MOBILISING YORUBA POPULAR CULTURE: 
BABANGIDA MUST GO

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The ‘video boom’ in Nigeria since the early 1990s, during which the production of feature films shot on video and sold as video cassettes has risen to the level of 500 a year, coincides with a period of political turmoil and deep crisis (Haynes, 2000). Cassette technology has enormous radical potential—because it is so cheap, mobile, and dispersed, the state apparatus can hardly control it (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi, 1994, demonstrated its importance in the Iranian revolution; Larkin, 2000, has applied their theory of ‘small media’ to the Nigerian situation)—but the orientation of most Nigerian video production has nevertheless been resolutely commercial and extremely cautious in political matters. Invaluable as evidence of the effects of the economic collapse and social anomie of this period, only a few video films produced before the end of military rule in 1999 attempted anything like a direct political analysis of the causes of the crisis, and fewer still can be seen as direct political interventions.¹ The rare and significant exception under consideration here, Gbenga Adewusi’s Maradona² (1993; also known as Babangida Must Go) indeed advertises itself on the jacket as the ‘First Yoruba Film on Nigerian Politics’.

The silence of other film makers is remarkable in contrast to the role of Nigerian print journalism—the other great chronicler of this terrible period of the nation’s history—which constantly tested the limits of the military regime’s tolerance, at the price of many arrests, detentions

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1 The return to civilian rule has brought a wave of films with political subjects, including a two-part lightly fictionalised chronicle of the Abacha dictatorship itself, Stubborn Grasshopper (2001), written and produced by Sam Opeoluwa. Prominent examples of videos dealing with political issues from the period of military dictatorship include Tunde Kelani’s Kasaegbe (1996), a liberal morality play about corruption in the civil service, Kenneth Nnebue’s exploration of the devices of economic and political predation in Dirty Deal (1993), and Nnebue’s linking of political power and dark occult forces in Rituals (1997). Haynes (2001) tries to outline some strategies of political critique that have been commonly practised in video film, and takes account of video’s increasing boldness in addressing political issues since the end of the Abacha dictatorship.

2 Because the video Maradona/Babangida Must Go has no subtitles, and I do not understand Yoruba, I must record my gratitude to Bose Shaba, who translated the film for me, and to my graduate student and research assistant at the University of Ibadan, Tunde Olaoye, who also provided a translation, along with invaluable background information and, finally, an introduction to the director, Gbenga Adewusi. Niyi Osundare provided assistance with some translations. Of course, none of these friends is responsible for any errors I may have made.
without trial, beatings, assassinations, seizures of equipment, and closures of media houses. Popular music, which is the only other art which commands anything like the same level of attention as the videos now do, has also carried many oppositional voices, sometimes strident, of which the late Fela Anikulapo Ransome-Kuti's was only the most famous.

While censorship of video films on political grounds is not unheard of, it is rare, and the relationship between the video industry and the Nigerian Film and Video Censors' Board became increasingly cosy and lax as production boomed. The main reason the merest threat of censorship deterred film makers from addressing political topics was doubtless the precariousness of their financing: though made on shoestring budgets, video films are still relatively major investments for those involved, and few producers could survive the total loss consequent on having a film banned. Moreover, with few exceptions most video producers and distributors are in the business for the money (this is a charge constantly made against them in virtually all Nigerian discussions of the video boom): they generally have few political purposes, and are eager to avoid trouble. 'My only enemy is poverty' is a frequently-heard refrain.

Maradona's director, Gbenga Adewusi, is very much a part of this commercial video culture, of which he was one of the pioneers. After some time as a struggling actor he started a company, Bayowa Films Production, which became one of the largest Yoruba video film producers and distributors. (The rise in his fortunes is doubtless connected with his marriage to the daughter of a business tycoon.) For Better for Worse is typical of the other films he has made and of the general run of Nigerian video dramas: it is the melodramatic story of the love and eventual marriage between a glamorous singing star afflicted with sickle-cell anaemia and a glamorous young man from a wealthy and disapproving family, played by Adewusi himself. Adewusi hosts a television show, Bayowa Half Hour, which promotes his company's films through celebrity interviews, film clips, and telephone calls from fans. He has also become a religious evangelist and makes gospel music.

Maradona was sparked by the annulment by military President Ibrahim Babangida of the presidential election of 12 June 1993, which was won by the late Yoruba businessman M. K. O. Abiola. Lagos was the scene of the most sustained protests against the annulment, which were bloodily put down. The Yoruba part of the country continued to seethe with outrage throughout the tenure of the short-lived Interim National Government (ING) appointed by Babangida after the annulment and throughout the regime of General Sani Abacha, who dismissed the ING in a bloodless coup in November 1993.

Maradona is not the kind of standard full-length dramatic feature film that constitutes the bulk of Nigerian video production. Part of it is something very like a music video—another genre which flourishes in Nigeria. Interspersed with this material, and making up the other half of Maradona, are two comic sketches by a roster of stars from the Yoruba
travelling theatre tradition,\textsuperscript{3} all of whom now make video features. This hybrid form is, as far as I have been able to discover, unique, but it obeys basic principles of Yoruba aesthetics, and parallels are not far to seek: travelling theatre performances regularly incorporated substantial musical elements, for instance. Radical journalism is also incorporated by the video, whose remarkable synthesising power is one of the themes of my analysis.

The video \textit{Maradona} was preceded by an audio-cassette tape of Adewusi performing a diatribe against the annulment in the chanted poetic form known as \textit{ewi}, which exaggerates the tonal patterns of Yoruba and adds rhythmic emphasis and a loosely co-ordinated musical accompaniment.\textsuperscript{4} Adewusi was working in a modern line of \textit{ewi} performance disseminated by the mass media. Olarewaju Adepoju, one of the founders of this modern tradition, was the first to employ musical accompaniment and the first to establish his own record label (Waterman, 1990: 18–19); he also pioneered the application of the form to national politics in the 1970s and 1980s, supporting the Yoruba leader Chief Obafemi Awolowo against the government of President Shehu Shagari, which led to his frequent arrest (Tunde Olarewaju, personal communication, 1997). During the 1993 crisis, at the same time Adewusi made his cassette, a number of popular Yoruba performers (notably \textit{fisti} musicians) released radical songs denouncing the annulment, and an \textit{ewi} was also produced by Gbenga Adeboye. These could be heard everywhere in the streets, taxis, bars, and homes of western Nigeria.\textsuperscript{5}

Adewusi's audio tape was a big hit and established him for the first time as a star. According to Andrew Apter, Adewusi 'is credited with bringing I.B.B. down with the song “Babangida must go!” and for influencing events with the power of his curse' (Apter, 1999: 304 n. 13). The video version was a way of capitalising on the success of the audio cassette, exploiting a common marketing relationship between recorded music and music videos. We see Adewusi perform two \textit{ewi}, \textit{President Maradona} (Nigerian popular culture bestowed the nickname 'Maradona' on Babangida because his political deviousness was reminiscent of the legendary Argentine soccer star's skilful dribbling), which condemns Babangida and the annulment, and \textit{Gongo so ni}

\textsuperscript{3} There is a fairly large literature on the Yoruba travelling theatre and its subsequent film and video forms. On the theatre itself see especially Jeyifo (1984); on the film era, Balogun (1987), Ekwuazi (1991), and Okome and Haynes (1997); on the move to video, Haynes and Okome (1998), Haynes (2000), and Barber (2000).

\textsuperscript{4} The term \textit{ewi} originally referred to the high, nasal chanting performed exclusively by \textit{ogun} masqueraders. In the 1960s it began to be used to mean 'poetry in general'. See Okpewho (1992: 128), Barber (1991: 80), Waterman (1990: 18) and Barber (2000: 83).

\textsuperscript{5} In \textit{The Generation of Plays} Barber includes the following footnote to a reference to 'openly political videos': 'Adio Majester Gbolyahade made one (419: \textit{Gbajie}), against corruption, which was sponsored by the government and another (\textit{June 12 Messiah}), in support of Moshood Abiola, which he could only show in London for fear of government reprisals' (2000, chapter 8, n. 2). Unfortunately, I have been unable to see these films.
Nigeria ("There is turmoil in Nigeria") which, while overlapping considerably with the previous one, carries the story forward, reviling the puppet Interim National Government of Ernest Shonekan and further denouncing the dire condition of the economy and the many scandals perpetrated by the ruling elite. The style is that of a Nigerian music video: the editing is rapid, Adewusi is wearing different clothing from one shot to the next, and he is seen against a constantly shifting background of video graphics and documentary footage. At the beginning the ewi performance is also cast as a television call-in show, 'Hello, Olodumare' (the Yoruba word for God), with Adewusi talking to God on the telephone, complaining about Nigeria's problems. He avails himself of the bard's traditional freedom to mock, insult, and curse. Babangida's Information Minister Chukwumerije, a frequent target, is said to have a beard like a brush or a goat and is associated with Satan; the politician Arthur Nzeribe is called a bush animal; and God is requested not to allow any person in Nigeria to give birth to anyone like Babangida again. Traitorous Yoruba politicians are condemned, and the sufferings of workers who are paid ₦600 a month but have to spend ₦40 a day on transport are detailed. Many names are named, and many scandals are alluded to, including Babangida's wife's alleged involvement in cocaine smuggling. Abiola is seen as the only hope, as the video draws to a close, and Sani Abacha, who had just taken power, is encouraged (without much hope) to do the right thing, not to turn his back on what the world is turning its face towards—'Democracy is the answer', 'History will not forgive the military', and 'Go-o-o-o, Abacha' say titles on the screen in the agitprop style that runs throughout the film, and a video clip of Abacha has prison bars and a padlock superimposed on it. The sound of gunshots punctuates the end of the ewi, with video images of the body of a woman protester and people mourning her: 'Victim of democracy, may her soul rest in peace'.

The video is so permeated by documentary news footage that Adewusi appears as a kind of newscaster as well as everything else: scenes of the polling (the caption: 'June 12 election: peaceful, free and fair'); a clip from Babangida's speech before the election in which he swore there was no hidden agenda; many shots of demonstrations and their bloody and charred aftermath, and of troops and tanks in the street; campaign images of Abiola; scenes of the Nigerian ruling class in one gathering or another of the kind which are constantly seen on television; chaotic street scenes created by the scarcity of petrol; and so forth. The busy and inventive visual field also includes a drawing of Babangida as Maradona on a soccer field (the same image is on the

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6. Cf. Barber and Waterman's characterisation of Yoruba faju music and the videos made to accompany it as 'a highly eclectic and incorporative genre, juxtaposing textual, musical and (in the videos) visual fragments in a shifting and unstable flow of pastiche and allusion' (Barber and Waterman, 1995: 241).
cover of the video), his dribbling clumsily animated by computer; finally the ball turns into a map of Nigeria. The second of the two eewi also makes abundant use of political cartoons and frequently shows magazine covers or newspaper headlines from the opposition press—The News, Newswatch, Tell, Punch, the African Guardian, and Abiola's own paper, the Concord—as it recounts the scandalous situations they covered so bravely. And, always, we see the image of the handsome Gbenga Adewusi in various embroidered flowing garments, his name (and sometimes that of Bayowa Films Production) often blazoned across the screen in the self-promoting manner of Yoruba performers, with computer-generated graphics busily metamorphosing behind him.

The cast of the dramatic segments is headed by Baba Suwe and includes Pa Kasumu and the late Lukuluku. The setting for both sketches is a very ordinary unpaved city street where Baba Suwe's wife has set up her ramshackle cooking operation, the steam from the big cauldrons curling around the actors and the ambient grimy, colourless walls. This is an example of the lowest-budget sort of Yoruba video comedy: the performances are clearly unhearsed and improvise on materials which are standard in the tradition. In the first sketch, following directly on the video's opening credit sequence, which ends with footage of the 12 June election, Baba Suwe is reading the news of Abiola's electoral victory from a newspaper, with the usual continuous wordplay both as he laboriously reads and as he jubilantly invites everyone to 'urinate' (instead of 'celebrate') with him. He tells his wife to give food to all the people who are crowding in (he specifies the tiny servings: ₦4 worth of rice, i.e. five US cents). A slapstick episode erupts on the standard—but in this context highly relevant—themes of greed, anarchy, and double-dealing: one of his friends, Lukuluku, complains childishly that someone has taken his meat, and a food fight breaks out; Baba Suwe orders the offenders to kneel and to pay ₦60 for the food he had invited them to eat.

The landlord (Pa Kasumu) then appears, in jacket and tie and thick glasses, accompanied by his wife, whose dress likewise marks her social status—she is in a tailored outfit, while the other women are wearing the traditional Yoruba iro and buba. The landlord is worried at the sight of his tenants gathered together, but they only tease him, and another fight breaks out among themselves amid talk about the election. The landlord says everybody can see Abiola has won, but we have a Maradona (cut to the computer graphic). Baba Suwe in his agitation accidentally steps into the cooking fire. He tells his wife she should collect money from everybody for the meals they have been given, since he had thought Abiola had won, but now he's worried. The landlord says they all helped elect Abiola by voting for him; now they should join hands to demand that Babangida should go. 'Babangida must go!' appears at the bottom of the screen as they form a demonstration, Baba Suwe rousing all the women and children he can find to take part. There follows footage of a large demonstration, with the crowd chanting 'I.B.B. is playing with death' and 'I.B.B. ole' (I.B.B. [Babangida's initials] is a thief), interviews with demonstrators, and
songs: ‘All we are saying is, give us M.K.O.’ (to the tune of John Lennon’s ‘Give peace a chance’). This leads into the first ẹwọ section, ‘President Maradona by Gbenga Adewusi’, still intercut with footage of demonstrations.

The other dramatic sketch is titled Ọmọ Ijọba (‘Government child’). Baba Suwe is found sleeping on a bench when he should be working, and his wife douses him with water. After some other comic business a mad woman appears, followed by a train of children. She is an orphan, a ‘government child’: her father worked for the Nigerian Electrical Power Authority but was electrocuted, then her mother was killed while hawking biscuits on the road, and the girl went mad. She carries off bread and anything else she wants from the street stalls, protected partly by the fear that she will bite and partly by an aura of privilege granted to the insane. Baba Suwe vows to become a mad ‘government child’ too, but he intends to steal hard currency, or at least ₦50 notes (the largest in circulation). His career as a madman begins well: he brazenly fills up a stolen plastic tub with booty and eventually reclines in the street with a great heap of petty trade goods, declaring complacently that it pays to be mad—he was mad during Babangida’s regime, is mad now, and will continue until he builds himself a house. But then he pushes his luck by invading a dry-cleaning store, whose personnel beat him.

The thematic relevance of this sketch is clear enough: governmental craziness is all-licensing, allowing one to steal with impunity, an imitable lesson that spreads down the social scale. (Baba Suwe’s manner as he pillages market stalls resembles a corrupt policeman’s as much as a madman’s.) But finally there is resistance, as the popular moral economy avenges itself against the criminal oppressor: every day for the thief, but one day for the owner, as a common proverb has it. Behind this very prevalent theme of Yoruba stage and screen comedy is the oral tradition of trickster tales. Such stories in their current incarnation as urban folklore may express a wised-up answer to the depredations of the ruling elite, particularly in the popular narrative variant of the elite trickster tricked by a subaltern character (Sekoni, 1997). The self-styled ‘evil genius’ Maradona was said to have dribbled himself into his own net with the elaborately rigged elections, while the much abused Nigerian people watched with deliberately unprovokable cynical patience.

The image of the masses as represented by Baba Suwe and company in both sketches is remarkably unheroic, given the circumstances: they are voluble, absurd, and corrupt, spontaneously generating their own palava and wakara and katsaka (‘contentious discussion’, ‘trouble’, ‘violent altercation’); they might be illustrating the Nigerian stereotype of the Yoruba as so prone to squabbling, treachery, opportunism, and greed as to be politically self-defeating. Nearly half a century ago, near its origins, the travelling theatre did on occasion produce rousing political propaganda (Ogunde’s Bread and Bullet, 1950, and the later Yoruba Romu, 1964, being the most famous examples), but since then it has mostly confined itself to what Karin Barber has called ‘radical conservatism’: a slyly subversive humour which opens an anarchic ‘gay
loophole’ even while lending support to hegemonic social structures (Barber, 1986, 1987, 2000). One might argue, mournfully, that Nigerian political history before and since 12 June 1993 has shown how hard it is to organise on such a basis. But here in this video film Baba Suwe and company are at the least a representative element of the population, expressing a sturdy outrage against the flaunting of their electoral will, and losing themselves in the mass demonstration to which they march off at the end of the first sketch. Conceivably the sense is that even the clowns are mobilised on this occasion, but more likely the meaning is more positive: these are beloved popular entertainers, custodians of a sustaining humour through the dark night of political repression, who join in the popular front political alliance embodied both by the vote on 12 June and, culturally, by the video itself, interweaving as it does the travelling theatre element with Adewusi’s own contribution, which is so much more articulate, glamorous, and saturated with modern media forms.

In the first sketch there is bantering antagonism between the masses and the landlord, who is mocked for his education, but this is quickly swallowed up in a class alliance against the annulment: the landlord informs them of the trouble and leads them off to the demonstration. One might say he stands for the class of predominantly middle-class politicians who would form the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) and the other pro-democracy groups which continued the fight for Abiola’s mandate. But little is made in the film of this leadership (or indeed of Abiola himself) except as a symbol of the popular will: the emphasis is all on the will of the people as manifested in the election, which was indeed far deeper, more intelligent, and more progressive than any of the candidates Babangida had allowed to run.

The class alliance is only one example of the film’s synthesising power, which is characteristic of the African popular arts (Fabian, 1997; Barber, 1987) and is perhaps also characteristically Yoruba (Barber and Waterman, 1995)—the spontaneous mobilisation of a rich panoply of cultural elements which might seem contradictory to an outsider, from *ewi* and ‘traditional’ comedians (as they call themselves) to music videos and televised news—the latter two being, as Ulf Hannerz has suggested, new globalised forms of literacy (1996: 21). We might add that it is the most widely disseminated of all transnational forms—televised soccer matches—which provides the video with its title, via the political culture of Nigeria’s streets. Karin Barber and Christopher Waterman have gone so far as to argue that the traditional—modern (or indigenous—exogenous) dichotomy becomes almost useless in the face of Yoruba popular culture (Barber and Waterman, 1995: 241–3; see also Barber’s exemplary discussion of these issues in 2000: chapter 10). There would be little point in sorting out the thoroughly modernised forms of Yoruba tradition from the thoroughly domesticated transnational forms in *Maradona*, except to stress the non-contradictory modernity of the whole. Perhaps one consequence of this modernity is to minimise the political contradiction between the Yorubaness of the video—which like most Yoruba videos is not supplied with subtitles—and its national
focus. There is no Yoruba irredentist sentiment; it dwells rather on the national character of Abiola’s victory and the unanimity of different ethnicities in condemning the annulment. (Babangida and Abacha worked hard, and ultimately with considerable success, to ethnicise the results of the election and the reactions to its annulment, which in turn has fed into support for the secession of Yorubaland from Nigeria and for the Yoruba nationalist organisation, the Oodua People’s Congress.) However much the video draws on Yoruba traditions, it is pitched towards an urgent, present, national crisis.

Maradona, then, was a deep, central, and full-voiced expression of Yoruba and indeed Nigerian opinion at a crucial historical moment; but it was also fugitive and clandestine. The repression directed against the radical audio cassettes of 1993 was not severe: everyone involved was frightened, but only Adewusi was arrested, and he was not held long. He fled abroad to escape the attentions of the State Security Services, who were looking for him, but his father-in-law, being a wealthy and influential person, negotiated his safe return. As a consequence of Maradona, music videos were required to be submitted to the censors, which they had not been previously (Tunde Adegbola, personal communication, Lagos, 1997). By 1997, when I chanced upon a copy of the cassette in a video shop in Ibadan, it had generally been removed from circulation. Adewusi told me it was too dangerous for video marketers in Lagos to display it (personal communication, Lagos, 1997). A poster for the video (under its alternative title, Babangida Must Go) still adorned the offices of Bayowa Films Production in Lagos, but all copies of the film had been removed to safety elsewhere. Adewusi also talked in 1997 of making a sequel directed against Abacha but, the Abacha regime having by that time demonstrated the full extent of its deadly fury against its opponents, and in particular against those in the media, the prospects of such a film actually being made seemed remote.

The condition for the circulation of Maradona, then, had been the partial revolt of western Nigeria in the middle of 1993. It was not, except for a few insurrectionary days, a disturbance of order complete enough to suspend the commercial economy through which the tape was distributed, but it was profound enough that a certain safety or at least mass solidarity could be felt in the company of nearly the whole of the Yoruba political, cultural, and social body. The class ambit of the video phenomenon is impressive: in this case the millionaire father-in-law had a role to play, and Adewusi’s own style runs to the sort of movie glamour associated with Indian films, but his offices are located (as is the video industry in general) in the heart of Idumota market, one of the oldest, poorest, and most congested parts of Lagos, where the streets are nearly impassable to vehicles because they are so jammed with petty trading in plastic containers, cloth, and electronic goods. These traders

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7 Cf. Barber’s discussion of the non-exclusionary character of the ideology of the Yoruba travelling theatre, which, though entirely in Yoruba, addressed itself in principle to all Nigerians and even to all moral beings everywhere (Barber, 2000: chapter 12).
are a primary audience for video films. Nigerian videos are nothing if not close to the people, and Maradona shows how to speak their language.

What has been lacking in order to make Maradona’s example sustainable is a core of activists who would set up an alternative distribution system that could withstand the threat of censorship and could guarantee minimum sales better than the commercial network through which video tapes now move. It is because they have an alternative distribution system within an ideologically cohesive community that Islamicists have used the radical potential of cassette technology so successfully, in Nigeria as well as in Iran and Egypt and elsewhere. Political radicals in Nigeria created a hardened, though not invulnerable, print media outlet through the newspaper and magazine group Independent Communications Network, which publishes The News, Tempo, and PM News. Nothing like it has been attempted for videos. There are several reasons for this, some obvious ones being: the chaotic distribution system that is a major problem for all video producers (Haynes and Okome, 1998); the dire state of the economy, so that even the few thousand dollars needed to make a video is a daunting sum to impoverished activists; and the disconnection between the commercial culture of the video boom and political activism, so that the idea of radical videos seems not to have occurred to either side. Wole Soyinka, for instance, in his campaign against the regime, editorialised and wrote plays and opened a pirate radio station, rather than making or sponsoring videos, though his Blues for a Prodigal (1984) is the original Nigerian underground political film. Finally, as Nigeria has passed from the bitter tyranny of military rule into the morass of civilian politics, there has been a general demobilisation of the cohesive fury that gave Adewusi’s film its mass audience. The disarray of progressive forces in electoral politics illustrates the problem. But none of these obstacles is insurmountable. Maradona demonstrates what is possible.

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8 Disenchanted with the aesthetic results of his forays into cinema, Soyinka declares he will leave film making to others (personal communication, 1997).
ABSTRACT

Nigerian video films are often characterised as apolitical. A rare and significant
exception is Gbenga Adewusi’s *Maradona* (also known as *Babangida Must Go*), which was released in 1993 in response to the annulment of the 12 June 1993 presidential election by the military ruler Ibrahim Babangida. The film is a fierce denunciation of the annulment and of the whole political regime, employing a number of Yoruba and transnational cultural forms: the chanted poetic form *eevi*, skits by artists from the Yoruba travelling theatre tradition, the televizual form of music videos, news broadcasting and call-in shows, and the resources of print journalism. This film demonstrates the political potential of the video film, but also the limitations of the video distribution system.

**RÉSUMÉ**
