The Hearthstone: Language, Culture, and Politics in the Films of Tunde Kelani

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Abstract
Nollywood, the appellative term for the Nigerian film industry, has been recognized in academic spheres for its substantial production of low-budget, narrative-driven, and serialized films. The tradition balances elements of cinema and television to emerge as the dominant producer of video-films in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, beyond using Nollywood films as samples of creative hard work in Africa and Nigeria or documentation of African cultures and traditions, serious research into the specific content, context, and the artistic plurality of the films themselves has been comparatively less frequent. Furthermore, Nollywood filmmakers are yet to be inducted into the canon of African cinema: their works have been studied in relation to themes and genres but not within the auteurist perspective that favors in-depth analyses of bodies of films regarding particular directors in the tradition. Therefore, in this essay, using the auteur theory, I examine the films of Tunde Kelani, who is regarded as a leading filmmaker in Nigeria, to underscore recurrent themes that are germane to his filmmaking art as an auteur. I conclude that three elements—language, culture, and politics—are essential to Kelani’s cinematic art in Nollywood.

Auteur Criticism and Nollywood

As John Caughie (1981) rightly says, “auteur” theory/criticism is not a representation of the “cult of personality” or the “apothecosis of the director.” Rather, Caughie posits that in the presence of a director “who is genuinely an artist (an auteur) a film is more than likely to be the expression of his individual personality; and that this personality can be traced in a thematic and/or stylistic consistency overall (or almost all) the director’s films” (9). What this assertion implies is that there exists in film production a central figure that is responsible for creating and achieving cinematic aesthetics. The central figure, to me, is a creative tinker-man/woman who has both the innovative capacity and the psychological freedom to manipulate other cinematic resources—actors/actresses,
camera, location (natural or artificial), technology, and stories (fictional or real)—
and transform them into series of visual images that combine to form narratives
within the precepts of the director’s imagination.

Historically, auteur criticism began with the French film industry through
the writings of film critics and scholars such as Alexandre Astruc, Andre Bazin,
Francois Truffaut, Jean Luc-Godard, and many more, who wrote articles for a
French film journal Cahiers du Cinema in the 1950s through the 1960s. The
Cahier critics pushed for a radical departure from the French “Tradition of
Quality,” which they considered boring and too pedantic. They instead argued
that filmmakers should be free to make films in the best styles that suited their
creative imaginations. So, Astruc, in 1928, expressed the idea that cinema was a
means of expression and, therefore, directors should consider themselves as artists
by viewing cinema as a language through which they express themselves, and he
coined the term “Camera-Stylo” (camera-pen). By the term, Astruc opined that
“the cinema will gradually break free from the tyranny of what is visual, from the
image for its own sake, from the immediate and concrete demands of narrative, to
become a means of writing just as flexible and subtle as written language” (New
Wave, 18). Astruc’s idea was later built on by Truffaut who made a bold claim that
the film director is the author (auteur) of a film. Later, in the United States,
Andrew Sarris, a film critic, developed the auteur manifesto into a full theory in
his 1962 essay, “Notes on the Auteur Theory.” (see Andrew Sarris, The American
Cinema: Directors and Direction, 1928-68).

In critical terms, the central figure’s ability to conceive ideological,
historical, and social discourses differently from others and interpret them
aesthetically without any constraints/boundaries is what gives him/her agency in
the film industry and also constitutes his/her artistic signature. David Wharton
and Jeremy Grant (2005) recognize and categorize as an auteur any filmmaker
who is “the principal source of meaning in a film” and “who demonstrates
technical excellence” (16). The summary of these definitions points attention to
the importance of the director in any film production. Though cinema/film is
often a product of many hands and professionals, it is the director’s composed
visuals and sounds and their arrangements that, in the end, become visible and
audible as the final product, a movie. I am quite aware of the complications with
auteur theory, even during its heyday. But I am mostly interested in the theory
because, despite its shortcomings, it is the most suitable theoretical paradigm for
critiquing films globally. What I mean by this is that the auteur theory provides a
universal template for film criticism. Although there are many theoretical
frameworks for studying and critiquing films, for me, though, none recognizes the importance of the film director as directly as the auteur theory.

A significant criticism against the auteur theory is that it is director-centric, that is, it focuses too much on the personalities of the directors in the overall discussion of their artistic creativities. I do not consider the near apotheosis of a film director a critical problem in film criticism. In my view, film critics and cultural studies scholars should be free to grant agency to filmmakers if they wish to do so; after all, literary scholars often confer artistic agency on novelists, poets, and playwrights. That being said, what I consider to be the challenge of auteur criticism is the identification of the central figure responsible for cinematic aesthetics in a film. In this age of new media and technology, the central figure responsible for the cinematic aesthetic in a movie may not be the director; it could be the editor, the cinematographer, or the visual effects artists. Whomever that person is, critics ought to recognize his/her artistic ingenuity and give him/her credit for it.

Regarding Nollywood, it may appear unconventional to deploy auteur criticism to study video films, but, surprisingly, auteur theory is a critical conceptual framework for reading the various cinematic styles and filmmaking ideas that different Nollywood filmmakers express in their works. For many years, scholars of Nollywood paid little or no attention to the personalities of Nollywood directors and how those directors influenced their films. With this work, I aim to focus on Nollywood filmmakers by studying the works of Tunde Kelani to foreground the three primary cinematic scopes of his art in Nollywood, which have become his iconoclastic artistic signature. Without auteur criticism, it would be hard, if not impossible, to determine how much of the directors’ ideology filter through his/her films. How do we weigh the impact of the director’s psychological and socio-political perspectives on the film he/she makes? There is no other way except by sieving through the body of work credited to individual directors to figure out how much of their personal experiences are crafted into his/her practices. And it is in this instance that I study the films of Kelani to underscore how his art reflects his linguistic, cultural, and political ideologies.

TK in Nollywood

Tunde Kelani, popularly known as “TK,” was born on February 26, 1948, in Lagos State. His father was an Egba man from the Ijaye Kukudi compound in Abeokuta. When he was five years old, Kelani moved from Lagos to Abeokuta to live with his
grandparents. He lived for about twenty years in Abeokuta. And it was at Abeokuta, where he had his primary and secondary education that he got the chance to fully participate in the Yoruba culture that he represents in his works. Keenly inquisitive, Kelani, during his final year in primary school discovered photography, and before he graduated, he bought his first semi-professional camera Halina35—a single lens reflex. After his secondary education in 1966, he became an apprentice photographer for two years (1966-1968). In 1970, he joined the then Western Nigerian Television as a trainee cameraman, and he was part of the film unit. In 1976, due to his exposure to filmmaking at the Western Nigerian Television, he enrolled at London Film School to study filmmaking. He spent two years in the school, and he returned to Nigeria and worked on bond with the Western Nigerian Television management for two years. Upon the completion of the bond terms, Kelani resigned from the television station and began practicing as an independent filmmaker. In 1992, he established his production company, “MainFrame Film and Television Productions—Opomulero,” and has since produced series of blockbuster films (Personal Interview).

Kelani, no doubt, is a leading filmmaker in the Nollywood tradition. He is the most prominent Nigerian video filmmaker, who combines celluloid filmmaking strategies with video production knowledge to create artistically appealing audio-visual narratives that endear the Nigerian film industry to the global world. He is, as Jonathan Haynes (2016) puts it, “the most celebrated Nigerian video film director and the one on whom the mantle of a film auteur fits most naturally” (113). Perceptibly, Kelani is not only the most celebrated Nollywood filmmaker but also a leading figure of African cinema. He has produced more films than the canonical figures of African cinema, including Ousmane Sembene. From 1993 to 2017, Kelani has directed more than sixteen feature-length films. He has “since the mid-1990s been the regular subject of university theses,” and remains an iconoclastic image of video film production in Nigeria and beyond (Haynes 113). Besides the bright pictures and high-quality audio that distinguishes Tunde Kelani’s trade in the Nigerian film industry, culture, language, and politics are the essential elements around which his art revolves, elements that accord his production outfit, MainFrame Productions, the artistic appeal it holds for its audiences. In this article, therefore, I discuss how Kelani treats indigenous language, culture, and politics differently from other Nollywood filmmakers, and I conclude that his striking artistic manipulations of the three elements distinguish him as an auteur in the jaded Nollywood industry.
Language Matters

Language, no doubt, is critical to contemporary African literary discourse—it spurs vibrant academic debates about African literary productions. Also, it signifies selfhood and points to the question of identity in African and world literature respectively. However, in postcolonial African nations, “the choice of the language of expression is itself a political statement” (Fofana 93). Language is political in Africa because many African countries, Nigeria included, are multilingual nations, where the choice of having an indigenous language as the official language is, often, a complicated and highly contentious process. And despite the vigorous advocacy by scholars such as Ngugi wa Thiong’o that African languages are capable of representing African literature and scientific ideas (see Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature), African countries remain subject to linguistic imperialism.

Moreover, the European languages that came to be “associated with power and prestige exacerbated identity crises among the new African elites” (Fofana 93). For the most part, African elites—even the semi-educated ones—still hold the European languages in high esteem, often deeming their mother-tongues inferior to European languages such as English and French. Since language goes beyond communication to function as the repertoire of culture, indigenous values, and philosophy, its treatment in Nollywood films has not been exemplary: Nigerian languages often signify the lowliest place in social spaces and contexts. In most of the representations, speaking indigenous languages means mediocrity and poverty, while the ability to communicate in the English language reflects power status and high-class. The recent trend in the industry is to give English titles to indigenous language films, as well as make actors and actresses speak English for the most part in non-English language productions. Although one can argue that titling Yoruba films in English is not a new phenomenon since there is a large pool of film marketers responsible for making Yoruba films, however, the trend is more rampant lately. And that is my point. However, here I discuss how, through his films, Kelani pursues a cultural agenda: to value, use, and teach Nigerian languages, especially Yoruba instead of English, the official language in Nigeria.

Frantz Fanon, in Black Skin White Masks(2008), underscores the importance of language in the development of any nation and its implication for the process of modernity and civilization. He writes that “to speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of
civilization” (17). Here, Fanon touches on fundamental contributions of languages to a community of speakers and the overall progression of the nation, a concept that underlies Kelani’s agenda in Nollywood. To Kelani, to speak African languages does not stop at the recognition of the syntactical and morphological processes in the languages, which is often projected by the mainstream films. Instead, he posits that it also extends to how well the indigenous population can think scientifically, culturally, socially, and politically in the languages to the extent that the tongue enables them to form sets of values on which they premise the day-to-day affairs of their nations. Perhaps Kelani promotes African languages to confer agency on African languages so that Africans may own their indigenous languages and project the culture embodied by the language to the world. For according to Fanon, “a man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language” (18).

To project “a world expressed and implied” by the Yoruba language, Kelani constructs his films as teaching materials for the public (ibid.). Like a teacher, he loads his films with linguistic contents that turn around the gaze of the spectators to the richness of Nigerian languages. More than any Nollywood filmmaker, Kelani has been so consistent with his language choice in his works to the extent that he finds a place for the Yoruba language in his English films. First, to debunk the erroneous notion that the multilingual situation in Nigeria complicates effective communication between ethnic communities, Kelani represents, in Thunderbolt (2001) and Abeni (2007), the possibility of linguistic border-crossing among multilingual communities through the experiences of Ngozi and the herbalist, and Ogagu and Laku. In both representations, the characters resolve their linguistic differences through empathic listening and gestural images. To me, these descriptions are symbolic, in that they project the apprehensions associated with terms like multilingualism—the existence of multiple languages in a nation with many cultural contexts. Also, they foreground practical attempts to overcome barriers of communication in multilingual settings; that is, indigenous languages and dialects can become national languages once there is a societal need for them. This idea seems to be what Kelani is getting at in both films.

Before Thunderbolt and Abeni, Kelani had, in O Le Ku (1997), demonstrated his commitment to the documentation and advancement of Nigerian national languages. In the film, Ajani, the protagonist of the story and his colleagues recapitulate a lecture they just attended where a professor, Larinde, speculates that the root of two English words, “immunity” and “me,” are “imuniti”
and “mi” in the Yoruba language. While one may not necessarily agree with these claims, one ought to praise Kelani for the audacity to (re)frame rhetoric that seeks to ‘possess the world expressed and implied” by Yoruba language (Fanon 17). O Le Ku is regarded as the best example of Yoruba language film in Nollywood regarding how the actors and actresses articulate their point of views in “undiluted” Yoruba language. Speaking about the strict adherence to the monolingual mode of communication in the film, Akin Adesokan (2011), in his book, Postcolonial Artists and Global Aesthetics, opines that “the strict use of Yoruba language brings certain stiffness into the film” (86). I doubt if the language choice in O Le Ku affects the performances of the actors and actresses. The strict adherence to the Yoruba language throughout the film makes for realism so that the audience gets the first-hand education about Yoruba society without the affection that code-mixing would have imposed on the characters in the movie. Moreover, O Le Ku, in my experience as a foreign language teacher, is among the pedagogically relevant indigenous films that teachers have successfully adopted to teach foreign learners of Yoruba language in the United States of America and other European nations. The reason for the classroom adoption is due to the standard Yoruba that the actor and actresses speak, which is a rarity in Nollywood.

Apart from his exhortatory deployment of Yoruba in his films, Kelani, at other times, chides Nigerian elites for their attitudes towards indigenous languages. In Arugba, Kelani frowns at the extent to which native languages have denigrated in modern times and lampoons the custodians of African cultures for their failures to secure African mother-tongues through practice. To show that influential citizens are culpable in their treatment of African culture, Kelani
portrays two grand-children of the king in *Arugba*—Adeolu and Aderinsola—who as future kings and queens cannot greet in Yoruba nor speak fluently in the language. Instead of prostrating and kneeling to greet the king, both children stand erect and echo “good morning, grandpa!” And despite the requests from the queen to the children to greet appropriately in the Yoruba language, Aderinsola refuses the appeal on the ground that her teacher “forbids them from speaking [that] uncivilized tongue.” Also, the efforts of the two little children to identify the animal-skin that decorates the palace wall ends in a linguistic disaster. Aderinsola says “it is *kiniun*” [it is a lion], but Adeolu counters his sister to say “no, it is a *ologbo*” [it is a cat]. Dumbfounded, the king asks his chief to remove the children from his presence.

![Aderinsola and Adeolu before the king in Arugba (copyright Tunde Kelani)](image)

Kelani’s representation of the indigenous language attrition in *Arugba* is similar to the language matter Sembene projects in *Guelwaar* (1992). In *Guelwaar*, Sembene presents his audience with Barthelemy, the son of Pierre Henri Thioune, popularly known as “Guelwaar” (the noble one), the eponymous character of the film, who is suspected to have been murdered by the elite government because of his acerbic criticism of the state. Barthelemy returns from Paris to attend his father’s funeral, but surprisingly, he has become Europeanized to the extent that he is no longer able to relate to his African families in the contexts of the local culture and language. He does not speak Wolof, the local language of his Sereer community, but French and even claims he is a European, a French citizen, saying, “*Je Suis Francais, Européen*” (I’m French, a European). While his long absence from Senegal could suffice for his language loss, his arm-length attitude...
suggests otherwise. What is observable is a promotion of classism, self-delusional subjective feelings of belonging to an elite culture with a refined language.

Like Sembene, the images that Kelani provides in *Arugba* are suggestive of the impact of globalism on African languages and culture. The representation also exposes the new generations of Africans, especially the elite class, as hybrid citizens, who can neither communicate in African languages nor successfully navigate the cultural terrains of their communities. These new Africans, Fanon describes as “the newcomer, [who] no longer understands the dialect” but who “talks about the Opéra, which he may never have seen except from a distance, but above all [that] he adopts a critical attitude toward his compatriots” (13). In other words, both Aderinsola and Adeolu, like Barthelemy, are newcomers/foreigners in their cultural domains. As foreigners in the contexts of the Yoruba language, they are grossly inadequate at sustaining the Yoruba culture. Since there exists a link between language and culture, where “language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world” (Ngugi 16).

My point here is that instead of pandering to elitist film taste to produce films that boast of characters who speak in impeccable European languages and accents, Kelani adopts a communication mode that employs Nigerian indigenous languages. An example is *Thunderbolt*, where Ngozi and her father speak the Igbo language, despite their advanced education and claim to elitism. Perhaps, Kelani has taken it upon himself to teach his audiences about Nigerian indigenous languages. And this motive explains his incorporation of a Yoruba classroom scene in *Arugba*, where a professor of linguistics explains the regional classifications of Yoruba language. In other words, language matters, and because it matters so much, it is at the heart of Kelani’s Nollywood filmic preoccupations. His use of Yoruba notwithstanding, Kelani subtitles his Yoruba language films in English to reach out to multilingual audiences. Also, he incorporates the French language, and other dialects of the Yoruba language spoken in the Benin Republic, a French nation that has historical ties with the Yoruba culture of Nigeria, in his films.

Cultural Matters

There is no doubt that creative works in Africa (songs, music, painting, drama, written and oral literature, etc.) are cultural productions that play essential roles in the creation of social identity and the discussion of African communal lives.
Through musical compositions, ornamental and religious artworks, wood carving, sacred rituals and fictional stories, etc., talented and creative individuals represent culture and its elements in their works as a way of preserving it and showcasing it to the rest of the world. In Nigeria, filmmaking, apart from creating entertainment for the audiences, also inscribes some aspects of the nation, such as the socio-economic situations, political conditions, and cultural contexts in movie narratives. And, regarding the representations of culture in Nollywood narratives, Kelani, through his films, foregrounds the impossibility of discussing contemporary Nigeria in isolation of the culture of the people and the meanings these cultures carry. In the words of Nobert Elias, the German sociologist, “the concept of Kultur mirrors the self-consciousness of a nation which constantly had to seek out and constitute its boundaries anew, in a political as well as spiritual sense, and again, had to ask itself: ‘What is really our identity?’” (5-6). Culture is the DNA of communities and societies; it distinctly distinguishes nationalities and social identities. Culture, in a sense, is “the measures of what constitutes a people’s specificity: their customs, traditional values, art, cuisine, forms of communication, and elements of social contacts” (Vetinde and Fofania ix).

Since culture is indeed “the window through which we can understand the way a society perceived itself and in relation to others,” its representation in films not only provides external participants and foreign audiences information about African cultures; it also indicates how cultural mediators/creative artists are willing to critique it [culture] in modern times (ibid). While most Nollywood filmmakers represent culture in their films in opposition to modern conventions, or as fossilized, Kelani projects African cultures, especially his Yoruba culture, as organic and capable of adapting to the global modernity of the twenty-first century. Similar to Fanon’s view that “national culture is no folklore where an abstract populism is convinced,” instead, Kelani represents culture in his films to underscore the fact that “culture is the collective thought process of people to describe, justify, and extol the actions of the nation” (Wretched of the Earth168). Kelani, in his artistic attempts to represent culture in such a way that it extols actions of the Yoruba people and the Nigerian nation, views culture as an all-encompassing concept capable of promoting the Yoruba concept of omoluabi. To Kelani, African cultures have the potential to reform individuals as well as the entire nation. His treatment of Nigerian cultures is quite unusual in the Nollywood industry, where the format for representing culture is, often, to place it

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1. Omoluabi is a term that describes a just, hardworking, civic, responsible, morally upright, and psychologically balanced man/woman in Yoruba culture.
in a dichotomous relationship with modernity and contemporary ideas. The uniqueness about Kelani’s projection of Nigerian cultures stems from his critiquing of obsolete and outdated cultural practices on the one hand, and the elevation of useful cultural observations that are coterminal with contemporary innovations and postcolonial modernity, on the other hand. Essentially, Kelani condemns cultural ideas that are both unpalatable and appalling, especially cultural practices that demonize and commodify women in rapidly transforming postcolonial societies. Two classic examples of cultural ideas that Kelani portrays as inadequate in contemporary times are presented in Ayo ni Mo Fe (1994) and The Narrow Path (2007). In The Narrow Path, Kelani, similar to Sembene’s Moolade (2004), lays bare the agony and the pain certain cultural practices inflict on individuals and groups of people, especially women, in Nigeria. He provides visual images that seek to repudiate the cultural practice of “virginity test”—a cultural practice that requires women to keep their virginity until their wedding night when they are expected to have the first sexual experience with their husbands, and which punishes and disgraces any woman with a ruptured hymen. While Kelani may not have posited that the virginity test is grossly outdated, he seems to be suggesting that he would rather the practice was mediated by application of rational reasoning which in turn would cause the eradication of the practice. For instance, when we consider that, as it is with Awero, the heroine in The Narrow Path, rape can be the cause of defloweration, we would instead focus on genuine virtues, the manifestation of the omoluabi concept, and not the rupture of the hymen.

Kelani, through Dauda’s vaginal rape of Awero, creates a narrative that disrupts the cultural rhetoric associated with women’s honor. Through this representation, he queries the lopsided traditional arrangement that fails to hold men accountable for their immoral actions, while sanctioning women heavily for breaking cultural protocols which men, often, force on them. The Narrow Path centers on Awero, the coveted belle of Orita village, who is wooed by three prospective suitors—Lapade, the wealthy gold trader; Odejinmi, the jealous brave hunter; and Dauda, the philandering city rascal. A few weeks before the bride price is paid and the wedding date fixed, Dauda lures Awero into a thicket and rapes her. With a ruptured hymen and tainted pride, Awero goes about in pain and agony, for she is ashamed and afraid to tell anyone that she is a rape victim. Aware of the shame and disrespect that will follow her wedding night once the village discovers that she is a “broken pot” (as a new bride with ruptured hymen), Awero sinks further into despair. As she expects, the wedding night is chaos,
Odejinmi, despite Awero’s entreaties, forced himself on Awero and upon discovering that her virginity is gone, announces to the waiting crowd that she is a “broken pot.” Sad that the new wife is a broken pot, the wedding ceremony ends abruptly as bewildered visitors disperse. With a bruised reputation, Awero finds herself at the center of intercommunity hostility as both Agbede—Odejinmi’s village, and Orita, Awero’s village—engage in a battle.

While men of both villages declare war against each other, Awero declines to reveal the identity of the person who defiled her as required by the custom. According to the tradition, Awero must disclose the identity of the man that raped her and dance naked around the village in the scheme of the atonement ritual. As men of both communities are ready to lock horns in battle, Awero leads a peaceful procession of women bearing leaves and offers herself to be killed instead of innocent villagers. Moved by her action, the blood-thirsty men sheath their swords and leave the battlefield. As a lesson from Awero’s dilemma, the village of Orita abolishes the culture of virginity test, and peace returns to the communities.

Unlike many of Kelani’s films, *The Narrow Path* is symbolic because of its critique of the patriarchal system that supports the objectification of women’s bodies in Nigeria. It is a film that projects ideas that provide insights for rescuing the agency of women in a male-dominated society. The film also spotlights the Manichean perspectives that privilege the male child over the female regarding education, social participation, and freedom of expression. When the village council members discuss Awero, no woman is present; they are removed from the decision-making process, while the same system allows underage boys to witness the arbitrating procedure. In that instance, the views of Awero and those of her friends and the women are not critical in this decision process; it appears that women are to be seen and not heard. Reacting to the gendered contexts that frame the identities of African women, Dominica Dipio (2014) posits that “the gender socialization process makes the women accept their non-decision making the position as a given” (102). It is this “given status” that Kelani reacts to in his films, where he projects the ability of women to return peace and stability to societies, as presented in *The Narrow Path*. And, at other times, by investing women with extraordinary wits to outperform their male counterparts (as projected in *Campus Queen*). Or through possession of unusual physical strength and mental energy to outmaneuver phallocentric permutations (as is the case in *Dazzling Mirage*). Above all, Kelani highlights a gender discourse that “seeks a greater valuation for women in a patriarchal order” (Adeoti 31).
Apart from critiquing culture in his films, Kelani also projects African culture as viable, and sources of practical knowledge, especially the Ifa divination system. In *Thunderbolt* (2001), for example, differently from the standard practice in Nollywood where Pentecostalism is, often, the preferred mode of curing ailments and diseases that defy Western medical knowledge, Kelani projects the Ifa divination system as a religious-cum-medical practice. In the film, when conventional medical understanding is perplexed, the indigenous medical knowledge steps in to save Dr. Oladimeji, who had, earlier in the movie, doubted the etiology and the medical existence of *Magun.* Without the usual friction that attends to representations of modernity and traditional values in Nollywood films, Kelani underscores the importance of (re)reading African indigenous knowledge afresh. He offers that useful insights can be drawn from them, which have potentials to advance medical knowledge and other forms of curative ideas in contemporary times. What seems to be relevant to Kelani is the idea that the definition of “medical knowledge,” all too often, has a narrow bend to it, whereas, “medical knowledge” is complex and nuanced.

While Kelani seems to be suggesting the efficacy of traditional medicine in modern times, he, in *Ayo Ni Mo Fe* (1994), condemns the manner in which Yoruba traditional doctors handle psychiatric patients. In the film *Ayo Ni Mo Fe,* Kelani points out the inadequacy of Yoruba conventional psychiatric practice, where, instead of a clean and rehabilitative environment, dirty and unhygienic homes house the patients. Through the healer’s alternative approach that is rooted in mysticism and maltreatment—beating, isolation, and confinement—Kelani further establishes that traditional psychiatric practice is lacking in research and unpopular for curing mental illness. In that context, the healer lacks training in psychology and other related medical fields but instead claims that *Anjonu aagana* (the spirit of mental illness) is the source of psychosis. Incidentally, this view, “that [mental illness] is said to be caused by physical or spiritual forces,” and that one can only exorcise the spirit by beating the patients with a cane, is widely shared by the Yoruba people (Makinde 2007). But, here Kelani is advocating for conventional treatments of psychosis and not the traditional alternative model that he deems ineffective.

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2. *Magun* is a sexually activated affliction that is often put on a promiscuous woman. It can be remotely placed on any woman by making her to cross over any charmed material that contains the *magun* formulae. There are different types of *magun* in Yoruba land but the common type is the one exhibited by doctor Oladimeji in the *Thunderbolt* film.
Apart from his representations of cultural practices that border on the affairs of women, health, and healing, Kelani’s films are replete with other processes and products of Yoruba culture, and they include greetings, drumming, singing, clothing, art and craft, and oral literature. The incorporation and representations of these processes and products of culture explain why his films are useful in foreign language classes to teach Yoruba language and culture to foreign learners of the tongue. Take dressing/clothing and greetings, for example: in each of his films, Kelani projects the Yoruba traditional style of dressing in contexts such as naming ceremonies, wedding ceremonies, work, and leisure. In both Saworo-Ide and Agogo Eewo, Kelani pays close attention to dressing, to the extent that he dedicated two or more scenes to the different styles of head-wrap and their symbolism in Yoruba culture. In addition to clothing/dressing, Kelani loves to showcase the richness of Yoruba body adornment in his works, especially hairstyles. Different from the mainstream films, where characters show off tattoos, and foreign hairstyles, Kelani’s actors celebrate Yoruba hairstyles such as Kolese, Olobameta, Suku, and Koroba. A classic example of this representation occurs in Saworo-Ide when Lapite appreciates the hairstyle on the new oriori, Tinuola. These consistent representations of Yoruba praxis “is a powerful signifier of culture with its rich symbolism,” and it is as profound as the language matters he addresses in his works (Haynes 136).

Politics and the Political: Saworo-Ide and Agogo Eewo

The general maxim about Nollywood is that it is “apolitical” and unconnected to any pragmatic national ideology. As tempted as I am to agree with these notions, I otherwise claim that Nollywood is political—at least from the perspective of choosing what to represent and how to express it. Nevertheless, there are films of Kelani’s that are very political, including Saworo-Ide (1999) and Agogo Eewo (2002). Saworo-Ide, according to Adesokan (2011), is a “political thriller that allegorizes corruption” (87). The film x-rays the contemporary Nigerian state and critiques its political economy. Even though the film deeply explores Yoruba culture, its main import moves towards transformational practices that can correct corruption in Nigeria. Agogo Eewo, on the other hand, is a political film that utilizes Foucault’s ideas of discipline and punishment to address issues of governance and political power as it relates to the Nigerian state. There are two primary transformative agendas that Kelani pursues in Saworo-Ide and Agogo Eewo: the possibility that African culture can help solve the malaise in the
contemporary Nigerian political landscape and the usefulness of practical punitive measures in curbing corruption in the nation. Both Saworo-Ide and Agogo Eewo convey meanings beyond the tradition versus modernity theme that is overtly expressed, they project practical steps that are useful for the masses to reclaim their agency in the rugged Nigerian political landscape.

In the opening sequence of Saworo-Ide, Kelani projects the Nigerian cultural past as an edifying piece of history, an orderly political state built on the mutual and symbiotic coexistence of its inhabitants. In a series of shots, he highlights the serene atmosphere that pervades precolonial Nigeria through the fictional image of Jogbo, whose sociopolitical representations detail Nigerian postcolonial realities. The lukewarm color saturation suggests that Kelani is deliberately contrasting temporality—a comparison of the historical past and the present in chronotropic paradigm. The chronotope, as Mikhail Bakhtin (1996) argues, “expresses the inseparability of space and time” (84). To Bakhtin, both time and space are fused, and as a constitutive matter, the chronotope category, “determines to a significant degree the image of a man in literature” (85). In both films, Saworo-Ide and Agogo-Eewo, activities of the first Onijogbo and Lapite and their followers foreground the temporal contrast in the two time periods represented in the films. In the first representation, Kelani provides the audiences with the image of a dying king, whose primary focus, it seems, is to provide a sustainable system of governance for his people. The subjects, who are concerned that the king is about to join his ancestors, lament the chaos and cluelessness that will follow: “Father, you must not leave us without any guidance, we would be lost” (Saworo-Ide). In response to their request for leadership guidelines, the king forges a pact between the masses and the gods, “there will be an agreement between the people of Jogbo and their kings.” The “pact” is a cultural one, as the series of shots reveal, and it is through it that Jogbo maintains law and order.

The first representation details the activities of a functional government, one in which the leader listens to his subjects and provides them with a strategy that will guide their day-to-day affairs. Michal Foucault aptly describes this representation in “Governmentality” (1991) by noting that the problems and concerns of the state are not always about how to govern but the strategy employed by the state “where all the citizens without exception obey the laws, accomplish the tasks expected of them, practise the trade to which they are assigned, and respect the established order so far as this order conforms to the laws imposed by God on nature and men” (95).
In basic terms, Foucault points attention to a strategic understanding of governance: what works, what will not work, and how best to rule over people, a political arrangement in which all citizens, including the leaders, are aware of their rights, responsibilities, and limitations. It is the orderliness that Kelani hints at in the opening sequence through the figures of the old king and the “sacred materials—ade-ide, ado-ide, and saworo-ide” that check Jogbo’s excesses. In other words, Kelani approaches the political relationship between the king and his subjects via mythology, which includes the interference of the deities in the affairs of man.

The represented past contrasts sharply with the modernity Lapite, and his cohorts, Seriki, Bada, and Balogun, represent in Saworo-Ide. And Kelani seems to be suggesting that, in reality, the political history of Nigeria has seen better days. This reading is possible because of two referents that Kelani inserts in the memorial song: “To find the elephant, go to the forest. To locate the buffalo, go to the grassland” (Saworo-Ide). Erin and ẹfọ̀n literally translated as “elephant” and “buffalo” respectively carry cultural meanings beyond their categorization as nouns and wild animals. In Yoruba culture, erin signifies enormity and unparalleled gargantuan abilities. While ẹfọ̀n denotes a ferocious attitude and grace. It is at this level of meaning that one can extrapolate the rare qualities of the past that the old king embodies.
The new Jogbo nation is different from the old regime; unlike the old Jogbo, selfish ambitions and corrupt desires serve as motivation for the new government. Chief Balogun, especially the lobbyist roles he plays in the films, gives the audience a hint that the economic agenda of the new government departs from the selfless and nationalistic ideology of the dead monarch. The new state is modern and ready to infract on the collective good of the nation. The stairway scene is where we first have a hint of the possibility of the “outlandish infraction of normality” that Olaniyan describes in his book *Arrest the Music!: Fela and His Rebel Art and Politics* (2004). The “outlandish infraction,” to Olaniyan, is not just about the usurpation of the resources in postcolonial African states. It describes how the government and its various agents disregard normative laws and existing protocols, and how public officers plunder the land and set themselves above punitive laws. It includes how individuals arrogate the power of the state to perform personal clandestine activities. The possibility of the “outlandish infraction of normality” becomes visible in the dialog between Chief Balogun and Ọpálába.

Balógun: Hello, sir. Are you tired?
Ọpálába: I’m not tired. I am only resting.
Balógun: Hope you’ve not forgotten about our previous discussion?
Ọpálába: Oh, about the kingship?
Balógun: Yes, sir.
Ọpálába: But I’ve told you whoever is after ill-gotten wealth cannot be king. For the king serves the people and not the other way round!
And no king of Jogbo can be as wealthy as modern kings.
Balógun: Why? Is that a curse?
Ọpálába: That is mysterious. You may be a chief, but there are certain secrets that you cannot know, I know them because of my age and relationship with elders. That is the foundational code of Jogbo.
Balógun: We have to change the law. The king-elect is my friend, and I want him to be rich.
Ọpálába: Tell him not to swear to an oath or make incisions.
Balógun: Why?
Ọpálába: You cannot understand. But warn him. [Singing] You cannot understand, they don’t understand. They will comprehend it tomorrow.
Unlike the old king, the Onijogbo that forged the *ade-ide, ado-ide,* and *saworo-ide*—the mythical elements that fuse together to sanction government officials in Jogbo—the new king appears to be lacking in self-discipline and political prudence needed to effect a prosperous state. The first impression the audiences have of the new king is that of fraud: he describes his queen pejoratively and sends a love letter to Tinuola, his concubine. Lapite typifies a Western-educated but crooked person. What could be gleaned from the dialogue between Lapite and Balogun is that the king-elect, Lapite, is a modern king whose formal training has beclouded his regard for traditional values, and also that he approaches the kingship/leadership position as a means to an end and not an end in itself. When Amawomaro, the chief priest of Jogbo, beckons on Lapite to swear an oath as prescribed by the tradition, Lapite vehemently refuses to take part in the process on the pretext that the whole process is a “backward culture” (*Saworo-Ide*).

Lapite’s refusal to be incised hints at W.E.B. Dubois’s idea of double consciousness that he proposed in his 1903 publication, *The Souls of Black Folk* (2008). The double consciousness is a “‘strange experience’ [and] peculiar sensation of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, in which two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; and two warring ideals are located in one dark body” (xiv). Lapite, who fits well in the double consciousness paradigm, exhibits a sense of hybridity and confusion: a part of him orientates towards African cultural practices, and the other towards crass elitism that is outside the limit his kingship permits. The avoidance of the ritual rites is an attempt by Lapite to dissociate himself from the cosmic cycle that binds the king, the deities, and the masses together in Jogbo. The dissociation signifies a violent reclamation of the agency from the spiritual domain to satisfy selfish agenda, which ultimately threatens the “common good” of the Jogbo nation.

The threat to the common good of the Jogbo nation is made visible in the outrageous manner Lapite harangued the kingmakers, to the point that he draws out his pistol to make them succumb to his will: “That is the way I want it. Rituals are now concluded.” Here, Lapite’s use of a gun is symbolic in the sense that it functions, metaphorically, to represent the various oppressive apparatuses of the modern state and its agents.

As claimed by Olaniyan(1995), it is not the case of cultural superiority that gave the Europeans the right to “pass judgment on the culture of others . . . their political and military power over disparate spaces gave the Europeans that right, not supposed claims of cultural superiority” (59). In a similar vein, it is not
the royal status of Lapite that empowers him to silence Amawomaro and Ayangaluso that they do his bidding; it is his gun, a symbol of military might and modernity that resembles that of the Europeans Olaniyan discusses. Unlike the old king, who listened to his subjects and forged for them the mystical ade-ide, ado-ide, and saworo-ide, Lapite fails to uphold the tradition that serves his kingship. He is gullible, puerile, and very loquacious. These differences in leadership traits and character are Kelani’s way of exposing the weak strategies contemporary governments in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, adapt to govern their subjects. While it appears that Kelani is aiming for the inclusion of traditional values in modern democratic practices, he also seems to be interested in the critical element of governance that Foucault highlights in governmentality, which includes a system of control in which the citizens and the leaders perform their functions as expected of them. But in his allegorical representation of the Nigerian state and its contemporary leaders, not only does Lapite fail to exert self-control and enable the citizens to perform their duties as expected, but he also terrorizes his subjects, especially from the moment Opalaba reveals the danger inherent in his refusal to be incised.

Acting faithful to the assumption that the “economic clout” of the African bourgeoisie and elites is “practically zero” (Fanon 98), Lapite flagrantly condemns the economic structure of Jogbo and includes himself in the national income derivation formulae. Rejecting Opalaba’s warning that “the king serves the people and not the other way round” in Jogbo, Lapite claims that he is entitled to a portion of the state revenue, “I want to know your gross income and my share of it.” And when the loggers respond that they will allocate ten percent of the revenue to him, he retorts “10% is small for me . . . and I want the money paid into my overseas account; I don’t want evil eyes on it. (Saworo-Ide). Lapite’s avarice echoes Chabal’s submission that “in Africa, power and wealth go together” and it is “precisely because power and wealth are so intimately connected that the personal ‘integrity’ of those political leaders is revealed as different, exceptional, odd-even” (214).

Furthermore, the Chiefs, who are supposed to be the “mouthpiece” of the people are also driven by their greed. To be included in the arrangement, Balogun, on behalf of two other Chiefs—Seriki, and Bada—runs after the loggers as they exit the palace shouting “Hey, just a minute, you didn’t even bother to see me again?” However, in the words of Foucault “government has as its purpose not the act of government itself, but the welfare of the population and the improvement of its condition” (100). Instead of seeking the well-being of his subjects, Lapite
advances his government in the opposite direction. He sabotages the economy and allocates for his personal use state funds that he could have dispensed to the benefit of the masses. His action is not only an anathema to state growth and social cohesion but also brews dissension and engenders corruption.

Lapite and his Chiefs ask for bribes from the loggers in Saworo-ide (copyright Tunde Kelani)

While still claiming to be representatives of the masses, the Chiefs transform their influential positions to that of modern agents with accumulated capital wealth that sustain ostentatious display of luxurious automobiles. This representation of the cars as a symbol of crass accumulation is in tandem with Chabal’s ideas of power in Africa. He avers that “if we are interested in understanding what is happening in postcolonial Africa, it is important to recognize that . . . the legitimacy of power derives in some significant part of the acquisition, possession, and display of wealth” (213). Perhaps, one could theorize that the images of the automobiles are symbolic of corruption and oppressive powers in the Nigerian socio-economic contexts, where masses struggle to get basic physiological needs, and where powerbrokers stifle public opinions and unleash the terror of the state security on seekers of truth.3 In this context, Kelani’s transformational agenda, it seems, to me, is directed at the need for non-partisan media as a global watchdog in exposing corruption and other vices in contemporary political space.

3. Of example is the killing of the prolific novelist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, and eight other Ogoni leaders by the late General Abacha’s military regime. Abacha, in a military junta, falsely accused Ken Saro-Wiwa and the eight other leaders for the murder of four Ogoni leaders, who sided with the foreign oil company in the ecological degradation of the oil-rich Niger-Delta region of Nigeria, a geographical area where the Ogoni people are located.
The political narrative that Kelani presents in *Saworo-Idé* applies to the privileges the elite class enjoys in Nigeria, and the roles centralized production plays in the cultivation of systemic corruption in the nation. To buttress the idea that centralized treasury is, at least, a factor responsible for the frenzied jostling for political offices in Nigeria, Kelani introduces Lagata, a soldier called upon to save the crown. The paradox here is that Lagata, who makes a grandiose speech about Lapite and his chiefs, is a dupe who flagrantly misappropriates state funds. Kelani’s framing of Lagata brings to perspective how military rulers truncate democracy in Nigeria with the pretext that democratic leaders are corrupt; whereas, in the end, they turn out worse than their democratic counterparts in the way they steal from the national treasury and trample on human rights.

*Agogo-Eewo* and Political Accountability

Discipline, as Foucault notes, has to do with the task of establishing continuity “in both an upwards and downwards directions” (91). The upwards direction, Foucault claims, describes the extent to which a leader disciplines himself/herself and how well he/she has learned to govern himself (extraction of self-seeking attitudes and rapacious appetite). The downwards direction, on the other hand, is a step lower in the hierarchy: it describes how sub-leaders, like the heads of families, have learned to govern their families. In other words, downwards continuity explains, in a sense, that “when a state is well run, the head of the family will know how to look after his family, his goods and his patrimony, which means that individuals will, in turn, behave as they should” (92). What Foucault seems to be driving at, in the up/down paradigm, is that responsible leaders exemplify good governance through their conduct, which in turn, subcategories of
chiefs and, eventually, the general population emulates. The whole import of the upwards and downwards continuity model is to teach discipline among leaders and their followers. It is in this ideological paradigm that Kelani frames Bosipo in Agogo Eewo.

As a leader, Bosipo leads by example and sets his household as a prototype of a just and disciplined family—he denies Lape, his wife, the extravagant and luxurious lifestyle Lapite’s house enjoyed. When Lape comments that “I want a convoy of three posh cars, a police escort siren in the front and another with a flashlight at the back,” Bosipo exclaims: “For what reason?” Lape mentions her status as the queen, a position that must be respected and displayed in public. Bosipo denies the request, saying, “No way. A car will convey you, and you will have a police escort. About the siren and flashlight, just forget it” (Agogo Eewo). Also, when Lape and Iyalaje discuss their pet project ideas with him (Bosipo), he frowns at using the state funds to sponsor the pet project. To Bosipo, Lape’s project is personal and, as such, she cannot use the state’s fund “that is your private project. We cannot vote state funds for that,” he rejoins.

Having distanced himself from the false ideas of the chiefs and the demands of his wife, Lape, for luxury, Bosipo begins the process of national rebirth. To bring Jogbo’s political community back to its old glory, Bosipo forms alliances with the cultural agents of Jogbo: Amawomaro and Ayangalu. With the help of these cultural agents, Bosipo recasts agogo-eewo as a cleansing symbol. The moment Bosipo formulates agogo-eewo, he moves to aggregate local support for his reformative project by organizing town hall meetings, where he discusses the program of his administration with the masses. In the process of fostering unity through political accountability, Bosipo reclaims the public space as a site of confession to ridicule corrupt chiefs. The public space provides the masses the freedom to voice their opinions, correct the anomalies in representations, and taunt their oppressors. The notion of the public space as the center for dishonoring the “honored” neocolonialist serves the purpose of reclaiming agency for the weak, the oppressed and marginalized members of the society.4

The invocation of this public space in Agogo Eewo is symbolic because it returns power to the subalterns, that is, the marginalized population, who, for the first time in the film, have space and freedom to jeer at the corrupt chiefs as they

4. In Xala, Sembene(1975) appropriated the public space as the center of the ritual healing for El HadjiAboucaderBeye, a prominent citizen and a member of the chamber of commerce. Also in Bamako (2006), the open courtyard becomes the trial court, the public space on which African spokesmen call attention to the atrocities of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.
confess their atrocities publicly. *Agogo-eewo*, as a mystical object, puts the notion of discipline and punishment in a pragmatic perspective. In any political/traditional contexts of governance, there is the concept of “political reciprocity” (Chabal 138), which holds that leaders ought to be disciplined enough to reciprocate their duties to the masses that they represent. But in Nigeria and most African states, political reciprocity has not been very useful because of the way politicians tower above the people they serve.

To Kelani, there is a need for a system that will bring politicians and public workers to justice, in case they err in their duties to the nation. Here, Kelani, for the most part, is suggesting in *Agogo-Eewo* that the political landscape in Nigeria will benefit from legislation that strips political representative of the “immunity clause” that has, over the years, shielded the powerful and political cabals from punishment. By recasting *agogo eewo* as a cultural element that helps civil justices, Kelani hints at the possibility of grafting sacred ideas with secular political views that can impact the nascent Nigerian political arrangement positively. Kelani implies that the possible solution to institutionalized corruption in Nigeria is not likely to come from the implementation of foreign ideas but through the adoption of indigenous principles.

To this end, Kelani plays *agogoeewo, ade-ide, ado-ide, saworo-ide, Amawomaro* and *Ayanagalu* as symbols of independent retributive institutions that survive time and tide and ensure justice and equity in the land. The film links discipline and punishment as the most necessary leadership elements in Nigeria. *Agogo-Eewo* imagines a communal space for the masses to publicly ridicule political bad-eggs and their local collaborators—a much-needed space in Nigeria to enforce political accountability.

Conclusion

The tableau that Kelani presents to the audience in *Saworo-Ide* reiterates the conflict between tradition and modernity on the one hand and the possibility that cultural processes could engender a flourishing political economy that is built on egalitarianism and equity, on the other. Kelani recasts culture and tradition in *Saworo-Ide* to explain Nigerian politics to the masses who are not included in the formal arrangement of the state.

Besides the espousal of the utilitarian values of cultures in contemporary African politics, Kelani opines that discipline and punishment will introduce some sanity into the Nigerian political space if sanctioned through shared cultural
beliefs. Since Nollywood has managed to appropriate the video-technology to its own cinematic advantage to beat critics’ expectations, Kelani, no doubt, has explored the potentials of video technology to produce world-class films that shift the paradigmatic scopes and “shaken out” [critics’] historical need to read African cinema in narrow political terms” (Harrow 1). Kelani has demonstrated the vibrancy of using video technology cinematically to represent African concerns and universal themes, both nationally and transnationally beyond “intellectual genealogy based on a territorialized identity and a racialized geography” (Mbembe 257). In his construction of African identity and modernity beyond the racialized geography and territory, Kelani reformulates African tradition and culture as indispensable tools for building saner and sustainable socio-political institutions in Africa. In respect to this landmark effort, notwithstanding his political bias and abstruse cultural formulations, Kelani deserves more canonical referencing than any other Nigerian filmmaker because he has provided a structure for viewing and reading Nigerian films without over-moralizing/sermonizing the themes. And it is in this instance of a role model that Kelani functions as a Nollywood icon and auteur.

Works Cited


Filmography


