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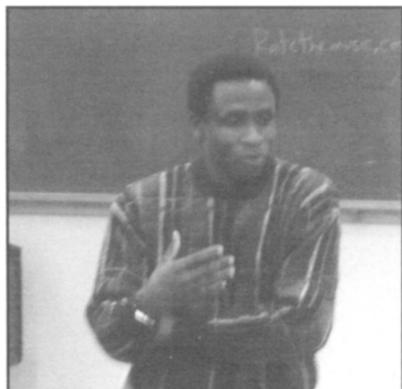
Issues in the New Nigerian Cinema

By Akin Adesokan



Professor Akin Adesokan lecturing on Nigerian cinema

The new cinema in Nigeria has been receiving a lot of attention in the last few years, through writings and featurings at film festivals as well as conferences. Much of this interest arises from the sheer power that the cinema is expected to wield as an economic force, next to Hollywood in the United States and India's Bollywood, in terms of the scale of production. Predictably, and for this reason, it has been labeled 'Nollywood.' Very few of the commentaries bother to describe the films in any intelligible manner or even historicize them. Mere familiarity with the Nollywood label does not prepare anyone for films made in several Nigerian languages, nor does it draw attention to the vast use of video and digital technologies as markers of new social identities outside of filmmaking. Nor, for that matter, is the relationship of these films to television stressed as an aesthetic issue. There are write-ups that routinely but vaguely class the films as 'straight-to-video' or 'home videos,' the sort of vagueness that, paradoxically, is to be encountered when even the filmmakers talk about their works.

This tendency cannot be divorced from the general attitude to cultural productions in contemporary Africa, which sees any form as dazzlingly new, for the moment, and apt to soon loose effervescence and disappear once its ostensibly utilitarian end is achieved. One is thus reminded of the ancient saying about the continent as the perpetual site of new things.

The truth is that the cinema had been in existence for about seven years when the critic Jonathan Haynes published an essay titled, "Nigerian Cinema: Structural Adjustments."[1] Haynes had several concerns in that important piece, but the most central, in this writer's view, was to demonstrate the effects of the regime of global economic deregulation on the vibrancy of a filmmaking practice that had none of the institutional support usually available to filmmakers in French-speaking West Africa. This concern was clear from the title; the economic deregulation process went by the name of Structural Adjustment Program, or SAP, its telling acronym. It was part of the neo-liberal economic agenda administered by the transnational corporate capital complex through the International Monetary Fund with variations in different parts of the 'global south.' In Nigeria, the deregulation consisted in the devaluation of the currency (which is still on a downward slide after almost two decades), the control of interest rates, and the removal of government subsidies from public corporations.

The questions of superstition and occult imagery have not been resolved...

The Nigerian cinema was a public ('national') institution more by presumption than practice, and the filmmakers discussed by Haynes had ideas that were compatible with neither the expectations of bureaucrats—the putative administrators of the industry—nor the suppositions of critics who analyzed their works. It seems ironic from this distance in time that Haynes's essay focused not on the then-incipient cinema driven by video technology but on the final gasps of the 16 to 35-mm celluloid tradition. The irony loses poignancy when one observes that those films of the late 1980s were already in the process of grafting their aesthetics on the technology of video, which would explain the structural and aesthetic problems identified in the essay. In one crucial passage, Haynes made the following observation: "...[O]ne will not truly be able to speak of Nigerian Film until the rift between the Yoruba filmmakers and the rest of the filmmaking community is overcome" (111). The rift in question had to do with the conviction of Yoruba-language filmmakers of the late 1980s that their works subsisted on an audience that they had created and cultivated, and the feeling of academics and bureaucrats that much of these films purveyed little beside superstition and false consciousness, the latter a Marxian terminology.

In the last ten years, those who follow the developments in cinema in Nigeria have seen a different, more muddled picture. There is such a thing as a Nigerian film now, although when we say this we usually turn a blind eye on the films made in Hausa language in and around the northern city of Kano, which are Nigerian but still very different. The questions of superstition and occult imagery have not been resolved, and the Yoruba filmmakers of Haynes's recall are not quite the dominant players in the current dispensation. It is true that the bridge across that rift has been provided in the works and person of Tunde Kelani, arguably the best-known of the director-producers in Nigeria.

Kelani, 57, has directed and produced eight video-based films between 1993 and 2005, excluding two cellu-

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loid features, one of which he only produced. As an active filmmakers he commands a stable, consistent, and formalized structure—Mainframe Productions. His cinematic practice is firmly rooted in Yoruba cultural identity even when he makes a foray into a cross-cultural ambience, as in the film ***Magun: Thunderbolt***, his first 'English-language' film. At the same time (a suitable Nigerian phrase), he travels regularly to film festivals inside and outside the continent. In 2004 he was the subject of a mid-career retrospective at the New York African Film Festival, and in Los Angeles later in the year. One of his films, ***Agogo Eewo*** (***The Sacred Gong***), was screened around the United States as part of an African traveling series.

But there is a limit to holding up an individual filmmaker as the paradigmatic figure in a context as stunningly diverse as Nigeria. There are producers such as Francis Onwochei, Kingsley Ogoro, Kabat Esosa Egbon and others who work the European circuit, while being active in Nigeria-focused initiatives like filmmakers' cooperatives and government-sponsored professionals' retreats and workshops. There are actors' caucuses and cliques unevenly spread across Lagos, Onitsha, Aba, and Osogbo; in sprawling markets of Idumota and Alaba cartels and mafias proliferate as regularly as the videofilms are released. In terms of actual productivity, these different formations put out over a thousand titles in a year, although given the scarcity of reliable statistics in Nigeria, this estimate is at best rough for a sector firmly in private hands. Their target markets spring from the road-side tuck-shop to transnational trade networks that the anthropologist Brian Larkin has questionably characterized as 'disembedded from the official global economy'[2].

For a country with a widely misunderstood international image and quite susceptible to resentment from outsiders, the self-adulation is not entirely useless.

The introduction of SAP had two immediate effects on the economics of filmmaking in the middle of the 1980s. In the first place, hitherto-active filmmakers like Ola Balogun, Eddie Ugbomah, and Bayo Aderounmu (with whom Kelani had worked as a cinematographer) found it difficult to fund new films. When they were able to complete a project, the costs of postproduction, which could only be done abroad, were too prohibitive. Even if the filmmakers could hope to sell these works to local television stations for broadcast, there was the other effect of SAP. The Nigerian National Television Authority, NTA, was one of the public corporations from which subsidies had been withdrawn, and most of the television producers were increasingly looking elsewhere for work.

In the early 1990s, there was an exodus of professionals from the television houses. But as it happens in such situations, this was also the time that video and digital technologies were becoming more and more available and affordable (deregulated, in fact, like the economies of the developing regions), and private broadcasting has since become a catalytic feature of mass media in Nigeria.

The earliest films were produced on shoestring budgets that the established filmmakers, who were accustomed to celluloid filmmaking with all its costs, could not embrace. Granted that technical expertise was lacking in most cases, those early films suffered more from an inability to the requisite capital than from an inability to tell a good story. Acting in Nigerian cinema has always been excellent, if often quite theatrical, but the overall quality was greatly affected by the technology of shoulder-borne video camera.

Even the breakthrough work of this period, ***Living in Bondage*** (1992) produced and directed by the electronics merchant Kenneth Nnebue, was technically flawed. Its success derived in part from its appeal to an audience broader than the ones that the Yoruba filmmakers had pleased for years. The story of Paul, a jobless man who becomes rich by sacrificing his wife to a secret cult, ***Living in Bondage*** cannily mixed a dramatic example of personal tribulation with the pervasive presence of Pentecostal fervor, and through the judicious deployment of English subtitles rendered the Igbo speech accessible in the multi-ethnic context of Nigeria. Haunted by the wife's ghost to the point of mental breakdown, Paul finds deliverance in a Pentecostal church. On this purely didactic level, the film was an unqualified success. The rest is cinematic history, an on-going rehearsal and one of the most fascinating in contemporary Africa.

Little of this history has received the kind of rigorous attention that it deserves[3]. Instead, what abound are celebratory claims regarding Nigeria as a 'force' in filmmaking circles. Hence the chest-beating honorific of Nollywood, 'the third largest film industry in the world', as an otherwise well-meaning commentator recently opined[4]. For a country with a widely misunderstood international image and quite susceptible to resentment from outsiders, the self-adulation is not entirely useless. In the rest of this essay, I attend to misconceptions whose correction I judge as crucial to a productive engagement with the videofilm practice.

It is common to describe these films, indeed the cinema of Nigeria, as apolitical. This is unhelpful. The sense of the political implied in such descriptions is conventional. The films are political, but not always in the explicitly anti-imperial mode which we see in much of better-known African cinema, from Ousmane Sembène to Jean-Marie Teno. Politics here is conceived philosophically as a sub-category of morality, so it is a foundationalist kind of principle, over and above specific political or social situations. There is some truth in the assumption that, since volatile political themes do not often or easily

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interest spectators eager for escapist and fantastic plots, filmmakers who cater to a mass audience are quick to keep such representations at arm's length.

However, such is the proliferative character of the videofilms produced in Nigeria in terms of themes, notions of the cinematic image, and genre that no approach is absolutely foreclosed. This industry may be far from integrated for now, but the very fact of an incremental form requires the practitioners to conceive of a material, a videofilm, as a commodity. This means that it must show potential for commercial viability. Once a particular film achieves success through its combination of certain factors, the formula becomes a basis for other stories.

...the (mostly uncritical) use of Pentecostal Christian ideas and 'traditional African' practices is better engaged than disparaged.

When Kelani revamped the institution of monarchy as a locus of political desire in the three-part ***Ti Oluwa Nile*** (*The Land Belongs to the Lord*), his first film released between 1993 and 1995, and later in ***Saworoide*** (1999), he also re-engineered the skin-deep proclivity for the allegorical among Yoruba-language filmmakers, with whom he shares a cultural template. These days, in any number of Yoruba-language films, the king sits resplendent in his grandeur on the screen, even if mostly pressed to share his authority with the law court and political Big Men. The recognition that women's motives could be presented as starkly as in ***Glamour Girls*** (dir. Nnebue, 1994/95) also led to a whole genre of English-language films, of which ***Zeb Ejiro's Domitila*** (1997) is perhaps the most controversial.

Even the consolidation of the videofilm as a genre is an example of this; everyone embraced this new formula once it was discovered that its economic success could double as artistic niche. Within this kind of logic, it is safe to speculate that directly political themes are not an anathema, all risks considered. There is enough evidence already.

In such films as ***Akobi Gomina*** (*The Governor's Heir*, 2003), ***Alaga Kansu*** (*The Council Chairman*, 2003), ***Mr. President*** (2004), and the eponymous ***Omasiri*** and ***Makan*** (both released in 2002), political issues are either foregrounded or integral. More and more films are turning toward 'dirty deals' in the political capital, Abuja. It is not to the advantage of the videofilm form to constantly import a notion of the political derived from the cultural-vanguardist practice of African cinema. Surely there is much that Nigerian videofilms stand to benefit from an acute sense of the ideological and political forces shaping global relations, which is to be found in different registers in the works of Sembene, Youssef Chahine, or Jean-Luc Godard. But it is more productive to relate to the phenomenon of videofilm on the terms of its open-endedness, and see its tendency to proliferate as the strategic basis of such engagement. In any case, the films' ground of foundational politics, which is seen in the (mostly uncritical) use of Pentecostal Christian ideas and 'traditional African' practices is better engaged than disparaged. It is about everyday human choices in socially volatile circumstances, so it embodies the moral force of a human example.

Nigerian videofilms are also often disparaged as being overly didactic and full of moralisms, when not obsessed with simplistic saccharine romance and domestic trivia. This is a question of form which cannot be avoided, and it is related to the earlier critique about ideological ambivalence. Like that critique, however, this is again a conventional view of a form that subsists on a foundational view of social processes. We would be relating appropriately to the complexities of the form if we viewed those spectacles of family romance and magic-suffused allegory as complex (even confused) attempts to address deep moral issues.

The films are about good and evil but not always in the traditional sense in which this binarism has congealed to be identified as melodrama. Good deeds are often seen to be rewarded or praised, but evil or deviant conducts may receive no more than telling rebuke or ostracism (the lot of distrustful Yinka in Kelani's ***Magun***) or retributive justice (which is why the political stalwart Chief Makan has to go to jail, in spite of having the film named after him!)

These concerns are real, but they need not be viewed as permanent because the terrain is broad and open to fresh ideas. More urgent concerns, it seems to me, should lie elsewhere. Even *before* conception, the films are being made to serve social purposes. Twenty-first century politics turns on some important social issues. These include questions of economic development, the threat posed to the human community by epidemics like HIV/AIDS, bird flu, and the concern about sustainable development and ecological catastrophe, trade-for-aid, pervasive militarism, and bio-political surveillance masked as war on terrorism. These are global issues with varying relevance or topicality; in African societies, each of them is crucial and crucially linked to everyday political or social choices. At their beginning, some Nigerian films were generated through a close identification with social issues like gender inequalities, prostitution, etc. Their didactic treatment of these subjects drew upon the strong tradition of artistic populism that rendered a topic attractive to a mass audience within familiar aesthetic standards. Now filmmakers are required, through funding possibilities, to use their films to combat AIDS and attack the phenomenon of child soldiers.

Important as such critiques might be in terms of social responsibility, it is a debatable issue that a form ought to be burdened by these economistic calculations so early in its life. In

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Diawara Interview

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ATM: It's an interesting and provocative discussion because there are certainly more Black filmmakers than ever right now, more blacks making a living in the film industry, not to mention the recent academy awards to black actors. But is the quality better or worse? What is black cinema doing for black people?

MD: Yeah. That's exactly what they were saying. Black filmmakers are interested in one thing—to be a filmmaker and to go to Hollywood and make money. So they left behind the community to go to Hollywood. You make films that compromise and leave behind certain artistic and political concerns. This was the argument at the conference. I was fascinated by some of these ideas.

ATM: Potent ideas.

MD: We said Black cinema is dead. The film they showed was like Kasi Lemmons' ***The Caveman's Valentine*** (2001) Films like that, that's what was shown and, you know, people say "Where is that edgy Black cinema beyond the Hollywood cinema?" But again, people say "Every Black filmmaker wants to go to Hollywood, that's the problem."

ATM: But a filmmaker with real passion wants to make films-most of them have Hollywood dreams—but the new technology—internet, DVDs, digital cameras, and lower costs create more options. I wonder if we are creating new models of success in filmmaking.

MD: Well, you know, that's what's happening in Nigeria. The Nigeria video films, they used to make them literally for $2,000. Now the price has gone up because they are making a lot of money. Now it's got to be at least $25- 50,000, so they make these films and it's a huge market right now. It's like a $70 million a year market—

ATM: Yes, it is often compared quite imprecisely to what has happened in India.

MD: It's like India, but the paradigm is very interesting because remember in the '80s, Black writers used to do this. They would write books published by the Black press and they would distribute them themselves. With the development of video and the potential of video, digital video cameras, I think what you just said—DVD, movies can be created and they can be sold in alternative markets and a new cinema can be born.

At least that is the hope.

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one sense, this demand is a reflection of the integrated role of the arts as social phenomena, and cultural brokers in the 20th century had many field days perorating on the *functionality* of African arts. In another sense, Nigerian videofilms stand at the crossroads of capital as casualties of their own success.

At this strange pass, how much can one hope to see by way of the *auteur* tradition that preserves the independence of a film as a singular work of art? Is not this social requirement a way of further severing the form's open-ended, inclusive politics from the critical traditions in global cinema? Or, to take a more optimistic view, does this suggest a reconfiguration of the politics of mass forms on a global level, in very much the same way that new technologies and the wide dispersal of peoples are unsettling entrenched cultural notions?

Akin Adesokan is an assistant professor of Comparative Literature at IU

[1] Haynes, Jonathan. "Nigerian Cinema: Structural Adjustments", ***Research in African Literatures***, Vol. 26, No. 3, Fall 1995, 111.

[2] See his "Degraded Images, Distorted Sounds: Nigerian Videos and the Infrastructure of Piracy", ***Public Culture***, Vol. 16, No 2, Spring 2004, 293.

[3] For an early attempt to characterize the films along thematic lines, see *Nigerian Videofilms*, Jonathan Haynes (ed.), Jos: Nigerian Film Corporation, 1997. Contributors included Larkin, Onookome Okome, filmmaker Afolabi Adesanya, and others.

[4] Toyin Akinosho, "Don't envy the South Africans" (Artsville), ***The Guardian*** *on Sunday*, Online edition, March 6, 2005.

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