like, “You know what? It was not an American film, but wow for a start this is a really strong sign!” They were hopeful, but after Wedding Party 1 we saw more mediocre content coming out. The audience is increasingly becoming disillusioned.

I’m sure when people look at Nollywood cinema numbers for 2018 they are not as good as 2017 and 2016. They are losing the audience, because they are not making good films. Nollywood cinema culture, while trying to grow is also at risk. We are not feeding the audience with what they need to keep the culture going.

Everything Nollywood: You are an entertainment lawyer, who has ventured, perceived, analyzed and evaluated Nollywood. What will be your strongest role at building structures to impact a film culture called Nollywood?

Isioma: That role is already being done. I came in at the point of trying to solve a certain group of people’s problem. I have done everything so far with the same mindset. May be skills have

grown over the years.

Lawyers are definitely critical! You cannot build a structure without lawyers involved. I like to use real life examples to explain this.

What are the foundations for a strong guild? It has to offer something to its members. An industry participant, who doesn’t belong, is disadvantaged.

Those things should be enshrined in guild constitution and code of conduct. There should also be some form of an enforcement structure within the guild.

People will tell me that’s why they want MOBICON. I know that such a thing does not need MOBICON mechanism. It is simply doable, when guild members decide on how they want to function.

Guilds like writers’ guild in developed film cultures have pension for members. They have standard form agreements used in contracting; which would have been pre-negotiated with major studios.

That will stipulate entitled minimum wage for filmmaking services. Guild members access healthcare benefits. So in this industry, where

you're essentially a freelancer there's a lot of benefits for members of guilds.

As lawyer I will draft the constitution and be there at the point of enforcement? I will negotiate with the studios on minimum wage for members of guilds?

Who can sit down with members of the industry, stakeholders and come up with a 5 year plan. A lawyer and other relevant professionals: the stakeholders themselves.

Check from the business and regulatory point of views in other countries, a lot of those people have some legal backgrounds. During my training in Canada many training attendees were from various regulatory boards, related to entertainment industry across Canada.

So the importance of law in the business of film cannot be underestimated. We basically are contracting on intellectual property; which is again administered through legal means. You cannot do a project without some form of legal backing.

Everything Nollywood: You've been in seminars or workshops and spoken in such places within and outside the country. How have these travels evangelize what you've said?

Isioma: It's good; when professionals from the industry are from within the space here. It sends a message that we are beginning to do the business of film, the way it should be done.

Everything Nollywood: Sorry what part of the world have you featured at?

Isioma: I've spoken at an international conference called MIDEM. It's one of the biggest music business conferences that hold in Cannes, France. My entire speaking session was in front of International Association of Entertainment Lawyers, which I am a member.

I talked about the new Nigerian creative economy, which encompasses not just film and music, but other creative subsectors. There was an incredible amount of interest about my presentation; because people did not realize there was a viable market in these sectors: Africa and specifically in Nigeria.

Essentially, when attending conferences, you're not necessarily advertising your business. You're more so advertising your industry; meeting someone to explain the way it should be done. Give investors a little more comfort to say okay, we're going to come into this market. Yes, because they are professionals in here that understand how it should be done. Guide us to

understand the landscape for our investment; which the industry needs. There is no need to beat around the bush about financing being one of our major problems.

Even within Nigeria, I remember another lecture this year, themed on building business structures: film, music and television industry. I had people from SEC saying we've put aside a fund for the creative industry; but no one has been able to tell us how to access it.

That triggered a whole lot of negotiations that are yet to materialize. We need to follow up in this conversation. They are places, where money is domestically and internationally, but filmmakers are not positioned professionally enough to access.

If you call me an evangelist: I guess that's a very practical example of how that can be done. It is also very important to educate filmmakers on their rights, risks management strategies and best practice. It trickles down from one producer doing it the right way.

Unlike before people now do stuff with contracts; whether it is the best contract is neither here nor there. At least there is something, an incredible progress marking out a better future.

Everything Nollywood: As a newly married woman, how do you manage life and work?

Isioma: I just survive each day, because I don't believe in work-life balance. I believe in work-life integration. My work knows about my home life and my home life knows about my work.

I'm blessed with working for a very reputable law-firm. It is committed to making sure there is good working environment for its staff. More so it deploys technology to make its staff more efficient. Some days it's easier for me to work from home.

