NATIONAL CINEMAS

Nigerian Cinema: Structural Adjustments

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Basic Conditions

Nigerian cinema presents an interesting, even striking contrast to the situation of cinema in other West African countries. To be sure, there are broad, structural similarities: Nigerian feature film production began in 1970, just a few years after the beginning of cinema in the francophone countries; the distribution system continues to be largely closed to indigenous filmmakers, supplying instead a diet of American, Indian, and Chinese films; local production is therefore starved for money and equipment, so that one cannot really talk of a film industry—production is artisanal, informal, and sporadic.

The rate of production in Nigeria is at best about four 16 mm feature films in a year—that is, films shot on negative film stock. More work is being made using cheaper technologies, such as reversal film stock (from which no prints can be made), or video, which is then blown up to 16 mm. Including such films, something more than one hundred features have been produced in Nigeria (Ekwuazi 16-18; Adesanya, *Nigerian Film/TV Index* 116-18). The material infrastructure for making films is about the same as in francophone West Africa, though the financial infrastructure is probably even less developed. The disastrous decline of the Nigerian Naira has made importation of materials and equipment, and foreign processing, astronomically expensive. Production in 35 mm has ceased almost entirely since the seventies, and is unlikely to resume on any scale until the economic situation improves. But 16 mm equipment (not always in the best repair) and experienced professionals to run it are available locally, and there is easy access to equipment from abroad. It is now possible to produce a 16 mm film of good technical quality entirely in Nigeria, importing only the film stock, and to do most of the post-production work there as well (Adesanya “Production Infrastructure”). Facilities for processing black and white film have been in place for a long time; a new color processing facility (with a sound dubbing studio) belonging to the Nigerian Film Corporation has recently (May 1992) been opened in Jos. As long as the Jos facility remains fully functional (there is some skepticism about its commercial viability), it will be possible to make a film in Nigeria from start to finish. The video resources in Lagos are considerable, with about twenty video production houses, and since a feature can be produced on video (for
distribution by video cassette) for about a tenth of the price of a celluloid film, there has been a pervasive structural adjustment towards video production.

One crucial difference between Nigerian and other West African cinema is the autonomy, or isolation, of Nigerian cinema: it has developed with very little influence or participation from outside, and exporting of films is an insignificant aspect. The British had a Colonial Film Unit that produced documentaries and propaganda, thereby introducing some cinematic technology and skills into the country, but neither before nor after Independence did they give any encouragement to Nigerians to make fictional feature films. This of course is in great contrast to the role of the French Ministry of Cooperation and Development in the development of African film in France’s ex-colonies. And this historical difference remains true to date. A major theme of the 1991 FESPACO film festival was “Partnership,” between African filmmakers and foreign, mainly European co-producers and distributors, who (with attendant journalists) were present in large numbers. But the screenings of the First Nigerian National Film Festival (in Lagos, December 1992) were, by my informal survey, attended by approximately one foreigner.

In the early days of Nigerian film there was some connection with African-Americans, notably Ossie Davis, who directed several films in Nigeria in the 1970s, including the first Nigerian feature, *Kongi’s Harvest* (1970), which was made with American money (Ekwuazi 24-26). The film’s producer, Francis Oladele, an important pioneer of Nigerian cinema, was trained in the US. Another of the founders of Nigerian cinema, Chief Eddie Ugbomah, continues to have American connections, and a number of other filmmakers have been trained abroad. Recently, at the end of his life, Chief Hubert Ogunde coproduced *Mr. Johnson* (1990) with the director Bruce Beresford and an American company. But such support and influence has really been very limited. From the beginning, Nigerian films have been produced almost exclusively with Nigerian money.

Relations with other African countries and the Pan-African filmmaking community have also been extremely attenuated—practically embodied in the person of Ola Balogun, Nigeria’s leading director, who speaks French, was trained in Paris at the Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques (IDHEC), and has regularly appeared at FESPACO. Otherwise, few Nigerians have come to the Festival, although this situation seemed to be changing in 1993. Because it does not have a national organization of filmmakers, Nigeria does not participate in FEPACI (the Federation of Pan-African Filmmakers). Films from elsewhere in Africa are virtually never shown in Nigeria; Nigerian films penetrate the market in neighboring countries in a modest way, particularly where there are Yoruba speakers, but are generally unknown to filmmakers or film audiences elsewhere on the continent.

The positive side of the isolation of Nigerian cinema is that insofar as it exists, it is truly independent and autonomous; there are no questions about what effect foreign money may be having on the artistic imagination. At the Workshop on Film Policy held by the Nigerian National Film Corporation in Jos in May 1992, the director Ladi Ladebo was virtually alone in talking of the foreign market as an integral part of Nigerian filmmaking, to be taken into account from the beginning in the financial, technical, aesthetic, and thematic dimensions. Nigeria’s sheer size and its cultural vibrancy are factors in this autonomy. Still, film is an international
as well as national industry: always and everywhere film industries count on the export market as part of their economic strategy. The isolation of Nigerian film stunts it.

The initiatives undertaken by the government to foster an indigenous film industry are a history of failures. A color processing lab in Port Harcourt was never completed. The distribution system, which had been in the hands of Lebanese and Indians, was indigenized by decree in 1972, but this resulted merely in the acquisition of Nigerian fronts. Investors rushed into the new business of production in the mid '70s, and then rushed out again. The need for a legal environment of copyright and contract law is just beginning to be addressed (see Oladitan and Ekpo in Ekwuawi and Nasidi). Grandiose plans for facilities in Jos, including a cinema village, are motivated more by political and bureaucratic interests than by a calculation of what filmmakers really need. Ola and Françoise Balogun have argued cogently from the beginning that what the government should be doing, instead of launching huge state-run projects, is establishing economic conditions that would encourage independent production (Françoise Balogun, *Cinema*).

Economic motivations still encourage distributors to take foreign films being dumped at very low prices rather than Nigerian films whose producers are trying to recover their whole costs on the local market: imported films cost the exhibitor around a fifth to a tenth of the daily rental Nigerian films must demand. The measures needed include waiving taxes on Nigerian films, using monies derived from entertainment taxes to support a fund for film production, requiring that a quota of films shown in theaters be locally made, and so on.

**The Shape of Nigerian Film Production**

The first Nigerian fictional feature film, *Kongi's Harvest* (1970), was adapted from a play by Wole Soyinka, who played the lead character. The cast included a number of people who were or would become central figures in the Nigerian theater, cinema, and even academic life (e.g., Pa Orlando Martins, Wale Ogunyemi, Femi Johnson, Dapo Adelugba). Politically committed (it is an allegory of African despotism) and drawing on a wealth of intellectual and artistic talent, the film seemed—whatever its faults—to augur the development of a sophisticated and engaged national cinema.

This kind of cinema has failed almost completely to materialize. From the beginning there were attempts to create a less intellectual cinema which would appeal to a mass audience. Eddie Ugbomah's approach was to make movies influenced by American action or Blaxploitation films, urban in setting and dealing with crime or political violence: *The Rise and Fall of Dr. Oyenusi* (1976), *The Mask* (1979), *Oil Doom* (1981), *Bolus '80* (1982), *The Boy Is Good* (1982), *The Death of the Black President* (1983). Ola Balogun moved in another direction, working with artists from the Yoruba Travelling Theater.

Film production in English, never more than a trickle, has become sporadic indeed. There have been only a few films in Igbo or Hausa, the latter sometimes made with heavy government sponsorship, perhaps reflecting the Northern influence in Nigerian politics, though there has been no real policy of government support for Hausa films. (Adamu Halilu's *Shehu Umar* [1976] was made from a
novel by the first Prime Minister of Nigeria, Tafewa Balewa, and was produced by the National Government as Nigeria’s official entry for FESTAC ’77; Halilu’s *Kanta of Kebbi* [1978] was co-produced by the Sokoto State Government. (Neither of Halilu’s epics were screened commercially [Françoise Balogun, *Cinema* 70-71].) It has been pointed out that all the films sponsored by the Federal Government have been in English or Hausa, and that none of them has ever recovered its production costs (Ekwuazi 57, 70). The sponsorship by the Babangida Presidency of a big-budget film by Sule Umar on the coup against Murtala Mohammed is the latest example of this sort of project. Meanwhile, while other kinds of filmmaking sputtered out for lack of an economic base, there have been more than one hundred films made in Yoruba, a completely independent phenomenon, whose basis—including distribution, which has always been the heart of the problem for African film—is carried over from the theater.

The Yoruba films’ grow straight out of the Yoruba Travelling Theater. This form of popular drama was created by the late Hubert Ogunde out of the traditional Alarinjo theater, with the addition of elements from the Ghanaian Concert Party and elsewhere. Its formal structure includes substantial elements of music and dance and even acrobatics, as well as drama, and it incorporates traditional Yoruba metaphysical and religious beliefs. This form of drama has been wildly popular with Yoruba audiences and draws crowds even in non-Yoruba areas. It is known as the Yoruba Travelling Theater because none of the troupes have had a fixed home: they travel constantly, performing in rented halls or wherever they can. Often the troupes are composed largely of members of the family of the principal actor/manager, who may marry his actresses. At one time (around 1980), there were about 100 such troupes (see Clark and Jeyifo).

Now it is difficult to see a performance of the Travelling Theaters, as all the major companies and many of the minor ones have switched over to making films. Some of the leading troupes (e.g., Baba Sala’s Alawada Theatre) became accustomed to working with cameras through television appearances (Lakoji 39-40; Okome 276, 297). As Karin Barber has pointed out, television also “was a catalyst in the process of shedding the older operatic format and replacing it with a streamlined tightly articulated comedy style carried almost entirely by straight dialogue” (“Radical Conservatism” 8).

The midwife of the transition from stage to film was Ola Balogun, who made the first Yoruba film, *Ajami Ogun*, in 1977, with Duro Lapido and his troupe, and starring Adeyemi Folayan (known as Ade Love); Balogun also worked with Hubert Ogunde and the other principal star of this tradition, the comic Moses Olayiwa Adejumo (known as Baba Sala). All of Ogunde’s films—*Aiye* (1979), *Jaiyesimi* (1980), *Aropin N’ Tenia* (1982), and *Ayanmo* (1988)—began life as stage plays (though they were sometimes extensively transformed and rewritten, as *Aiye* was by Ola Balogun); so have most of Moses Olayiwa’s (Okome 290, 302-03; Ola Balogun, personal communication).

Soon there were a host of imitators. The companies discovered that there was more money to be made from films. Now reduced in size, but associating themselves with other companies to produce the films, the troupes continue to travel with their films, as they are still excluded from the normal film distribution system, though they do sometimes rent cinema halls. The National Theatre in Iganmu, Lagos, now shows Yoruba films on a regular basis, and Baba Sala owns
a theater in Ibadan that shows other Yoruba films besides his own. But for the
most part they screen the films elsewhere: in hotels, schools, town halls, and so
on. The company, or some part of it, has to travel with the film because if they
are not there in person, they will be cheated out of their share of ticket sales. For
similar reasons they generally put their work on film rather than on video cas-
settes, for showing in the legion video parlors. Widespread piracy means the films
are kept in the jealous possession of the theater companies, whose presence at the
screenings in any case makes for good publicity. The films are advertised on tele-
vision and radio, as well as by posters and sound trucks making their way through
popular neighborhoods.

Alain Ricard has pointed out very well the advantages and liabilities of this
system of distribution. On the one hand, the actor/manager has the name and per-
haps already has the resources to capitalize a production. The circuit of distribu-
tion is already in place, and those from whom he rents halls are used to treating
him with the respect his popularity commands. He does not need to trust them or
any intermediaries to handle his business for him, because he is on hand to over-
see everything. All he needs to do is load a projector onto his vehicle as he sets
out on tour, and so “le producteur devient son propre distributeur et réalise à une
échelle quasi artisanale l’intégration verticale typique des réussites capitalistes
dans l’industrie du cinéma” (163) “the producer becomes his own distributor and
realizes at a more or less artisanal level the vertical integration typical of capital-
list successes in the cinema industry.”

But, Ricard goes on, this system does not work at all for exporting films, where
it is necessary to make copies of the films, manage their distribution and exhibition
at a distance, and thus

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The Yoruba Travelling Theater filmmakers have shown remarkable entrepre-
neurship in distributing their films as far away as the Benin Republic and Côte
d’Ivoire, but their system does reach its limit. They also run into a language bar-
rier: unlike francophone filmmakers, who may get their films subtitled in French
at the expense of the French Ministry of Cooperation and Development, thereby
giving them access to a much larger market, the Yoruba filmmakers get no help
with subtitling and find it prohibitively expensive.

The system carries with it an aesthetic problem as well, as Ricard says:

Le principal défaut d’un tel système, outre son caractère inex-
portable, est donc de mettre le cinéma entièrement sous la dépendance
des gens de théâtre, de faire du cinéma le serviteur du théâtre. Or les
traits principaux de ce type de théâtre, notamment le vedettariat, le goût
pour les numéros d’acteurs, font partie du style dramaturgique du théâtre populaire et ne peuvent passer sans transposition à l’écran. Et si la vedette est en même temps producteur et distributeur, le réalisateur de cinéma n’a aucune possibilité de faire entendre un point de vue critique, à supposer qu’il en ait un et qu’il se préoccupe d’adapter à l’écran et non de filmer du théâtre. (164)

The principal failure of such a system, beyond its unexportable character, is thus to place the cinema entirely under the domination of theater people, to make of cinema the servant of the theater. Now the principal features of this type of theater, notably the star system, and the taste for actors’ “numbers”, are part of the dramatic style of the popular theater and cannot pass onto the screen without transposition. And if the star is at the same time producer and distributor, the film director has no chance to voice a critical point of view, supposing he has one, and that he is concerned with adaptation for the screen and not with filming theater.

Françoise Balogun’s account of Ola Balogun’s work with the Yoruba theater people in *The Cinema in Nigeria* is a running complaint along these lines. Because they are successful enough—in some cases, wildly successful—with filmed theater, the theater people see little reason to move towards a more truly cinematic film language. This aesthetic blockage reinforces and is reinforced by the commercial blockage that stops the films at (or not far beyond) Nigeria’s borders: the Yoruba films are not exportable because in most cases they do not meet the world’s minimum cinematic standards, technically or stylistically.

Nevertheless, the conjunction of Ola Balogun with Hubert Ogunde and the others was of great symbolic as well as practical importance: the intellectual director embraced a popular and indigenous form, and thereby gained access to an enormous, enthusiastic, and unalienated audience, which simply followed their beloved actors into the new medium of cinema. The problem of establishing rapport with the audience, which took time to resolve in the francophone countries, evaporated.

**The Descent from Pa Ogunde**

A principal genre of the Yoruba films is the costume drama, which aims to recapture the vanished splendor of traditional Yoruba culture in all its metaphysical, social, and aesthetic integrity. It relies heavily on dancing and music and recreated festivals to do so; the visual aspect of these films can be stunning. Both the theme and the multi-media treatment are extensions of the Travelling Theater, as pioneered by Ogunde.

The films of the late Hubert Ogunde have enormous symbolic status for their audience. They are shown on holidays, like Sallah (Ilaye); the films themselves have a quasi-religious status. Ogunde is entirely identified with the character he plays in the films, Osetura, a benign and powerful priest who leads and defends his community and communicates on its behalf with supernatural forces. His first film, *Aiye* (1979, directed by Ola Balogun), begins with him leading a procession to the sacred iroko tree, where his sacrifices on behalf of the community are
accepted, and where he does a fertility dance, to their acclamation. His last film, Ayambe (1988), is even more clearly metaphysical in its dimensions: it opens with scenes in a witches' hell and a heavenly supernatural realm. Both films tell essentially the same story: witches disrupt the happiness of the community, until Osetera intervenes to defeat them. They both have the same narrative structure as well: we follow many parallel stories, through rapid cross-editing; in each situation the witches bring confusion and disaster. The fragmented narrative structure helps compensate for the simplicity of the story. The total effect is of the presentation of a unified but various world, a sense of the collective life of the village.

This world is idyllic, at least before the witches—a basically external force—come to disrupt it. The idyll is at once cultural, social, and religious, and it is conveyed through a continuous aesthetic heightening. Ogunde built a cinema village in his home town, a recreation of a traditional village, with the normal inflation of film sets: the buildings are more spacious than one would expect, everything is perfectly clean, costumes are authentic, but nothing looks lived in. Lighting and camera angles are carefully designed for aesthetic effect. Much of the screen time is taken up with music and dancing, or ceremonies of one kind or another. There are scenes of ordinary daily life, but they seldom last long before they are taken over by something else: women going to a pond to fetch water are apt to start singing and dancing, for example.

The charismatic, gap-toothed, benevolent, Ogunde/Osetera is the patriarchal embodiment of all values. He is always imperturbable, and invincible once he has begun to act. The audience applauds when he consults his vision pool to discover what the witches are up to, because the matter is now as good as settled—once he knows, it is inconceivable that he will not triumph, and that without any haste that would break his composure.

The ideological meaning of Ogunde's films is clear. They are nostalgic, aiming at restoring a pre-existing stasis; their world-view claims to be whole and intact. This in itself marks them as an ideological construct for conservative purposes, and is in strong contrast with the dialogized, fragmented, and multiple consciousness that goes with modern urban life. The films deal with the crisis that modernity has brought to the traditional Yoruba world by denying it. This accounts for their psycho-social power and even necessity, but also for their limitations. Hyginus Ekwuazi attacks this kind of film in the following terms:

On the African screen, especially in the African folklorist cinema, culture takes the form of dance, of festivals. These dances and festivals, held up to the audience as flash cards for predictable reactions, bear only a tangential relationship to the action. The African atmosphere, the African mind, to wit, the African personality or culture, becomes a battle cry, the motif for political sloganeering as art. The familiar cliches heap up at well nigh breaking point: the joie de vivre of the African, the comely beauty of African maidenhood, the idyll of village life—the cliches pile up in a series of contrived situations which stick out like a sore thumb. (79)

One can trace a line of descent from Ogunde's films to the present. Fopomoyo / Chaos (1991), directed and written by the veteran actor Jimoh Aliu, is also set in an elaborately rendered traditional setting, where the coronation of a
king (played by King Sunny Ade) and the life of the town in general are disrupted by the wicked Fadeyi "The Terror" (played by Ojo Arowosafe), in alliance with witches and, ultimately, the god Esu. The king (who does almost nothing himself, beyond maintaining his tranquility in the face of calamities) has as his champion Orisabunmi, the priestess of the Mother of the Osun River. The goddess herself ultimately intervenes to kill the wicked Fadeyi. Again we are in a world densely saturated with cultural meanings. Again the conflict is a simple Manichean struggle of good against evil, which is identified with chaos. The aesthetic and technical quality of this film is also high. The cross-cutting is abundant and moves even faster than in Ogunde's films; the scenes are rapid and packed. There are signs of careful overall design: the actors are under firm control, and the film must have been tightly scripted, with very little or no room for the improvisation which is normal in the Travelling Theater tradition and the films that spring from it.

Though the religious element in Fopomoyo is strong, it seems less hieratic in its intentions than Ogunde's films—less interested in revealing religious truths than in using the supernatural to add a dimension to an action plot. It has much more dramatic substance as a depiction of a battle between contending forces, full of reversals and so on, organizing tension and suspense in the manner of action pictures. It also seems to have a revisionist political agenda: in contrast to the absolute patriarchalism of Ogunde, here it is women who play the most active and decisive roles, notably the heroic priestess Orisabunmi, and a band of warrior women who defeat the party of evil when the men have failed to do so. This focus on the role of women in traditional Yoruba society seems to be a conscious use of the traditional setting to address contemporary issues.

The evil Fadeyi also appears in an even more recent film, Agbo Meji/ The Two Forces (1992), directed by Dr. Ola Makinwa. His antagonist Abija is another character the audience recognizes from other films (just as Ogunde always played Osetura, and Moses Olayiwa Adejumo is always Baba Sala). In the film, a king praying before an annual sacrifice is given two injunctions: he must sacrifice the child of one of his chiefs, and no strangers are to be allowed to enter the town during this period. The chiefs, comically disconcerted, decide a cow should be substituted, and the king (another weak figure) goes along; he also orders hospitality be granted to Fadeyi, who has appeared first as a corpse lying in a field, and then as an ominous stalking presence who intrudes into the king's court. When the king's daughter suddenly dies, Fadeyi brings her back to life, and she is given to him as his reward. A dreadful spirit orders him to sacrifice the two children he has by the king's daughter, and he does so. His unhappy wife joins a witches' coven to seek revenge but he overpowers her. His evil becomes more and more rampant; finally he bewitches the whole village and leads them off with him. At this point the good magician Abija intervenes. As his reward for bringing back the villagers he is given a chief's daughter, whom Fadeyi has been chasing. Fadeyi appears and kills the girl; a duel of incantations between Fadeyi and Abija is interrupted by the apparition of the goddess, who orders both of them to go back to the supernatural realm they came from. She explains that the dead girl is the sacrifice she had demanded, but that henceforth there should be no more human sacrifice.

Agbo Meji is an example of the dramatic power a jujú tale can have. The religious dimension has been reduced pretty much to a formula and a frame which permits the displays of magic. Agbo Meji is also an example of the aesthetics of
SAP (Nigeria’s Structural Adjustment Program, which has wreaked havoc on the economy since the mid 1980s). The washed-out colors and grainy scintillation of the images are the result of having been shot on video and blown up to 16 mm. The traditional setting is merely an ordinary Yoruba village filmed very much as it was found — there is nothing fancy about the houses or the costumes, no aesthetic heightening of traditional culture. The film displays the weaknesses of the Travelling Theater style. The editing and continuity are rough, though some of the violations of the (Western) canons of film language may be the result of the influence of oral tradition (as when Fadeyi is married to the king’s daughter in one scene, and in the next, without transition, they suddenly have two children). Many of the actors are well-known professionals with a great deal of presence on screen, though — as is typical of all the actors who have moved over from the stage — the style is broad and theatrical, which comes across as overstated and crude in the very different medium of cinema. And there is weak directing and some very poor acting as well, as for example the contrived bulging eyes and bared teeth of the dancing witches in their coven. This film’s budget does not allow it to approach the production values of Ogunde’s films; nor does it seem to be aiming at their aesthetic standard.

There is actually a great range in the professionalism of current Yoruba film production: in some the acting, camera work, and so on are sophisticated and completely professional — for instance Eri Okan (Conscience) (1990), directed by Tunde Oloyede, or Baba Balogun’s Orogun Olun, which premiered at the end of 1992 at the National Theatre. In both cases, significantly, the director had considerable experience in television. But there is a large class of films more modest even than Agbo Meji in their artistic ambitions, the issue of the Travelling Theater methods of production, the dire economics of SAP, and the spirit of Nigerian capitalism, which is to make money fast on a small investment. The Travelling Theaters have always had the character of small, informal sector businesses, looking for rapid but small returns on a minimal investment in equipment and training (Barber, “Radical Conservatism” 7). Many of the films being made now are shot as cheaply as possible, without properly trained technicians, with abysmal results. They are also shot as rapidly as possible, with minimal rehearsals or attention to script (which is usually sketchy or non-existent in the Travelling Theater tradition). They are blown up from video onto 16 mm, or they may well be shot on 16 mm reversal stock, which results in a single, un reproduceable print; when this print wears out, it is time to make another film. Techniques like color balancing are impossible in the reversal process; outdated film stock or chemicals may further degrade the quality of the color. Other dramas are shot on video, in conjunction with a video production house, and are marketed as cassettes, on sale in video stores and stalls. Some of these videos are quite successful within their scope, particularly if a strong actor carries them — for example the comedies of Jagua (like Commander, Parts I and II, which are in Pidgin but otherwise are comparable to the Yoruba productions); others are very poor.

As an example of the most absolute modesty, let us take the video Ija Ebi Bi Ojo Wahala/Wrongful Strike Cause [sic] Troublesome Rain. The actor/characters include Abija (from Agbo Meji) and Orisabunmi (from Fopomoyo). It tells a simple story, about juju. There is a land dispute in a village; the king’s arbitration fails; the villain and his wife attack their opponent and ultimately the whole
village with their powerful juju charms, but are finally defeated by the good juju of the hero and heroine. The moral is equally simple: bad magic is bad, especially in the service of uncontrolled greed; good magic is good, and obviously necessary.

The tin roofs of the village houses are the only sign of the modern world; on the other hand, we do not see any objects or institutions so identified with the historical past that they are not still ubiquitous in Nigeria. The point is that the setting is not particularly “historical”; it is taken entirely for granted. It is not glamorized in the slightest—in fact, one might be tempted to make a critical connection between the obsession with occult powers and the obvious poverty of the village, but this is clearly not intended either. The true interpretation of the setting is probably that it was the cheapest one possible. The total production costs of this video appear to be whatever the cast was paid and the rental of one video camera—the whole thing is shot outside village houses or in the bush, with no interior shots, no lighting (the automatic lighting adjustment on the video camera creates a halo around figures as they enter the darkness of their doors), no costumes the actors probably did not already own, no musical production numbers. The handling of the video camera and sound recording are amateurish.

Nevertheless, the setting must necessarily also illustrate a world view, and its treatment a kind of cultural politics. The world view is the traditional Yoruba one, although one of shrunken dimensions. The film does not register any sense of historical change. The magical universe is simply there, as the traditional social world is, as if they were the most natural thing in the world to find on screen at the end of the 20th century. Things have shifted considerably from films like those Ola Balogun made with Ogunde and the others, which glorified and defended African culture and the African past, in (unspoken) reaction to the crisis of the present, making the audience proud of where they come from and giving them something in which to believe. The very importation of foreign technicians and the employment of a highly trained director were a way of dignifying the subject matter, making sure it was presented in a way that could represent Africa on the world stage, or rather, world screens. In Ija Ebi Bi Ojo Wahala, the element of cultural/political polemic indicated by Ekwuazi is entirely missing.

Afolabi Adesanya’s Ose Sango/Sango’s Wand (1991) is interesting in this context. The director was educated at the San Francisco Art Institute and is bright, young, practical, and ambitious. He has chosen to immerse himself in the ethos of the Yoruba films, and Ose Sango is entirely devoted to occult matters. But here there are signs if not of alienation, at least of self-consciousness in the face of the relationship of juju and modernity: in the film the power of the occult is measured against that of the legal system and of a scientific laboratory in the National Museum, and a crucial episode takes place when Sango worshippers come to perform their rites at the statue of Sango in front of the Nigerian Electrical Power Authority offices in downtown Lagos. The filmmaker is perhaps trying to exorcise his own skepticism by staging repeated triumphs of the magical.

Many other Yoruba films have a modern setting—they are mostly domestic tales in a moralistic framework, with an important element of juju. Magical effects are easy to produce in film, and it is rare to find a Yoruba film which does not exploit them. Magical duels are also an easy way of creating dramatic tension—easier and cheaper to stage than American-style car chases, or elaborately
choreographed Chinese-style martial combats. On the evidence of the films one would conclude that the lives and imaginations of contemporary Yoruba are dominated by jujú. It obviously strikes a chord with the audience, whose explanation involves more than their supposed backwardness.

The “tradition” of a film like Ija Ebi Bi Ojo Wahala is a narrowed and decayed version, in which religion is reduced to magic. This is a transformation typical of the culture of the newly urbanized or otherwise disoriented. Modernity has not brought with it a decline in “superstition”; magic, as a way of explaining and controlling the world, is turned to more than ever in a situation in which people feel powerless and psychologically threatened by a breakdown of the accustomed cultural order. Juju is also the spiritual least common denominator in the multi-ethnic cultural melange of the cities, where the full ritual expression of religious beliefs, as once elaborated in the villages, is not possible, but where everyone sees the point in a method of getting back a husband or revenging one’s self against a wicked employer.

The Yoruba filmmakers generally are not alienated intellectuals trying to recapture their roots—theirs is a truly popular (or at least, “people’s”) form, as is the Travelling Theater.” Their intentions are, above all, commercial. They want to please their audience, and their audience likes music, dance, festivals, comedy, maidens, and, especially, juju. The demand is predictable, and such stuff is easy to package and deliver. In the process it may very well become alienated; but it is the alienation of a commercial commodity, not of a colonized intellectual.

There is a body of opinion in Nigeria which holds that the emphasis on juju is decadent, culturally backward, and stale. Even Baba Sala agrees:

Maybe they are trying to copy our stage production and because it is making very good market, many of us are trying to follow the footsteps of (late) Pa (Hubert) Ogunde. For this reason every film-maker applies witchcraft and magic in his film. It is becoming monotonous. This must be minimised . . . . (Olaiya 25)

So also Niyi Osundare: “One of the flaws from the problem of presenting the supernatural cinematographically . . . is (the) pandering to the clamorous but misguided call for the exotic in culture, a facile glamorization of our disappearing past. The Nigerian film has yet to catch up with the dynamics of Nigerian life and establish its relevance to the Nigerian condition” (826). The comic films do better at this, if only because of the traditional function of comedy to hold a mirror up to contemporary society.

**Baba Sala Sapped**

In the career of Moses Olaiya Adejumo, known as Baba Sala, there is an evolution parallel to the descent from Ogunde I have just traced. For his first film, Orun Moorun/Heaven is Hot (1982), he enlisted (as had Ogunde and Ade Folayan) the help of Ola Balogun as director, co-producer, and co-script writer. The film was made with a big budget and opened with lavish publicity. It begins with Baba Sala living in a fishing village as a basket-maker, amusing himself by chasing women. A visit from an old friend provides the occasion for a flashback to better days when he had a shop in town selling electrical appliances. A babalawo
(herbalist) tricked him into believing he could fill oil drums with money; this led to an ecstasy of grief, ruin, and the move to the village. Now his visitor, Adisa, loans him N500. Baba Sala interrupts his dance of joy to close his door and worry about where to hide the money. In the event, he loses it all, half to a pickpocket in town and the other half when his new wife unwittingly trades the old container where he has hidden the rest for some new plates. In despair, he throws himself off a bridge, and finds himself in the underworld.

The underworld is represented with the help of special-effects trickery and the striking neo-traditional sculpture and architecture of the Grove of Osun at Oshogbo. Death tells him he is not ready to take him, and Baba Sala ascends to meet the Queen of Joy, at her shrine surrounded by dancers. She sends him off with two magical eggs, and two of her disciples meet him on the beach of this world when he is cast up on it, escorting him to an extravagant mansion. He cavorts with the two girls in the bedroom (in his childish, roly-poly, sexless way), and breaks one of the eggs on the floor, whereupon it turns into a huge pile of money—the magical wealth the babalawo had falsely promised him. He joins a big party downstairs, where the juju musician King Sunny Ade is entertaining the guests, and is generally the center of attention in a wild ego fantasy. He returns upstairs and breaks the second egg, in spite of an injunction not to do so, at which point Death appears. Then we find Baba Sala coming to in his shack in the fishing village, with a flashback of his having been fished out of the water under the bridge from which he had thrown himself.

The themes of over-reaching greed and wild swings from village life to lavish prosperity and back again are close to the heart of the Nigerian national experience during the oil boom years. The oil drums which are to be magically filled with cash are a clear enough figure for “Petro-Naira” (see Barber “Popular Reactions”). Propelled by his feckless moral will, Baba Sala bounces among four sharply opposed realms. One is the village, a fairly traditional place; this is where he wakes up with a hangover after the mad story is over, and it is also where Baba Sala is at his most relaxed and attractive, though the film does not go in for a moralizing polemic in favor of rural values. The town is lively and entertaining, but a place where desire (for upward mobility) can slip on treacherous ground; it’s where Baba Sala gets cheated—twice, first by the herbalist and then by the pickpocket. The fantasy villa is still more unstable, because fundamentally unreal, but it is perfectly attractive as far as it goes—the pleasures it affords (notably King Sunny Ade’s performance, and the party surrounding it) are pleasures for the audience too. The metaphysical dimension is not introduced with any great solemnity (Baba Sala clowns his way through the sacred grove with labile, childish curiosity), but it adds depth and scope to the film, culturally as well as morally. In spite of the unhappiness of Baba Sala’s own adventures, the film feels expansive, and reflects the buoyant outlook of Nigeria before the crash: the modern world was full of possibilities, and the traditional realms of religion and art were there to back up and guide one’s posture in it, if only one could pause from a career of tearing greed.

This was an extremely successful film, but a copy of it was bootlegged. Olayia himself produced, directed and scripted his next film, Aare Agbaiye (1983). The result was a precipitous decline in technical quality. The story once again
involves over-reaching greed: a poor man becomes king through magical means, tries to become equal to the gods, and ends up in hell.

*Mosebolatan/Hopelessness* (1986) was made with the assistance of the fine (and prolific) cinematographer Tunde Kelani—Olaiya’s Alawada Movies produced, and Ade Folailey (Ade Love) directed very competently. Olaiya/Baba Sala plays his usual role as a lecherous miser. The plot is large and complex. The family of Mosebolatan, Baba Sala’s friend, was split up in a boat wreck; Mosebolatan has become a wealthy businessman, and his son, Jide, is an officer on a ship, while (unknown to them) his wife has become a market woman in the same town, struggling to put her daughter Shade through school. Baba Sala’s son is in love with Shade, though his father won’t hear of the match with a poor woman’s daughter. Meanwhile Mosebolatan’s son, Jide, rescues Baba Sala’s daughter, Sala, and, since Baba Sala won’t allow her visitors, Jide takes a job in his household as driver/cook/steward, pandering to the father’s miserly fantasies so he can court the daughter. Eventually the lovers are discovered by the two fathers; then follows a “recognition” scene in which everyone’s identity is established, Mosebolatan’s family is reunited, and the two marriages are contracted.10

The setting of *Mosebolatan* is very modern. Baba Sala and Mosebolatan are nouveau riches on a grand scale, living in spacious mansions; Mosebolatan has a huge warehouse, and Baba Sala a large appliance store, larger than the one in *Orun Mooru* (in both films, as in the later *Agba Man*, he casts himself as a businessman—which is what Moses Olaiya Adejumo is in fact, as owner/manager of his company). Mosebolatan is wholly good, and is irresponsible towards half his family only through a trick of fate. But Baba Sala is irresponsibility itself. His business is built on sharp practices, as we see at the film’s beginning, where we also get a taste of his ways of getting himself into trouble with women. Later, as Chief Launcher at a benefit concert, he is unwilling to shoulder the responsibilities that come with his status.

This film seems to be more consciously contemporaneous than *Orun Mooru*. When his cash box is stolen, Baba Sala has motor park touts tie his son to a stake in front of a wall of oil drums, like the armed robbers who were executed on Bar Beach; he sometimes wears a Nike T-shirt, while Jide wears a Manchester United cap, as signs of the changing times. Other foreign elements are absorbed into the sophisticated soup of this film: Jide and Sala have several love duets obviously inspired by Indian films, and an early chase scene, in which Baba Sala swivels a road sign to throw off the pursuing police, draws on the tradition of American silent films. There are other, characteristically Nigerian elements, which may owe something to the revue-like aspects of the Travelling Theater performances: as in *Orun Mooru*, there is a long scene at a lavish party, where famous musicians play (in this case, their names appear on screen as titles), and Baba Sala (as Chief Launcher) pastes money on their foreheads.

*Orun Mooru* and *Mosebolatan* represent, in retrospect, the high-water mark of Nigerian film comedy, and deserve their great popularity. Baba Sala’s personality and excellent acting are at the center of things, but are set in a rich, various, and well-structured comic world. In spite of the theatrical derivation of many of their elements, the films are fully cinematic, in design and execution, and their high production values (e.g., the performances by musicians who are major stars in their own right) would not have been possible on stage.
Two of Olaiya’s recent productions on video, Agba Man (1992) and Return Match (1993) (both in Yoruba, despite their titles), illustrate a dire degradation of means, and a contraction of artistic imagination. Writing, directing, and producing himself, Olaiya employed a small cast composed essentially of his core troupe. The video work is crude: there is no attention to direction or cinematography, no crane shots or special effects beyond amateurish freeze frames and video keying between scenes. Rank commercialization obtrudes: the name and address of AMCO Video Films, the video production house, keep scrolling up the screen throughout the films. In Agba Man there are various internal advertisements: the locations are paid for by advertising them (the camera dwelling on a restaurant’s sign board, for instance); near the beginning when the conversation turns to invitations to a birthday party, Baba Sala recommends a specific printer by name and gives his address; later there are advertisements for Betamalt and Mayor Beer.

Both these films are comedies of sexual intrigue, but in Agba Man, Baba Sala is at the center of things; in Return Match he is peripheral, playing a comic servant in a household where the wife is having an affair with a man who turns out to be her husband’s friend. The two films display different halves of Baba Sala’s normal character: in Agba Man his miserliness and lecherousness is given full play; in Return Match he grabs the housemaid when he can, but the emphasis is on his goofy costumes and his strain of absurdist humor—he sticks the baby in the refrigerator, reverses the terms of a prescription, tries to jump into Madame’s arms, and so on. The setting and aesthetic of Return Match, and its moralistic plot, are very much like those of the Nigerian bourgeois TV serials, though without so much glamorization of wealth.

In Agba Man, Baba Sala is a businessman who spends his time chasing girls, and jealously trying to prevent his son and daughter from having romantic relationships. As usual Baba Sala is both miser and lecher; all his relationships with women are based on hard-nosed negotiations over how much sexual favors will cost. As in Mosebolatan his daughter Sala’s boyfriend must resort to disguises to get into her house, and Baba Sala is miserly about his son’s entertaining his girlfriends. Lovers still sing Indian-style duets, of worse quality than ever. As in the other films there are party scenes, with Baba Sala circulating, spraying the musicians with money, though now they are on a much more modest scale: a birthday party at the Sonnyville Restaurant, with three break dancers performing to Tina Turner’s music on a fancy sound system; a dance at a beer parlor, with a live band. Baba Sala is still moving with the times, the musical styles and clothing absolutely contemporary. This film in fact seems more realistic than the others, in the sense of closer to the quotidian life we see on the streets, though this is probably just the effect of the low budget, which doesn’t permit the more spacious recreations of cinema. A certain theatricality hangs around Baba Sala’s own character—he is always the performer, and always “on” — but not around anyone else; the locations never feel like sets.

In comparison to the earlier films, Agba Man seems claustrophobic. Baba Sala is still wearing his crazy outfits, and he keeps up an endless comic patter, but in an atmosphere of slapstick farce and fabliau-style intrigue, the cruelest forms of comedy. The element of fantasy and imagination has contracted drastically—there is nothing like the Oshogbo artistic element in Orun Mooru, or its metaphysical
dimension, or the aesthetic self-consciousness and variety of *Mosebolatan*. His character has shrunk too—certainly shrunk from the cheerful satyr of *Orun Mooru*, so full of geniality and playfulness, whose lust for money and sex are the expressions of an untrammelled childish ego. Now there is a hard ball of selfish greed inside him, and not much else. This film is pitiless towards his own character.

In *Agba Man*, Baba Sala's desire is comic but degrading—the multiple plots are always and directly about the joyless purchase of sex. Most of all his desire is preternaturally persistent, leading to a potentially infinite proliferation of plots, all of the same kind, as his girlfriends multiply. These stories always come to a humiliating denouement—the young whom he is exploiting have seamy imaginations and desires of their own, and are better masters of deception. The plots involving his own children are the most unsavory. It turns out both father and son have been having affairs with and are engaged to the same woman, Segi—in the end her father drives them both off. And finally, in a brothel, Baba Sala is brought in to his own daughter. His friend Adisa is on hand to tell him he's gotten what he deserves: he's been a sugar daddy, and his daughter has chosen to be a sugar baby. He's learned his lesson the hard way.

A nasty kind of comedy, but in its very nastiness it conveys a strong satire on the Nigerian business class and its parasitic attendants. Baba Sala's accumulation of girlfriends is hardly an unrealistic element; his greed is the greed of a class, which leads multiple lives with multiple women, enjoying the advantages that irresponsible wealth brings. Baba Sala's caricatures of western dress, his symbolic Mercedes, his patronage of entertainment spots, all are references to the behavior of a specific class in a specific setting; always the comedian of impossible desire, his miser is no archetype floating through history. How much of this critique is intended, and how much is it an accident of the low budget and a mood to suit the hard times? The challenge for criticism is to neither exaggerate nor minimize the critical potential of populist cinema (see Barber).

**Populism and a National Cinema**

The National Film Corporation Workshop on Film Policy in May 1992 revealed a marked division—indeed antagonism—between the Yoruba filmmakers, on the one hand, and the bureaucrats, academics, and intellectual filmmakers, on the other. The Yoruba filmmakers were well aware that they had created a viable and even flourishing popular cinema, with absolutely no help from anyone, and resented having their deficiencies pointed out by people who had never made films, or made money. On the other side, embarrassment and chagrin at finding that Nigerian cinema had come to mean atrociously made films about witch doctors and adultery led to proposals for censorship, including one suggestion that films liable to convey a negative image of Nigeria abroad, through their technical quality and/or cultural content, be denied a license necessary for exporting the film.

This antagonism is unfortunate: one will not truly be able to speak of Nigerian Film until the rift between the Yoruba filmmakers and the rest of the filmmaking community is overcome. Both sides clearly need one another in order to progress. For those who look to cinema to exercise a progressive political and social
function, the sole redeeming feature of the Yoruba cinema may be simply the fact of its existence. If it suffers all the characteristic limitations of populism, it is at least cinema of the people, if not cinema for the people, expressing their consciousness, and it bears the promise of a future industry. As the television director Lola Fani Kayode said at the Jos Workshop, the most important thing now is simply that Nigerian films exist: all other questions are secondary. True; but that does not mean that the other questions are not important, and intractable.

The Yoruba filmmakers generally have limited formal intellectual education, and tend to be apolitical. I have already said something about the conservativeness, or evasiveness, of the costume dramas. As in Indian or American films, the representation of the contemporary bourgeoisie is largely uncritical—and, as in those films, the world represented on screen is typically one of ostentatious luxury, which serves as an advertisement for bourgeois values and an incentive to accumulation. What criticism there is of the rapacious primitive accumulation and rampant corruption and greed which have dominated the scene in Nigeria since Independence tends to be either moralistic (and may well be mixed up with juju—e.g., a wicked wife gets a babalawo to help her take over her husband’s property) or comic (Baba Sala’s misers). There is never anything like a systematic analysis of the situation, or the suggestion of a political alternative. The filmmakers can express the popular imagination, providing it with themes and symbols, but cannot show the way forward.

The rhetoric of the National Film Corporation—for instance, in the draft for a Film Policy circulated at the Jos Workshop—is full of nationalist concern for Nigeria’s image abroad, countering racist stereotypes, and so on. These sentiments were echoed in speeches to the Workshop by then-military President Babangida, the Minister of Culture, and such people, when they talked of the importance of establishing a film industry in Nigeria. These points take on added force in a situation where a new flood of images from abroad, transmitted by satellite and video cassettes, threatens to bury the self-created image of Africans altogether. Filmmakers like Ladi Ladebo, Kunle Balogun, and others talk in the same way. Ladebo writes:

> Everyone seems to be in agreement as to what commercial film content ought to be. We all agree that our locally-made films should present the facts of life in Nigeria so that others may appreciate and understand those things which may appear strange or ridiculous. It is only natural for us to be uncompromising in our objective of using our films for positive self projection. (153)

But this is essentially the only political role accorded to film, and it is conceived of in very conservative terms. The adopted Film Policy for Nigeria calls for the State, through legislation, to

(a) encourage the exploitation of our heroic past and cultural heritage in the production of films, designed for both local and external consumption;

(b) encourage the adoption of themes which shall emphasise the desirable, rather than the negative aspects of our present social existence, including belief in the capacity of our people to overcome extreme adverse conditions of nature and socio-cultural arrangement . . . . (6)
It continues in this vein. If one compares this with, say, the film policy enunciated by the Federation of Pan African Filmmakers in the Charter of Algiers, which calls for film to be used as a means to teach the people to think critically and to mobilize them to political action for the liberation of the African continent, one sees how conservative this agenda is. The concerns are roughly those of the pre-independence Negritude movement: counter racist images, provide role models Africans can be proud of, dust off and dress up traditional values. Film is not supposed to do anything within society except make it generally better through the gentle suasion of noble examples. There is a recurrent, even obsessive, concern for producing a positive image for foreigners. The propaganda concerns of the government intersect here with the old-fashioned inferiority complexes of the Western-educated intellectuals.

This remarkable consensus about the political and cultural purposes of film production presents an extreme contrast to the rest of the Nigerian cultural scene—where Negritudinist ideas were never very influential. The emphasis of contemporary literature has shifted decisively away from recapturing the past or dealing with the colonial legacy to the description and analysis of the sorry state to which Nigeria’s leaders have brought the nation. The leading playwrights of the second generation—Femi Osofisan, Bode Sowande—are overtly political, and their stance is (or was) revolutionary. The years of SAP have produced a new generation of artists whose bitterness and impoverishment have created a new aesthetic of hunger and rage, expressed most eloquently by their poets.

This radical position was entirely unrepresented at the Jos Workshop, where the absence of the politicized figures from the ’70s era was noticeable: Balogun, Ugbornah, Soyinka, whose* Blues for a Prodigal* with its “underground” alienated aesthetic might have been (despite all its failings as a film) a model for the SAP generation. But it was a forerunner with no successors.

**Some Other Figures**

In spite of all the difficulties, a few films do get made, outside of the Travelling Theater mode; the following profiles of four directors show something of the conditions of possibility that currently exist. Afolabi Adesanya has already been mentioned, as a (foreign) educated filmmaker who has attached himself to the Travelling Theater mode of filmmaking. His first film, *Vigilante* (1988), made with his brother Aidedanji (who directed), was a different sort of thing: made in English and Pidgin, it addressed a topical social issue—the crime wave in Lagos, and vigilantism as a response to it—and did so with a light touch, compounded of elements of social comedy and action-picture drama. One would have supposed this would be a canny formula, exactly the sort of thing Nigeria needed, and that success would follow. But the film did not do terribly well. Adesanya points to several reasons for this. The middle-class audience which the film targeted simply will not come out to see films anymore, partly because of the crime which is the film’s theme—they are happier at home with their VCR’s. The popular film-going audience was disconcerted that the film was in English: since all the names on the poster were Yoruba, they expected a Yoruba film in the familiar mode and did not know quite how to relate to what they were seeing.
Adesanya’s conclusion was that there was no market for English language films in Nigeria—that an ethnic base was necessary. "Ose Sango," therefore, is in Yoruba, is all about the supernatural, and stars actors from the Travelling Theater. This is a new breed of Yoruba juju film, with a modernized thematic and symbolic structure. Adesanya distributes it in the old way, carrying it around in a vehicle with a projector and a crew; this is time-consuming, but viable. The rest of his time is spent in less artisinal pursuits, like directing pilots for TV, or working on his useful Nigerian Film/TV Index.

Ladi Ladibo was connected as a producer and/or scriptwriter with the early Nigerian films Countdown at Kusini and Bisi, Daughter of the River. He has since directed several films, notably the fictional features Vendor (1988) and Eeowo/Taboo (1989). The former is an elaborate morality play, in English, about corruption in Nigeria; at the First Nigerian National Film Festival in Lagos (1992) it swept most of the prizes, showing how much the judges at least appreciated this sort of socially concerned film. Eeowo is a melodrama about drug addiction, and in various ways is closer to Yoruba culture (the dialogue is sometimes in Yoruba, though mostly in English, and there are supernatural elements from Yoruba religion).

Neither of these films has been distributed in Nigeria, though bits of Vendor were used in government (MAMSER)-sponsored spots on TV, and bits of Eeowo have also been on television as part of the anti-drug campaign. Ladebo is a businessman, trained in the US in marketing, and he is one of the people thinking most creatively and practically about how Nigerian films could be distributed abroad; but he is unwilling to subject himself to the time-consuming system of distribution that exists in Nigeria. His most recent projects (a documentary and short and feature-length fictional films, all on women’s issues) are being made for international agencies, notably the United Nations. Ladebo has faults as a filmmaker—his actors often turn in wooden performances, and his scripts tend to be excessively and flat-footedly moralistic—but aesthetically he is in some ways the most sophisticated and creative of all Nigerian directors (for instance, in the way he handles the interplay between image and soundtrack), and he is utterly dedicated to using film to address important social topics. It is tragic that his country does not have a system that supports his efforts.

Brendan Shehu has made a number of documentary films, and now a fictional feature, Kulba Na Barna (1992). In spite of the fact that Shehu is General Manager of the National Film Corporation, financing the picture was a struggle: finally it was arranged through a company associated with Ahmadu Bello University. This is that rare thing, a Hausa film. Shehu is a talented director—the film is a pleasure to look at, and there is a fine quiet dramatic wit running through it. However, the film takes two hours to tell a simple tale of a school girl seduced and abandoned by a rich al Hadji, which could have been told easily in half an hour. The script is derived from a novel (of the same name) which is required reading in secondary schools. One supposes the fact that the film retells a well-known and officially-sanctioned story was counted upon to generate an audience. In any case, the film suffers from its reliance on this story, which is so simple and moralistic as to seem less than fit for adult viewers. Surely the budding Hausa film tradition needs more ambitious projects.
Saddiq Balewa's *Kasarmu Ce/The Land is Ours* (1991) is such a film. It was made rather on the model that obtains in francophone Africa: Balewa was trained as a filmmaker in Britain, at the National Film and Television School, which supported the film by making facilities and equipment available. The crew and producer are European. The bulk of the funding came from the European Community; the rest from the National Council for Arts and Culture, the Bauchi State Government, and private individuals (Balewa 26). It has made the rounds of the international film festivals. The film is nearly perfectly conceived. Visually its stunning landscapes, austere costumes, and attention to peasant folk ways will appeal to outside audiences, but it treats realistically, which is to say usefully, a story of a village struggling against its exploiters, who, having discovered that the land is littered with sapphires, are trying to defraud the peasants of their inheritance. The ending does not exaggerate the victory the peasants win: the snake has been stunned but not killed. The film combines a convincingly rendered local focus with a comprehensive and intelligent political vision.

**“Nigeria Deserves a Film Industry”**

“Nigeria Deserves a Film Industry” is the title of one of Ola Balogun’s manifestos, this one published in *The Daily Times* in 1974. Like Cassandra, Balogun has always been right, and has never been listened to. Because of the iron laws of neocolonial economics it is something of a wonder if anything like a film industry appears in any African country. Still Nigeria, with its size and wealth, should have been able to manage it if anyone could. The reasons a national cinema does not exist correlate with the political failures of the Nigerian nation:

—On the official level there has been disinterest, ideological bankruptcy, incompetence, and misconceived projects. The necessary economic structures have never been put in place. There has been no integration of television with film production, which would have been an obvious first step both in supporting a film industry and in improving the locally sourced television programming. According to Ladi Ladebo, “Unfortunately for Nigeria, after three decades of television in Nigeria, and with nearly thirty nine stations all over the country, that industry has not even begun to search for a meaningful relationship with the local film industry” (151). Ekuwuazi claims that “no Nigerian film has yet been programmed on television in Nigeria” (133).

—The national bourgeoisie has been equally irresponsible. They have been generally unwilling to invest in film production, preferring quicker and safer investments. Philistines, they are normally unwilling to support the arts, whether traditional or modern, unless their vanity is directly served. The petty bourgeoisie has deserted the cinemas in favor of television and VCR’s.

—A consequence of the failure to establish a strong national center, in cultural projects as elsewhere, is disintegration into ethnicity, expressed in modes which encourage backward tendencies. TV serials—*Village Headmaster, Basi & Co., New Masquerade*—have sometimes been powerful agents in the creation of a national Nigerian culture. Film has made no such contribution. There are strong arguments for making films in indigenous languages. Still a situation in which one ethnic group is responsible for virtually the whole of Nigerian film production.
is inherently undesirable, and even dangerous in a polity which suffers from
enormous centrifugal forces.
— The nation remains supine in the face of neocolonialism: the cinema screens are
dominated by foreign productions, a situation which will only be intensified in the
new world information order. The psycho-political consequences of this are so
frequently bemoaned that there is no need to rehearse them here.

In Nigeria, amidst so many other disintegrations, the institution of “cinema”
has disintegrated, both socially and technically. Now the bourgeois never attend
films, in cinema houses—the films do not suit their tastes, the places are too
rowdy, and their cars are apt to be vandalized. Instead the elite live in a world of
VCR’s and satellite dishes, tuned to foreign programming. Patronage of film is
left to the working class and lower middle class, who conjured their indigenous
entertainers from the improvised theaters through television studios onto cellu-
loid. But their patronage can’t any longer support real film—their N10 or 5 does
not convert into enough foreign exchange to buy negative film stock, so they
get a mixed bastard technology, determined by a logic of poverty and piracy. SAP
has, across the board, collapsed industries and stimulated petty informal sector
activities. Strategies of import substitution become impossible, let alone manu-
facturing for export. A real film industry is farther than ever from realization.

Is it time, then, to stop hoping for and talking about one? Has “a virile film
industry,” like the production of a Nigerian-made automobile, become a shibbo-
leth of modern nationhood which is just no longer affordable? Perhaps, though
the dream dies hard, and there is no reason to stop attempting what is still possi-
bile. But there is an argument to be made that—for the moment at least—it makes
more sense to emphasize video production, in coordination with television. This
has the great advantage that it is already flourishing. The object is to diversify
production, and raise the quality. Private broadcasting should create a greater
demand for indigenous programming. But above all, the virtue of video technol-
ogy is that it is so open to (modestly funded) initiatives from below.

At any rate, Nigeria has appropriated film, in its own style and according to its
means. It may not have a proper film industry, but it certainly does have some-
thing that is alive and kicking, and that mirrors the paradoxical image of the coun-
try, expressing its ethnic divisions, its relative industrialization, its huge market,
and its current poverty, which does not, however, prevent busy, inventive, infor-
mal activity. This takes strange shapes because there is no legal environment of
copyright and contract law, a problem which in itself would impede a real indus-
try from forming. Investors contemplate a howling chaos, shudder and withdraw;
the white elephants of government intervention lumber by to rapid extinction.
The dumping ground for Hollywood’s toxic waste, Nigeria is also a notorious
pirate and producer of goods so shoddy no one would import them. If film dis-
tribution in Nigeria is as clear a case as one could want to see of continuing neo-
colonialism, the Yoruba cinema is also an extraordinary example of popular
cultural self-assertion, producing something modern straight out of an old tradi-
tion, speaking directly and effectively to a mass audience, without any concern for
who else might be listening. The same country that imports junk vehicles and
makes wondrous imitation spare parts adopts the reversal process and low-budget
video: both produce lots of accidents but traffic does move, in rattletrap vehicles
going at full speed. And so the country maintains a churning reproduction of itself, not surely in the form it deserves, but indomitably.

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NOTES

1. Ladi Ladebo gives figures demonstrating the economic impossibility of making a profit on a 35 mm film; he says no Nigerian film in 35 mm has done it (145-49). But Ola Balogun disagrees, saying the early films did make a profit (personal communication, April 1994).
2. The honor of having produced the first Nigerian feature is disputed: Kongi's Harvest was preceded (barely) by Son of Africa, produced by Fedfilm Ltd., which some would disqualify on the grounds that it was really Lebanese, though shot in Nigeria with a Nigerian actress. See Françoise Balogun 49-50.
3. On government policy see Ekwuazi, Ekwuazi and Nasidi, Okome, Diawara, Françoise Balogun, Ola Balogun, Opubor and Nwaneli, and Shehu. The Balogun's and Adegbuyegb Arulogun (in Ekwuazi and Nasidi) are particularly trenchant critics. Ekwuazi has written the fullest accounts of the history of government policies.
4. Some States in Nigeria levy an entertainment tax of up to 40%, which makes it virtually impossible to turn a profit on a film. At the National Theatre in Lagos, the premiere showcase for Nigerian films, 30% of the gate goes for tax, and another 35% goes to the management.
5. I will sometimes be using, for the sake of convenience, the terms "Yoruba film" or "Yoruba filmmaker" to refer to the products and producers of this kind of cinema which grows out of the Travelling Theater. I recognize that the terms are extremely problematic. Figures like Ola Balogun or Ladi Ladebo or Afolabi Adesanya are Yorubas and filmmakers, but certainly do not fit the mold of the folk artist—Adesanya objects very strenuously to being referred to as a "Yoruba filmmaker" (See his letter in The Guardian [Lagos] 27 Mar. 1993: 16). I certainly do not wish to encourage the ethnicizing of Nigerian film, or of discussions of culture in general. Still there is a tradition and generic category of films too useful to ignore, and "Yoruba" is the name generally attached to it. Alternative terms for it, like "ethnic" or "folkloric cinema" (used by Ekwuazi and Okome), are no less problematic. (Françoise Balogun objects to "folkloric," "Originality" 68.)
6. All translations are my own.
7. This peculiar method of distribution is of course not so good for the film scholar either, or anyone else interested in monitoring film production and exhibition. Hyginus Ekwuazi, dean of Nigerian film scholars, evidently speaks from exasperating experience as he points to how secretive the whole business of Nigerian film is: "the industry very jealously guards its facts and figures. Producers, like distributors and exhibitors, are all reticent beyond the limits of tolerance" (132). Any kind of reliable overall statistics are very hard to come by as there are so many unregistered exhibition locales, and so many films never pass by the censor for registration.

A new Film Archive building has recently (1992) been inaugurated by the National Film Corporation in Jos, where copies of all new Nigerian films are to be deposited, but it seems exceedingly unlikely that the filmmakers will actually give up copies of their films, given their paranoia about piracy.

8. Karin Barber has explained this tendency of actors in the Travelling Theater tradition to play the same part in various plays or films as part of a strategy of self-promotion on the part of small-scale entrepreneurs trying to carve out a niche for themselves in the entertainment business; their consistent projections of a fictionalized version of their personalities will be recognizable to a loyal clientele ("Radical Conservatism") 8).

9. "Yoruba travelling theater is a people’s theater in the sense of being both produced by and addressed to the lower layers of society: the worse paid, less educated majority who are furthest removed from power. But it has been accused of failing to be a popular theater in the sense of serving the people’s real interests. Instead of opening the people’s eyes to their objective situation, the accusation runs, it distracts them with reactionary, escapist or plain vacuous rubbish" (Barber, "Radical Conservatism" 5; see also Barber’s "Popular Arts in Africa").

10. This plot is in fact identical to that of Molière’s The Miser. Olaïya (who wrote the script) denied having had any knowledge of Molière, until after the film was released and lecturers from the University of Ibadan came around asking him about it (personal communication, June 1993), but it seems impossible that such an elaborate and detailed resemblance could be pure coincidence. Perhaps the plot came to him through an Indian intermediary.

11. Ade Love agrees (Fatunde 74). One could point to the parallel difficulties in establishing a viable English-language theater, outside the auspices of the universities. Wale Adenuga’s Papa Ajasco (1984) is an example of a popular English-language film; the fact that it was based on a famous comic strip may have had something to do with its success. There is a market for (comic) video productions in Pidgin, exploited by Jaugua and others; the potential of Pidgin deserves exploration.

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