Evolving Popular Media: Nigerian Video Films

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The production of celluloid films in Nigeria, which was running at about four a year at the end of the 1980s (Haynes 2; Ekwuazi 16-18; Adesanya, Index 116-18), has collapsed completely, the victim of a deflated currency, a moribund economy, deteriorating public safety, increasingly dilapidated theaters, and lack of a coherent system of film distribution. Only one celluloid film, Bankole Bello’s Oselu (1996), has been brought to the National Film and Video Censors Board since 1992. But there has been an enormous boom in the production of dramatic features shot on video and sold on video cassette, and sometimes also exhibited for paying audiences with video projectors or simply with video monitors. Pioneered in the late 1980s by artists from the Yoruba traveling theater tradition, who had earlier moved into television and film production (see Balogun; Ricard; Ekwuazi; Barber; Okome and Haynes), the videos are now being made in large quantities in Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Pidgin, and English; one has been produced in Itsekiri, another in Igala, and other minority ethnic groups will doubtless be represented in the near future. In 1996 alone, the Censors Board licensed over 222 releases (Ayorinde, “Booming” 31).

Nigerian film and now video production has been absorbed into the realm of popular culture. This is a distinctive and unusual development in African cinema, though something similar has happened in Ghana, which has also launched into low-budget video production. Elsewhere—particularly in the francophone countries—filmmakers have been for the most part educated, self-conscious artists, often with political or social motivations, and the system for producing films has included a crucial role for European funding sources and international distribution to film festivals and other noncommercial outlets. In those venues at least, African films tend to be categorized as “art cinema.” A more commercial orientation has become visible, but this still is predicated on the existence of an international audience (see Mermin; Akudinobi). The Nigerian videos have merely intensified the autonomy that was characteristic of Nigerian celluloid film production (see Haynes): they are virtually never distributed abroad except to Yoruba-speaking audiences in neighboring countries and to expatriate Nigerians elsewhere; the video format keeps the current productions out of international festivals; and foreign investment is negligible.

The popularity of Nigerian video production is our main theme. Nowhere else in Africa has a domestic market been captured so successfully. The videos are produced on a number of distinct bases, and have a variety of forms, styles, and themes, as well as languages of expression. Taken together, they give us something like an image of the Nigerian nation—not necessarily in the sense of delivering a full, accurate, and analytical description of social reality, but in the sense of reflecting the productive forces of the nation, economic and cultural. An attempt at sociological mapping of
the phenomenon shows us a congeries of forms, radically different at
the poles in ethnic and class terms, but with wide areas of overlap and
convergence.

The strongest element in the twenty-year span of Nigerian celluloid
film production was the work of the artists from the Yoruba traveling thea-
ter tradition, and they still dominate, at least numerically, current video
production. There have been a number of excellent studies of the Yoruba
traveling theater: the seminal work of Biodun Jeyifo in The Popular Yoruba
Travelling Theatre of Nigeria and the subsequent studies by Karin Barber
(“Radical Conservatism in Yoruba Popular Plays,” “Popular Arts in Africa,”
and her introduction to Yoruba Popular Theatre) have been the most sophis-
ticated in theorizing its relation to popular culture. In Barber’s perspicac-
ious and influential article “Popular Arts in Africa,” this form is used as a
central instance. The theoretical model developed there (and in
Christopher Waterman’s study of Juju music) is the most powerful we have
for interpreting African popular culture, and can be extended to much of
the current video production. But the Yoruba traveling theater has itself
undergone extensive changes (it no longer exists in the form of live stage
performances), and the Igbo and English video films contain tendencies
that pull away from this model, being markedly different from the Yoruba
traveling theater kind of production aesthetically and—perhaps even more
strikingly—in terms of economic and social organization, and the audience
they reach.

Jeyifo argued for the term “popular” (rather than “folk”) as meaning
not only that the audiences were large and enthusiastic but, more specifi-
cally, that they embraced “the entire range of occupational and socio-
economic groups and classes” (1); the troupes “substantially played to ‘the
people as a whole’ rather than to exclusive, partial groupings or strata of
the population, as is the case with the modern English language, literary
theatre” (2). In fact, because class formation in Africa is far from complete,
this theater was also “popular” in the sense of expressing the point of view
of the mass of the people, rather than of some ruling stratum:

The emergence and growth of the Travelling Theatre [are] bound up . . .
with the rise and phenomenal expansion of “citified” popula-
tions in modern Nigeria whose division into distinct groups and
classes on the basis of education, status, wealth and political influ-
ence have so far been so fluid that no particular group or class
has created a hegemonic culture, art form or life-style. In other
words . . . no integral, dominant ruling class “high culture” has
been created in the modern Nigerian society (though there are
definitely aspects and fragments of elite culture and life-style largely
based on a composite mix of Western middle-class forms and
neo-traditional approximations) . . . . (3-4)

In “Popular Arts in Africa,” Karin Barber summarizes her definition of
“popular art”:
Popular art can be taken to mean the large class of new unofficial art forms which are syncretic, concerned with social change, and associated with the masses. The centers of activity in this field are the cities, in their pivotal position between the rural hinterland on the one hand and the metropolitan countries on the other. (23)

Barber develops the common tripartite model for defining the popular arts as being located in the shifting, indeterminate zone between the “traditional” and the Europeanized/elite, both of which work through more clearly defined conventions and institutions. The popular faces both ways at once—hence the vibrant eclecticism of the Yoruba traveling theater, which draws simultaneously on “deep” Yoruba verbal arts and the traditional cosmography evident in the works of Chief Hubert Ogunde and, at the other extreme, the conventions of American situation comedies.

As they straddle cultural origins and genres, the traveling theater practitioners also straddle media: Barber points to how the troupes might be simultaneously involved in stage productions, film, television, records, and photo-play magazines as a way of diversifying their resources in an intensely competitive, marginal economic niche (“Popular Arts” 31). It is because the traveling theater troupes had already established a relationship with their audience outside the commercial cinema distribution system that they survived as film and video makers, while the collapsing economy drove nearly everyone else out of business. The formal and generic characteristics of their work have undergone rapid metamorphoses (Jeyifo 17; Barber, “Radical Conservatism” 8). Barber concurs with Christopher Waterman and Bogumil Jewsiewicki in pointing to the nascent petite bourgeoisie as the social layer most involved in producing this sort of art and sees their socioeconomic organization as the more or less constant element in an unstable situation.

The Yoruba theater companies are small business enterprises operating like others in the Nigerian informal sector. The conditions of their artistic production affect their relations to the mass media; their structure as organizations and, correspondingly, the structure of their plays; and their relations to tradition and modernity . . . . The company retains its organizational integrity in relation to television, importing its personnel, its production methods, its style, and its subject matter more or less intact into the new medium. Rather than imposing the uniform stamp of mass culture on these plays, the television seems to be invaded by chunks of the living popular culture that flourishes around it. (“Popular Arts” 65)

As Jeyifo says, the traveling theater practitioners have a strong artisanal, guild consciousness: “extensive relationships of cooperation and competition between the companies [have led] to the very strong sense of corporate group identity and vocational distinctiveness that exists among them today” (7). This has helped preserve their integrity, but it has also proved a limiting factor: their method of distributing their celluloid films restricted
them to an artisanal basis rather than an industrial and international one (Ricard 163-64), they have seldom attempted to master cinematic technique on a fully professional basis, and they have tended to have rocky relationships with cinema professionals or those perceived as interlopers.

Yoruba traveling theater artists began making video films in 1988 (Ayorinde and Okafor, "Rave" 29). They conceived of video simply as the cheapest possible way of producing audio-visual material for projection to an audience. This was the culmination of a process of adopting progressively cheaper media as the economy deteriorated: they had turned from 35 mm film to 16 mm, then to reversal film stock or shooting on video and blowing it up to 16 mm. An audience in Oshogbo, one of the first to be exposed to the appalling quality of the video projection image, wrecked the theater (Ekwuazi 73, qtd. in Olaoye 59). Improvements in video technology at this time made possible an image good enough to project (Olaoye 56-57), though the visual and audio quality is still usually very poor indeed. Audiences seem not to mind, being interested mostly in the stories the videos tell, but nearly everyone in the industry laments the necessity of working on video and looks forward to the day when celluloid production can resume.

It was Igbo businessmen who understood that a larger market could be opened up by the retail sale of video cassettes. Kenneth Nneube, then an electronics dealer and film promoter, led the way. He produced a Yoruba video film, Aje Ni Iya Mi, for the late Sola Ogunsola. It was made as cheaply as possible, shooting with an ordinary VHS camera and using a few VCRs to edit. Few of the actors were paid anything at all. His investment was a mere -N-2,000, and he made hundreds of thousands back (personal communication). Yoruba artists like Jide Kosoko, Adebayo Salami, Gbenga Adewusi, and Muyi Aromire, seeing the money to be made and unhappy with the pitance they were being paid by the Igbo producers, soon rented video equipment (U-matic cameras, a step up technically) and launched into their own productions (Ayorinde and Okafor, "Rave" 29). A deluge of films followed.

The "traditional" producers (as the artists from the Yoruba traveling theater tradition call themselves) handle the video film medium in some distinctive ways. Public exhibition with video projectors continues to be much more important for them than for other video makers. They aim to open their films at the National Theatre in Iganmu, Lagos, and then take them around to other cinemas in Lagos and elsewhere. After taxes and other expenses these theatrical exhibitions seldom prove to be very remunerative, but they provide publicity, and in any case the films are made very cheaply, often for less, and sometimes for much less, than a million naira (i.e., less than US$12,000: in 1997 the naira had stabilized at -N-85 = $1), so they may cover their expenses in this way. The films are also sold as cassettes more cheaply than Igbo- or Nigerian English-language films, costing about -N-260 as opposed to -N-300 or 350. (Pirated foreign films are even cheaper, about -N-150.)

Costs are kept down because the technical standard is low and the actors may be paid nothing, by virtue of the working arrangements of
the "traditional" artists. The large standing traveling theater troupes (Moses Olaiya Adejumo [Baba Sala]'s organization, for instance, once had more than 50 members, Lakoji 39) were disbanded out of economic necessity when stage performances ceased, and were replaced by more informal, flexible arrangements. But these are still based on social relationships within the same community. Junior, apprentice actors or actresses married to the main actor/manager will not expect to be paid (Babatunde 36). From the beginning of celluloid film production it was common for the actor/manager producing the film to call on members of other troupes on an ad hoc basis. This has turned into a generalized system of reciprocal favors, whereby actors appear in each other's films for free, with the understanding that the favor will be returned someday. Little or no cash may change hands (Olaoye 123-25).

This system has several effects. One is that it is only by producing his or her own film that an actor can get a return for all the screen appearances he or she has made. This is partly responsible for the enormous volume of Yoruba films being produced, many of them by actors with no experience as directors or producers. Another is that when news gets out that a film is being shot, actors just show up to participate in the exchange of favors, even if they had not been contacted to play a role. Parts then have to be found for them, at whatever cost to the coherence and economy of the story line (Olaoye 126-27). The traveling theater artists always proceeded on the basis of a minimal scenario rather than a fully written-out script; this arrangement for film production ensures that this method cannot change. It also tends to hold in place the type-casting of actors, who bear the same stage name and persona in every film. The actors on the set may well not know the title of the film they are acting in, and the producer may not want to divulge the whole story for fear that one of the actors might steal the idea (interview with Idowu Phillips [Mama Rainbow] in Olaoye 88). The result is unrehersed cameo appearances, shallow characterization, predictable turns, and much irrelevant business.

Even within Yoruba language production, "traditional" artists are by no means the only players. The Structural Adjustment Program that put an end to their stage performances caused others as well to look to the new video business for a livelihood. There were massive retrenchments of technicians from state television stations, the film units of the information and communication ministries, and audio-visual departments of other parasitats (Olaoye 53-56). This was also a period of radical decline in Nigerian television serial production, as stations came to prefer to buy much cheaper second-hand Mexican or Brazilian soaps (Ogundadegbe and Adedokun 21). (Nigerian soap operas are now rebounding.) University-trained ("acada") actors also came as refugees from the literary theater. The first-generation celluloid filmmakers have tended to view video production with disgust (the late Adeyemi Afolayan [Ade Love] being a vociferous example), but some have entered the fray. Tunde Kelani, who was the cameraman for a great number of the celluloid films of the 1970s and '80s, now runs a large professional operation, Mainframe Productions, making sophisticated films, exclusively in Yoruba, that mix "traditional" and "acada"
actors (Ayo Ni Mo Fe 1 and 2, the three-part Ti Oluwa Ni Ile, Kosegbé), and draw on the script-writing talents of prominent Yoruba literary dramatists like Akinwumi Isola and Wale Ogonyemi. The cultural aspirations of these productions are illustrated by the fact that Mainframe advertises a “library pack” of its award-winning videos in the glossy pages of Glendora Review: African Quarterly on the Arts.

The Yoruba video repertoire has expanded beyond the genres of village idylls, traditional religious dramas, juju contests, and farcical comedy that dominated Yoruba traveling theater films and early videos and sometimes led to the term “folkloric” being applied to them (see Okome). The modern urban scene has become more prominent. The term Ere Igbalode is used to describe this genre: “Ere Igbalode may refer to works based on contemporary themes, but it equally carries an additional meaning of something more in the line of popular fad or fashion . . . . [T]hey try to shun the provincial or communal air of the comedies of the popular theatre” (Laoye 29).

These films are similar to the Igbo and English films to be discussed below, in form, style, and themes as well as production structures. It is routine to make them in two parts, as this doubles the profits while production costs remain basically the same. (This is true if the two parts are shot at the same time; if they are not, actors who felt underpaid for their work in the first part and who are indispensable to the second have the producer over a barrel). The basic format, then, is three to four hours long, rather than the international standard of 90 minutes for a feature film; generically the video films are closer to serial television forms than to the Aristotelian form of the feature film (as codified in Hollywood), with its emphasis on unity and one clear emotional trajectory. The videos’ subplot-filled, sprawling, rhizomatic plot structures have affinities with oral narrative patterns and with indigenous conceptions of fate and destiny. The talky character and low-budget domestic settings of the vast majority of the films suggest the influence of soap operas, as the judges of the 1997 THEMA awards commented: “They generally lacked the grandeur of movies and at best remained within the genre of TV plays or soaps. Mastery of the use of imagery was lacking—too much reliance on dialogue rather than images!” (“From the College” 11).

A distinguished example of the standard melodramatic form is Tunde Kelaní’s two-part Ayo Ni Mo Fe/I Want Joy (with a pun in the title, as ayo, joy, is also the name of one of the main characters). Ayo and Jumoke are young lovers. Jumoke is also being courted by an elderly man, Adeleke, who offers her a position as junior wife and manager of his businesses, which she angrily rejects. Philandering Ayo impregnates Adunni, the very young daughter of a rich family, and is forced to marry her. Jumoke finds out just as the wedding is taking place and runs mad. She is taken by her mother to a traditional home for the insane, of whose horrors we are given a taste. Jumoke escapes from the place when the headman tries to rape her and ends up on the streets. Meanwhile the wealthy Chief Tomobi has been told by an iyánifa (female babalawo, Ifa priest and herbalist) that the reason his two wives cannot get pregnant is that his mother once interrupted a man
who was having sex with a madwoman on the street. The solution to his wives’ barrenness is that Chief Tomobi must have sex with a madwoman. This he attempts to do, with the help of his driver, in a series of comic episodes. Finally he ends up with Jumoke. Pregnant, she camps out in front of the Chief’s gate until he drives her away, which the iyanifa will tell him is a great mistake: he has driven away his luck, and must again start looking for madwomen. The marriage of the immature Ayo and Adunni has broken up, and Ayo has begun his own self-motivated descent into destitution. Good old Adeleke locates Jumoke and checks her into a mental hospital. Gradually she recovers, and as part 1 ends she gives birth, marries Adeleke, and becomes pregnant again by him.

In part 2, Ayo becomes captain of a gang of area boys (street toughs), and the hostility of Adeleke’s other wives causes Jumoke to have a relapse. When she recovers she introduces computerization into the company Adeleke has given her to manage. Ayo is reclaimed from his life on the streets and his marriage with Adunni is renegotiated. Chief Tomobi is still having comical encounters with mad people, trying to fulfil the iyanifa’s instructions. Jumoke’s eldest child falls ill with typhoid, and is saved by a blood transfusion by a donor who proves to be his natural father Chief Tomobi. When Jumoke, Adeleke, and the boy visit Tomobi’s house to thank him, his gatekeeper recognizes Jumoke as the madwoman and guesses at the child’s paternity. Tomobi is dissuaded by his lawyer from trying to reclaim his son through legal means, given the circumstances of his engendering; Tomobi gives up his plans to kidnap the boy when it turns out both his wives have become pregnant. The iyanifa tells him it was holding his son on his lap during the visit which cured him. Ayo goes to visit his former love Jumoke at her office and is forgiven. He and Adunni then fly abroad to work on graduate degrees, after which they will return to take over her family’s business.

This exuberant narrative enfolds an impressive range of material. The distinguished veteran traveling theater actors Lere Paimo and Alhaji Kareem Adepoju (Baba Wande) live in an entirely contemporary world of fuel scarcity, AIDS screening, computerization, and the American visa lottery. The iyanifa holds the keys to Chief Tomobi’s destiny, but the video is dedicated to the late social reformer Tai Solarin “and all those dedicated to the cause of the mentally ill,” and has other frankly educative touches like a little lecture on how hygiene prevents typhoid, and another on the law on rape for those who have not thought about it enough. The Tomobi family’s curse is conceived of in a fully magical sense, divorced from moral allegory; the son is condemned by fate to enact the sin the mother prevented. The viewer is left contemplating the wonderful turns of individual destiny, which were wholly unforeseeable from the opening premises.

Ami-Orun/Birthmark, written and directed by Tunde Alabi-Hundeyin, also mixes actors from the “traditional” and “acada” camps. The story begins with a riot in a medical school canteen; the student leader takes refuge with, and impregnates, the canteen worker in whose face he had earlier thrown a plate of beans. Four years later she believes herself to be dying of tuberculosis and brings the child to him. He is so concerned about his
marriage and reputation, and is such a vile person, that he tries to have mother and child killed before his wife intervenes—unable to bear a child herself, she has them take the child and move abroad. In part 2 we learn they have written to the mother (who did not die after all) to say (falsely) the child had died; when they return to Nigeria years later the poor canteen worker struggles to reclaim her child in the face of the wicked and powerful family of doctors.

The story is handled with quiet realism. The yuppies' wealth is not exaggerated, and the film gives us dark psychological portraits as well as a study of class arrogance. But it also has room for a comic gateman, Dento (a "traditional" actor using his stage name), whom the doctor suborns to kill the woman and child. This sets Dento off on his comic business, bringing on other actors of his ilk (Lukuluku and Baba Suwe), and it is quite some time before we return to the strained psychological scene we had left. This is more than a little like the Porter scene in Macbeth: Shakespeare too was grafting a popular comic style onto a nascent bourgeois one, partly to maintain his hold on a popular audience, and partly because he had uses for the wealth of artistic resources available at such transitional moments.

Tunde Alabi-Hundeyn's direction has flair but also the roughness typical of nearly all of the videos. He uses the full gamut of cinematic techniques and uses them expressively, but crudely. As usual the lighting is bad and there are serious sound recording problems. Always one feels the lack of money, equipment, and training. The sound track is cheap-sounding studio music or Western pop hits. The major Yoruba contemporary musical resources—juju, fuji, reggae, Afrobeat—are virtually never used on the sound tracks of the videos, as local artists would have to be paid and they are expensive. Foreign music can be pirated with impunity. Local studio musicians are always commissioned to write a theme song (in a Western pop style) for each video, which will then be endlessly repeated throughout the film.

Igbo video production was launched in 1992 with Living in Bondage, made by the same Kenneth Nnebue who had begun investing in Yoruba video production a few years earlier. At least fifteen other production outfits followed him into the field (Ayorinde and Okafor, "Enter" 29). Two years later Nnebue made the first English language video, Glamour Girls. Some Igbo filmmakers turned to English looking for a wider market, and also wanting to use talent beyond the relatively small number of professionals who can act in Igbo. (The writer and director Amaka Igwe is another example: she started by making English language television serials, like the extremely popular Checkmate, then made the two-part Igbo video Rattlesnake and Adamma before returning to English with Violated 1 and 2 and Forever). Many of the highest-profile artists in English language films are from southern minority groups, like the actor Richard Mofe-Damijo and the prolific directors Zeb and Chico Ejiro, all from Delta State, and the actress Liz Benson, from Akwa Ibom.

The Igbo and English productions, which share much the same production basis, can be relatively highly capitalized, at least compared to the bare-bones "traditional" Yoruba films. Eleven "big-budget" videos were
made in 1996, with budgets ranging from about -N-2 million to -N-7 million (that is $25,000 to about $90,000—minuscule in comparison to the budget for a celluloid film). Of these eleven only Tade Ogidan’s Owo Blow was in Yoruba (Ayorinde, “Video rage” 25). Instead of relying on the resources of a struggling small-scale entrepreneur, who was formerly the actor/manager of a theater troupe, these videos draw on the wealth of the business class. They may be backed by big merchants from Onitsha or Aba or elsewhere, and the properties used to represent the lavish lifestyles which are a normal feature of these videos come through business networks of fashion houses, real estate brokers, car dealerships, and so on, which are often eager to provide sponsorship for its publicity value.

There is a concerted effort to build a star system of actors with name recognition whose presence (as in Hollywood) will guarantee investment in the project. Many of the current stars made their reputations on television, but an arena of publicity based on the videos themselves is being created through vehicles such as billboards, radio and television advertisement, the shows on Lagos television devoted to videos (“Movie Half Hour,” “Videoview,” “L’Agbo Video,” “Bayowa Films Half Hour”), celebrity magazines, the Nigerian Television Authority’s TV Guide, and other magazines dedicated specifically to videos such as the short-lived Starfilms and Nigerian Videos, the Nigerian Film Corporation’s Film and Video, the Censors Board’s The Classifier, and the new newspaper-format Cinematters. The annual THEMA awards (begun in 1996), sponsored by Fame Magazine, are modeled on the Oscars. Drawn by the prospect of relatively huge salaries (stars can make -N-300,000 for an appearance in a video [Ayorinde, “Video rage” 25], though many others will get only -N-5,000 or even less and many are paid nothing), would-be actors are flocking to the new industry from modeling careers, State Arts Councils, and the universities.

The financial muscle behind these productions is also brought to bear on the distribution end: large numbers of copies of the cassettes are made at once and distributed with careful timing through numerous channels, which discourages piracy and maximizes publicity. A new film will make most of its money in the first week or two after release (Amaka Igwe, personal communication).

There are legends of large profits to be made: in an interview the producer Okechukwu Ogunjiofor claimed “with the -N-1,500 he had on him and a loan of -N-3,000, he immediately embarked on the shooting of Circle of Doom, from which he was able to buy a Benz and secure a comfortable home” (“Encounter” 20). But profit margins are usually very small. The market has become extremely overcrowded by the proliferation of new releases, and is badly disorganized. Average sales are about 30,000; 50,000 is considered good. The largest selling film is Amaka Igwe’s Violated 1, with 150,000 copies sold. The “traditional” Yoruba films, which have smaller budgets for advertising and distribution as well as production, and which depend more on theatrical screenings for their profits, tend to sell fewer copies. All figures on sales and profits need to be treated with extreme caution, as they are frequently inflated for publicity purposes, or deflated in order to defraud partners. Cheating is endemic in all relationships between
marketers, producers, directors, and actors (Babatunde 46-50, 60; Ayorinde, “Video rage” 25 and “Still perched” 25). To minimize this, producers have come to prefer outright sale of the master tape to marketers rather than trusting in a percentage share of putative sales (Babatunde 50).

The main constraint on the market is piracy. “Piracy is our AIDS,” says Kenneth Nnebue (3). Popular videos are rapidly pirated, sometimes by the marketer entrusted with distributing the film. But the greatest problem is piracy by video rental clubs, which rent out films with no mechanism for paying royalties to the producer. There are said to be two thousand such video clubs in Lagos alone.

The marketers are the best organized and most powerful element in the industry. They are based around Idumota Market, in one of the oldest and most congested parts of Lagos Island (Ewuzie 8). Idumota is a major electronics and home appliances market (Ayorinde and Okafor, “Rave” 29), and most of the video distributors started as importers of electronics and blank cassettes or pirated foreign videos. Other businessmen, in car parts or more dubious enterprises, may use video deals as a way of laundering money. The producers have a number of grievances against the marketers. They are accused of being merely traders, not true distributors, as they are largely uninterested in advertising the films or otherwise building the market, preferring to wait for wholesale dealers to come to them (Odigho 25, Nnebue 3). Because in many cases they put up the capital for video productions, they are in a position to determine casting (Aina 15), and as a cartel they can kill films in which they have no cultural or financial interest. All this is the more resented as the marketers are generally wholly uneducated in film aesthetics, though by now they are led by people with business degrees rather than the stereotypical semi-literate traders.

For the producers to break the power of the marketers, according to Amaka Igwe (personal communication), there are two possible strategies. One would be the renovation and rehabilitation of cinema houses, and the creation of a rationalized theatrical distribution system such as the Ghana Film Industry Corporation has instituted, which would lessen dependence on cassette sales. Such a plan is being discussed by the Nigerian Film Corporation. (Of the approximately sixty cinema houses left in Lagos all but about ten now show Nigerian videos. But they are generally unsavory places. As elsewhere in Africa, cinemas are rapidly being converted into mosques, churches, or warehouses.) The other strategy would be for the producers to organize collectively their own distribution outlets, as some of them (notably Nnebue’s NEK Video Links) have done individually. But the chronic internal squabbling among the producers has kept them from organizing themselves effectively.

Production and marketing for all of southern Nigeria is centralized in Lagos, though there is activity in other places, notably Onitsha and Aba. Yoruba, Igbo, and English language videos are sold in considerable numbers in the north, but there is very little reliable information about this since nearly everything is pirated. Meanwhile virtually nothing is ever heard in the south about Hausa video production, which has been enjoying its
own boom. Hausa videos have, for instance, never been represented at the THEM A awards.

This is partly the consequence of a major political and cultural divide, but it is also a sign that Hausa video production is still emergent. The vast fertile seed bed of this activity is the drama groups that have sprung up in large numbers out of young men’s social clubs. These social clubs themselves are for the most part a fairly recent development (Steve Daniel, personal communication), though some of the drama groups have been in existence for a long time (Larkin, “Hausa Dramas”). The drama groups sometimes videotape their performances and sell the cassettes in the market at astonishingly low prices, barely the price of the blank cassette. These cassettes are literally not packaged for the national market, with the standard multi-colored printed jacket and cellophane wrapper. They thus correspond to a kind of Igbo video production that predates Nnebue’s Living in Bondage, which is always said to have inaugurated Igbo video films. Earlier in Onitsha, short, mostly comic videos were being shot and sold, unpackaged, in Onitsha Market. Mike Orijedinma is the main figure in this phenomenon, which has obvious affinities with the ephemeral Onitsha Market pamphlet literature (Amaka Igwe, personal communication).

At least a handful of higher-budget, well-packaged Hausa videos have been made, notably Soayya Kunar Zuci/ The Pains of Love, directed by USA. Galadima and produced by the Nigerian Film Corporation—the only video film the NFC has produced to date. Negotiations have been going on with the inevitable Kenneth Nnebue for national distribution of the cassette. The film’s title reflects the influence of the Hausa soayya (“love”) pamphlet romances, which themselves are inspired by Indian films, to which the Hausas have always been addicted (Larkin, “Indian Films”). The film presents an acute conflict between a glamorous, elite lifestyle based on romantic love and individualism and traditional values as embodied in a village. Such a conflict appears to be standard fare in the Hausa videos, which share thematic concerns and an iconography of the modern city with both southern Nigerian videos and Indian films, but reinterpret these materials in line with the stricter norms of Hausa culture (Larkin, “Hausa Dramas”).

The video boom reaches an audience that is very different from that of the original Yoruba traveling theater and its subsequent films, and not only because the ethnic base has expanded so dramatically. As Brian Larkin argues, new modes of social organization are constructed around cassette technology, which differ along axes of gender, age, and class from the audience constituted for celluloid films (“Hausa Dramas”). Everywhere in Nigeria cinema-going is predominantly a male activity and, for that matter, an activity for younger, poorer, and rowdier males (see Adeleke for audience surveys carried out in Ibadan: 106-11); it is considered of more or less dubious respectability for girls and women. As Larkin points out in the context of northern Nigeria, the advent of television and then video cassettes has opened up to women a media environment that was largely closed to them before (“Hausa Dramas”). We need sociological and anthropological studies of this phenomenon and its consequences. Strong regional variations are to be expected, based on different cultural gender norms as well
as on different relations between cinema-going habits and home viewing of videos. As conventional Nigerian wisdom has it, cinema-going (like patronage of the traveling theaters) has always been a family affair for the Yorubas, and the projection of videos in cinemas continues to be an important source of profit; among the Hausas videos are also shown in cinemas to avid audiences, which, however, contain essentially no women besides prostitutes; the Igbos were always much less enthusiastic cinema goers, and the men now tend to leave the family at home with the VCR while they go out to sports events or music concerts (Adesanya, "From Film to Video"). In any case, it seems obvious that female viewership has greatly increased everywhere. Perhaps one of the consequences of this is that women have been making careers as directors and producers of videos (like Amaka Igwe, Lola Fani-Kayode Macaulay, Idowu Phillips, Franca Brown, Uche Osotule, Ameye Imariagbe, and Christyn Michaels), whereas celluloid filmmaking remained largely closed to them. The predominance of the genres of romance and melodrama may be another consequence, though it is not obvious that these genres are as strongly associated with female audiences in Nigeria as they are in the West (LaRay Denzer, personal communication).

The class character of the audience also needs to be investigated through empirical research. Ownership of a VCR and television has become a basic aspiration and has spread pretty far down into the lower middle and urban working classes. Buying video cassettes (at -N-250 to 350) or paying to see theatrical screenings (at -N-50- to 100) are relatively expensive forms of entertainment (Adesanya, "From Film to Video"). But cassettes are reviewed many times by entire families, and are circulated among friends and neighbors. Video rental clubs rent (pirated) videos for a very modest -N-10 or 20; such businesses at the lower end are very informal affairs, run out of someone’s room in a compound with no signboard to advertize their presence. There are also one-room video parlors, equipped with ordinary televisions and VCRs, which cater at low prices to a poorer clientele. Cassettes are sold out of modest shops and stalls on the street—very much a part of the ubiquitous West African petty trading. Traders and market women are said to be major consumers of video films.

The opening of Amaka Igwe’s Violated 1 in 1996 was an attempt to open up a high-end market. The Nigerian elite has been slow to interest itself in the videos, preferring imported entertainment via cable or satellite television or foreign film rentals at upscale video clubs. Interest in Violated was drummed up through a month’s publicity on radio and television; the venue for the opening was the MUSON Centre, the most prestigious and exclusive performance hall in Lagos. Opening night was by invitation only, the invitations being addressed to the elite of Victoria Island and Ikoyi, and on subsequent nights admission was a fancy -N-500. Violated’s record sales seemed to indicate that the “trickle-down” class strategy had worked (Charles Igwe, personal communication). The opening of Zeb Ejiro’s Domitilla in 1997 was another attempt to transform the profile of video films. Backed by massive publicity from Daar Communications (which owns a television station and the only private radio station in Lagos), the video premiered at ten Lagos cinemas simultaneously, amidst assurances that a
security firm had been hired to protect the vehicles of patrons and maintain order. The lamentable state of most of the cinema halls prevented this experiment from being an unalloyed success as far as the upper classes were concerned. Theatrical release has still not become an important financial resource for the Igbo and English language producers.

The audience for video films, then, is very broad indeed, comparable to the diversity of the live audience of the Yoruba traveling theater that provided Jeyifo with an image of the whole of the Yoruba nation. But for the most part the audience is assembled in a privatized manner quite different from that of cinema or live theater. Without entirely inscribing this transformation of the audience within a sentimental narrative of the breakdown of an original, traditional, mediated community into modern alienation, we must recognize that video cassette production is a much more commodified form, a fact that has deep social as well as aesthetic consequences. Larkin points out that “the same” Indian film means very differently (particularly with respect to its erotic charge) when viewed in a cinema full of whistling men than it does when viewed in domestic space, surrounded by family members (“Hausa dramas”). The best studies of the Yoruba performance arts, or indeed of African arts in general, have stressed the centrality of the immediate contact between performer and audience in the moment of performance, and the characteristic emphasis on social process rather than isolated aesthetic object. Only more or less dim echoes of this can be caught on video cassettes; once the videos stop being essentially records of performances in another medium it is natural for them to move towards an aesthetic formed on a different basis, exploiting different values and potentials.

Igbo culture had never sponsored a popular commercial theater like the Yoruba traveling theater or production of celluloid films. In their case the video cassettes do not displace an anterior indigenous cultural form like live theater as much as they claim a share of the market in televised and recorded video products, most of which are imported. Their audience had grown up saturated by the international, chiefly American, culture industry. “Hollywood” is frequently invoked as the model or inspiration by the Igbo and English language filmmakers. Partly this refers to the attempt by dynamic and modern operators to create a proper entertainment industry, aspiring to the technical capacity to copy the look of at least the minor Hollywood genres. From a certain point of view—a point of view pretty well represented among Nigerian film critics¹—the invocation of Hollywood signifies a betrayal of African culture in the face of the neocolonial invasion of foreign media. The real object of imitation (as has been said) is certain North American and Latin American television genres (rather than feature films), particularly melodramatic TV movies and evening soap operas. Generically this tends to exclude the sort of cultural spectacle patented by Chief Hubert Ogunde, the patriarch of the Yoruba traveling theater and Yoruba filmmaking, which was created at an historical moment when it coincided with anti-colonial nationalist assertion, providing an image of a “usable past” governed by a noble, colorful, and intact tradition. This has
remained one of the resources of the Yoruba filmmakers and video-graphers (Haynes 102-07).

The new Igbo works certainly encode responses to modernity, urbanism, and so on that are specifically African, Nigerian, and Igbo, but most of them have done so without much overt, formal reference to a "deep" ethnic tradition and world-view. (There are many exceptions, whether as moments within otherwise modern/secular films like Igwe’s Rattlesnake 1, or as entire films. The historical epic has been added to the repertoire of Igbo videomakers with The Battle of Musanga.) The main reason for this would seem to be the historical situation of the Igbos in modern Nigeria. The Igbo videos are the expression of an aggressive commercial mentality, whose field of activity is Nigeria’s cities—and not only the Igbo cities. Attention is resolutely turned towards sources of wealth and change; the villages tend to figure only in more or less cursory backwards glances or, in the case of Ikuku for instance (see below) the village itself is fully caught up in the processes of change. The nation, the state apparatus, and ethnic political claims are invisible, doubtless mostly because the genres of the films tend to exclude such materials, but one might also guess they are being bypassed in despair. Beyond Nigeria’s cities are international circuits in which Igbo are famously active as traders, from which a commercial cultural imaginary is being imported. Nigerian video production itself has important material links with the Nigerian diaspora: post-production work may be done in London, videos are sold to the Nigerian community abroad (for hard currency) and, significantly, the magazine Nigerian Videos had a London edition.

In the "postcolonial" theory being developed principally in the West, cultural hybridity and transnational networks are celebrated as positive values. The creative spirit of Africa is being looked for less in the form of an eternal, uncorrupted traditional cultural essence, and more as something realized through the historical process of interaction with other cultures, African and non-African. The story of the tortured relations between colonized intellectuals and European and traditional African cultures is familiar enough; interest is shifting to the apparently much less conflicted way in which popular culture has absorbed foreign influences. Barber is summarizing this strain of thought when she lists syncretism as an essential feature of the popular arts.

This dynamic of popular culture is doubtless in play in the imitation of American forms, but still the situation has to be evaluated as a specific historical instance, which may certainly have negative aspects. The producer Ogunjiofor himself sees the degree of imitation as a sign of immaturity:

It is Ogunjiofor’s belief that the video-film world in Nigeria has not started yet.

We have a long way to go, he opined, adding that we are imitative; we produce in English and adopt western concepts which are lost on our own people who buy our films. (“Encounter” 21)

The more bourgeois English language films, with their representations of elite and highly Westernized lifestyles, are often criticized as being so exces-
sively oyinbo (white, foreign) as to be unrecognizable as Nigerian to the majority of the population.

The conjunction of the representation of a luxurious elite lifestyle and an incipient capitalist organization of video production might suggest that there is a serious tendency towards consolidation of a bourgeois art form which would detach itself from the category of the "popular arts." One can point to some works that are entirely bourgeois in the world they represent, their mode of production, and in their style, which is virtually indistinguishable from American television: Amaka Igwe’s Violated, Andy Amenechi’s Mortal Inheritance, Chico Ejiro’s Shame. But this proposition needs qualification and careful handling. In addition to the remarks quoted above on the failure of the African ruling class to create a hegemonic culture, Jeyifo has pointed out that, with a few exceptions, “the exclusive appropriation of a theatrical form by a social group, or class did not, and has not historically advanced far in Africa” (31). This will almost certainly remain true for video production, even if sectors of it move upscale, given the existing models of very low-budget production and distribution in the informal sector. The popular audience is not apt to let video production slip entirely out of its control.

Moreover, there is irony in the consolidation of a bourgeois style at a moment when the Nigerian middle class is being unconsolidated by economic collapse. The essential heterogeneity, fluidity, and unboundedness of social groups in Africa makes it difficult to talk of fully formed “classes” in the European sense at all. In Nigeria the class situation is further destabilized because of extreme underlying economic instability, the possibility of rapid mobility for a limited few, and nearly universal aspirations for individual advancement which tend to inhibit the formation of class consciousness. One of the signs of the incomplete process of class formation is that nearly everyone aspires to rise socially and imagines there is some prospect of doing so, however slim the chances really are, so that the dream vision of an elite lifestyle is in some sense common property (Williams 111-14, 118-19; Barber, “Popular” 18; Waterman 223-28). This is particularly true in cultures like the Igbo and the Yoruba where individual dynamism is much prized. Images of lavish wealth are standard fare in the videos, but they need to be interpreted sometimes as expressions of a stable middle-class vision of itself, and sometimes as a turbulent dream by and for the masses. Of course there is no neat separation between these possibilities.

The class fraction most identified with the videos—particularly the Igbo and English language ones—are urban nouveaux riches, who have gotten ahead in the mad scramble for wealth in post-oil boom Nigeria. This group puts money into producing videos, and their lifestyle is frequently represented. At their worst the video dramas produced on this socioeconomic basis, and with the plainest commercial motives, are thin and false, advertisements for unbridled acquisitiveness and an elite lifestyle which can hardly be attained honestly. But this is of course not the whole story. The spectacle of luxury is normally accompanied by a moralizing commentary, which appeals to more traditional values. Where the emphasis falls,
whether on the glamor or the moralizing, varies with each film and with each viewer.

*Living in Bondage*, which was the first big Igbo video hit, established and exemplifies the characteristic handling of the urban scene: a compound of money, violence, occult rituals, women, fraudsters, and strange occurrences in the lives of the upwardly mobile in the dark belly of the city. The success and importance of the film have little to do with its aesthetic qualities, but rather with its powerful crystallization of common ideas of the urban masses—as Barber puts it, following Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, the “re-experiencing of things that all had felt and thought of in isolation, now heightened and intensified by the recognition that they are communal” (“Popular Arts” 47).

The story takes place in Lagos. Andy, the main character, who has been drifting from job to job without entering the fast lane where he so desperately wants to be, gets entangled with a group of dubious Igbo business men. He is avaricious, gullible, and envious of them. He seeks to join their group, and is gradually let in to their secret world. Finally the real price of membership is demanded of him: he must present for sacrifice in a money ritual his wife Merit, the allegorically named moral anchor of his drama of greed and selfishness. Entered so far with them, he cannot opt out. He tries to substitute a prostitute for Merit, but when this fails his wife is killed in a bizarre ritual scene, and he immediately begins to prosper.

The narrative brings us to this point very quickly. Now we watch Andy enjoying his wealth for a time, in the style of his upwardly mobile friends: philandering in bars, frequenting posh hotels, and generally conspicuously consuming in the most crude and flagrant manner. This is the sign of his “arrival,” as he accumulates the markers of his new social position: women, cars, more women, and more cars, a huge house, a cell phone, and international business deals. But even as it records the lifestyle of this dubious and thieving elite, the story turns towards teaching a moral, as it must do. Andy’s problems start when he tries to marry a new wife, Ego. His first wife begins to haunt him as a nightmarish apparition. The news of his scandalous impending remarriage (before the traditional period of mourning for Merit has passed) gets to his village, where a family council is summoned and a delegation sent to demand an explanation; he angrily rejects them, but the apparition of his murdered spouse upsets the marriage.

In part 2, Ego has fled and is replaced by another woman, Chi, who in her turn, unable to stand the continuing apparitions and Andy’s psychological deterioration, steals a great deal of Andy’s money but is poisoned by her best friend as she tries to travel abroad. Merit’s ghost drives Andy completely mad as he is signing a big contract with representatives of an important company. Andy ends up living on the streets, raving and picking morsels from rubbish heaps in downtown Lagos. The rest is a story of rehabilitation. He is discovered by Tina, who was the prostitute Andy tried to sacrifice in place of his wife; the experience has turned her into a born-again Christian. She rushes back to his home and returns with his mother, and then has him taken into the custody of her Pentecostal church, where exorcisms are performed. Andy regains his sanity through the intervention
of Jesus Christ and his minister, after he confesses his sins. The story ends with him in the church, stripped of all urban sophistication.

The threads of the story which are left unexplored are revealing. Many social issues are touched upon but then dropped immediately, such as the options open to Andy as he initially faces the problems of unemployment and coping with the city and its attractions, or the episode in which his wife is thrown out of her job because she will not sleep with the boss. Her death does not lead to a criminal case, and the fortunes of the other members of the group of ritual killers are not investigated. When Andy goes mad he is not sent to a modern asylum for the mentally ill, but to the church. Personality and identity are presented as complex and layered, and it is the more modern and individualized part that falls prey to the devouring city. One might be tempted to say that it is a traditional moral scheme and narrative imagination that figures the drama of city life as one of ritual murder—except that the urban vampire story is one propagated in the cities, by city dwellers, to make sense of their own condition. It has passed through various ethnic groups, forming part of the mixed, modern culture of the cities—many parallel instances can be found in Yoruba films and videos, or even those being produced in Ghana.

We are then not really dealing with a polarized opposition where modernity and the urban scene are on one side, and tradition, magic, and the rural village are on the other, and serve as the answer to all problems. Andy's story does not intersect with modern legitimate institutions that would solve problems of mental health, missing persons, sexual harassment, or unemployment, because such institutions are not available to the mass popular audience, which has only family, traditional healers, and churches to fall back on when the city overpowers them. Very much a product of the city, Andy's story has recourse to his village of origin and its moral values at crucial moments, but the ultimate spiritual anchor proves to be the modern Pentecostal church. Such miracle churches and healing places are multiplying every day, as refuges for the spiritually broken urban masses.

The representation of the city is subsumed by a logic of acquisitive desire and magic because this same vast floating desperate mass of the population needs figures for the social processes of post-oil boom Nigeria, which seem occult because they have so little to do with work or productive social processes (see Barber, "Petro-Naira"). Andy's wealth defies all logic of capital formation and accumulation: fully occupied in squandering what was acquired through the money ritual, Andy never thinks of using his wealth to create more wealth. This economy is organized by cliques and cabals enriching themselves at the expense of others, following the slogan "chop make I chop." Upward mobility is everything, and there are very few people in a position to demand, or even to be interested in, accountability or transparency from those who have made it. Andy replies, to questions about his identity, "I am a businessman"—a supremely vague description in this situation where it means everything and nothing. There is little in the way of available political ideology that really makes sense of this mess. Popular consciousness, built on a disposition in traditional Igbo culture to
favor individual dynamism and ambition, is fascinated with the art and strategy of getting ahead in this world, and of course admiring of the spectacle of luxury that accompanies it, even as it registers horror at the moral anarchy. It is therefore very easy for the video dramas aimed at this audience to misrecognize the real social and political issues facing the urban masses, representing them in a way that falsifies the problems and makes solutions unimaginable. In Hollywood and the Indian film industry, both under the control of a consolidated bourgeoisie, mass culture is certainly designed to have a politically soporific effect. In Nigeria the problems are rooted more in limitations inherent in popular consciousness.

One recurring form through which this anarchy is expressed is the sacrifice of marital relations on the altar of greed, to support a glamorous urban lifestyle. This happens with allegorical clarity in Living in Bondage, but it also features in a number of the other most popular Igbo and English language videos, such as True Confessions and Glamour Girls; it is given a mythological turn in Nnaka 1 and 2. These dramas all invest their female characters with immense frightening power—the nightmarish projections of the males who control video production, but which resonate with everyone whose psychological relationships have been rendered insecure by the precarious struggle for existence.

While the urban scene is dominant in the Igbo productions, we do not mean to suggest that they are limited to any one location, physical, social or ideological—their openness is one of the most promising things about them. Ikuku/Hurricane, written by and starring Nkem Owuh (who also directed part 1; part 2 was directed by Zeb Ejiro) is set in a village, and takes a village perspective on things. But it does something that is quite rare in the “traditional” Yoruba productions, which is to present the village in historical fashion, as being in an uncompleted relation to the forces of modernization, rather than as being a pure repository of uncorrupted values or the scene for essentially timeless stories of magical encounters. (Tunde Kelani’s Ti Oluwa Ni Ile, with its story of sacred ancestral land being sold for a filling station, is more like Ikuku.)

The village is beset by a terrible wind because the priest of the Ikuku shrine has died without a successor. A diviner says the priesthood will fall on the Ezigbo family, and eliminates as a candidate one of its members, the town drunk Osuofia. The only other known male is Dr. Raymond, a nuclear physicist living in Lagos, recently recalled from abroad by the government. Nobody knows that a boy called Stephen is the illegitimate son of Osuofia—he is obviously the right candidate as he suffers visions of the oracle and of his father, but the film does not get around to a discovery scene which would resolve this situation until the end of part 2. A delegation is sent to visit Dr Raymond in Lagos. Found in his luxurious home, he treats the delegation rudely, with no respect for kinship, let alone the shrine to whose priesthood he has been called. Eventually, however, he is forced into returning to the village by a series of catastrophes that befall his life in Lagos: his chickens all die, somebody poisons his dog, his grant letter goes missing, and the engine of his Volvo knocks.
Much comedy is made of his cultural alienation once he returns to the village. He speaks English to the oracle, puts on surgical gloves to handle kola nut, expects there to be files on the job as priest and a bank account to support sacrifices, and allows his foreign wife to commit various sacrileges, for which she suffers magical retribution. In a parallel plot, the Igwe’s son and heir has also returned; Jeff has acquired a fake American accent in Lagos, along with the dress and manners of a street hustler, and he brings along a fiancée called Jenny who can’t cook and has no intention of learning how. Jeff will clearly not be able to succeed his father. The theme of acculturation to the wider world is carried on throughout the film through many incidental jokes, not necessarily connected to Raymond and Jeff, about who does or does not speak English—French and even Latin also come up. The village has been thoroughly penetrated by the languages of modernity.

The satire on modern, alienated sons of the soil is balanced by discredited village figures who insist on their traditional titles. The main one is the drunk Osuofia, who insists on his status as elder and relative as he gives a prurient lecture on sexual morality to his niece, and demands that the waitress in an Igbo restaurant in Lagos bend down as she serves him in deference to his rank, but really so he can see down her dress. When he is thrown down after provoking a fight in the village bar he makes a big deal of how a titled man’s head should never touch the ground. Similarly the diviner is also pushed to the ground (on the periphery of a fracas involving his fierce hen-pecking, adulterous wife); from this position he announces he won’t arise unless placated by the sacrifice of a cock. Nobody really notices.

The film, then, is made from the perspective of a real village, shot through with problems and in the midst of negotiating responses to the wider world that impinges on it. The Lagos scenes, let alone Dr Raymond’s career, are less realistic, being the fragmentary impressions of bewildered outsiders. At every turn Igbos are found in Lagos, as auto mechanic or restaurant proprietor; really no one else is visible. The notion that Raymond should abandon his career as nuclear physicist in Nigeria’s space program (sic!) in order to become the priest of the village oracle seems absurd even to the film, but it does endorse the community’s claim on its members—Raymond should negotiate, as his friend in Lagos tells him: go home, give gifts, and see what can be arranged. Raymond is much more ridiculous, and more clearly in the wrong, than the village ever is. But the village also has to negotiate, to keep channels of communication open.

There is an important sense, the plots tell us, in which the tradition cannot defend itself, has broken down, suffering interruptions: the Igwe looks and functions like an Igwe, but he has no plausible successor; the priesthood has devolved on a family whose male members are the alienated and absurd Raymond, the utterly corrupt and incompetent drunk Osuofia, and the illegitimate and unrecognized boy Stephen. Part 2 will put all this back together again. Still, even in the first part one generally has a sense of life going on in a way that prevents any sense of an acute crisis. The supposed hurricane is forgotten—certainly it is not blowing at the end of
part I as the masquerades come out and everyone dances. Throughout, the atmosphere is of resilience and humor, not tragic civilizational crisis.

The degree to which video and film production is organized along ethnic lines in Nigeria is quite unusual in Africa—elsewhere films do not carry their ethnicity on their sleeves because production is organized on a national and international basis. The positive side of the Nigerian situation is the immediate relation to a popular audience; the negative side is that in some ways at least, it reflects a situation in which many dimensions of national life are being re-ethnicized as the national institutions deteriorate. One needs to ask what the relation of the popular arts arising from each ethnic tradition is to a national culture, and perhaps these days one will answer with less assurance than did Biodun Jeyifo in 1984 when he placed the Yoruba traveling theater “solidly within the pale of an emergent national popular culture,” though one that was not monolithic and had many ethno-national streams (5).

The Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa videos all emerged from specific circumstances that gave them markedly different characters. This perhaps extends even to a certain nonequivalence of categories, to differences in the extent to which they are marked as ethnic. The “traditional” Yoruba videos seem more imbued with an ethnic spirit, for diverse reasons that have been touched upon: their immediate artistic lineage goes back to a moment of cultural nationalism (one wonders how the Igbo films would look if they had begun production in 1967); the “deep” Yoruba verbal arts play an important role; the original structure of the acting companies was more closed. While Igbo films also frequently involve magic, they are much less likely to invoke a whole traditional cosmology and pantheon of deities. The Yoruba films are much more liable to be historical in the sense of appealing to a legendary Yoruba tradition, which is not easily seen to flow into a modern pluri-ethnic nation. Even dramas with modern urban settings seldom hint at the existence of other ethnicities, whereas Igbo videos not infrequently do. All this is apt to make non-Yoruba viewers feel culturally excluded. Yoruba films and videos are fairly seldom subtitled, and in general (with the large exceptions discussed earlier, such as the work of Tunde Kelani) there seems to be little interest in making the concessions necessary to attract a non-Yoruba speaking audience. The Igbo videos on the other hand are normally “spiced” with a fair amount of English and/or Pidgin, and are subtitled (Living in Bondage, the first Igbo film, was originally released without subtitles, but a subtitled version was quickly supplied), as if aiming at an audience beyond that of the Igbo ethnic group. Franca Brown’s Lies of Destiny is a hybrid, half in Igbo and half in English, invoking Igbo religious conceptions but starring an actor who speaks no Igbo. The rapidity with which English language videos grew out of the Igbo boom is indicative of a certain lack of linguistic loyalty. A number of Yoruba actors also cross over into English language films, including some with “traditional” roots like Jide Kosoko. The artists from southern minorities may feel they have a stake in avoiding ethnic identifications altogether, and therefore are stalwarts of detrubalized English language productions. But they may also be motivated by micronationalism to make films in their own
languages or to make films in English and Pidgin that nevertheless carry a strong regional flavor, like Zeb Ejiro’s Domitilla, with its deep Delta Pidgin.

Yoruba and Igbo production is also marked by these two simultaneous and contradictory tendencies: towards ethnic cultural assertion, and towards participation in a detribalized, national form aimed at a national (or at least pan-southern) market. This is an altogether healthy tension, though each tendency carries its own dangers. The judges of the THEMA movie awards complained of the blandness of the detribalized films: “In too many movies the scenes were not “located” —they had no cultural, political or even geographical identity. Story lines themselves hardly had any cultural identity. They often looked like the Lagos version of New York—especially because the scenes had no ambience” (“From the Judges” 11). Many such films are within the bourgeois tendency alluded to above. They may be enlightened and programmatic about their handling of ethnic relations (both Violated and Mortal Inheritance play families of different ethnicities against each other; family resistance to a cross-ethnic marriage is central to the latter film), but a class division threatens to open up in place of the ethnic one as the lifestyles represented pass beyond the ken of most Nigerians.

The issue here is finally that the Nigerian nation is simply too big and diverse to be fully represented by any one kind of film. But the video films in the aggregate do a remarkable job of conveying the country’s immensity and diversity. In spite of all their aesthetic and ideological underdevelopment and the blockages in the market, their cultural and commercial elasticity is such that it is hard to imagine what could kill off the video industry. When circumstances allow celluloid film production to resume, it will be on the basis laid down by the videos.

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NOTES

1. Following Nigerian usage, we will sometimes refer to the video films simply as "films." They are also frequently called "home videos," though not of course with the American meaning of the term.

2. It has been estimated that more than three quarters of the Yoruba-language films are in the improvised style of the Yoruba traveling theater (Taiwo 16), though many of the younger actors began their careers after stage performances had ceased.

3. Musicians do appear fairly frequently in the videos performing their music (doubtless as an extension of the tradition of the traveling theater, which regularly featured musical entertainment). What they do not do is get paid to provide soundtrack music.

4. The title of a collection of essays and speeches by the Managing Director of the Nigerian Film Corporation, Brendan Shehu, is precisely No... Not Hollywood.

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