

Ola Balogun's Lost Classics *Aiye and Orun Mooru*

It is hard not to feel a poignant sense of loss when thinking about Ola Balogun, whose career as a feature film director was cut short by the devastations of the structural adjustment era in Nigeria, which put an end to celluloid filmmaking, and whose legacy is in eclipse. In the 1970s, when African cinema was new, his talent blazed. The most prolific director on the continent, with a movie star's looks, sharply articulate in English and French, shooting films in Brazil and Ghana as well as Nigeria, he was Nigeria's ambassador to the world of international cinema. His films passionately expressed the Pan-Africanism and revolutionary fervor of the epoch. Now if you google him, the first things that come up are a pitifully short and incomplete Wikipedia entry and an IMDb biography that is only twenty-seven words long and gets his gender wrong.

Within modern Nigerian cultural history, he is even more important. Nigeria produced about a hundred celluloid feature films between 1970 and 1992.¹ Most sprang from the Yoruba Travelling Theatre tradition, which guaranteed their audience; the rest were various experiments that generally proved not to be commercially viable. Balogun directed nearly ten percent of the total and made both types of films. His experiments did not pay off, at least in immediate financial ways: *Amadi* (1975) was the first and only Igbo-language celluloid film; it was only twenty years later that the inaugural video film *Living in Bondage* (1992) revealed the potential of filmmaking in Igbo. *A deusa negra* (*Black Goddess*, 1978) established a connection between Nigeria and Latin America that has been neglected ever since, though its Pan-Africanism is echoed in films like Haile Gerima's *Sankofa* (1993).

It is his films with Yoruba Travelling Theatre actors that guarantee Balogun's central place in Nigerian film history and have a living legacy. That's because they are part of an unbroken tradition: the Yoruba Travelling Theatre artists had been on

stage since the late 1940s and on television since Nigerian television began in 1959. Balogun worked with the best of them – Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo, Adeyemi Afolayan, and Moses Olaiya Adejumo – to move the tradition into the medium of cinema. Balogun’s inaugural films were followed by many others on celluloid and then on video.² Yoruba-language production remains a major, sturdy element in Nigerian film production.

Balogun continues to be recognized as a distinguished figure in Nigerian cultural life, but for years no one has been able to see his films. It is shocking and tragic that two of them, *Aiye (Life/The World, 1979)* and *Orun Mooru (Heaven is Hot, 1982)*, seem to be lost and gone forever, no copies to be found. They are true classics, expressions of an alliance between popular culture and sophisticated cinematic technique, landmark films made at a high-water mark of Nigerian culture. Recovering Balogun’s personal touch in these films, his specific art, may be impossible to do fully now that fading memories are all that is left of these films. I have yellowing notes scribbled in the dark while watching these two films at the Cinema de Baba Sala in Ibadan in May 1993.

Baba Sala is the stage name of Moses Olaiya Adejumo, perhaps the greatest comedian to emerge from the Yoruba Travelling Theatre. Balogun directed *Orun Mooru* for Baba Sala’s company Alawada Movies, and he was the star. His cinema was in the Agbowo Shopping Centre across from the main gate of the University of Ibadan – in the back of the complex, as if to express that while he looked for business from the university community, his primary loyalty was to the jumbled popular neighborhood behind.

It was Eid al-Fitr, the major Muslim holiday at the end of Ramadan, when every year Baba Sala would screen the old classic movies and families would dress up in their finery – a marvelous display of shining, vivid cloth – and bring their children for an immersion in Yoruba culture. A great festive crowd streamed into the theatre.

Otherwise, the theatre was not doing well: the large concrete shell was showing signs of dilapidation, and nail heads were making their way out of the wooden seats to snag the clothing of the unwary. The whole country was dilapidated and dangerous, most of a decade into the Structural Adjustment Program imposed by the Babagida military dictatorship at the behest of the International Monetary Fund. (A month later the Babagida regime was swept away in the outraged maelstrom and bloody military crackdown following its annulment of the Presidential election on June 12.) By 1993, nearly all the cinema theatres had closed (a few survived in the North) as armed robbers made it dangerous to go out at night. Filmmaking on celluloid was another casualty of the SAP-induced currency devaluation. 1992 was the year celluloid film-making finally petered out; it was also the year when *Living in Bondage*, shot on video and distributed as a cassette, created a sensation and opened up the market that would later be called “Nollywood”.³ Something was dying and something else was being born, though for those living through this moment the shape of history wasn’t clear.

Baba Sala was not doing well either: when I interviewed him, he spent most of the time lamenting the piracy of *Orun Mooru*, which had ruined him. Piracy, the bane of the video film industry, did not begin with Nollywood. Up to today, interviews with Baba Sala are full of this same lament – he never recovered financially or, it seems, emotionally.

And the old classic films themselves were in bad shape. A couple of minutes into the projection of Hubert Ogunde's *Aiye*, which was already fourteen years old, the film broke in the projector. Baba Sala led the crew that gathered around to fix the problem. Films often broke in the projector. In the University of Ibadan's Trenchard Hall, I watched another Ogunde film, *Jaiyesimi* (1980), which was in even worse shape. Ogunde had died, leaving many wives and many children. The films were their inheritance and they continued taking them around to show in informal venues, the way the traveling theater artists always had done.⁴ A number of the wives and children were there with the film – well-known actors themselves, they helped draw the crowd. They needed money and so went on showing the films until they just wouldn't run through the projector any more, and then threw the remnants away. This is apparently what happened to all the known copies of *Aiye* and Ogunde's other films.

Anyway, everyone was in a celebratory mood when the screening of *Aiye* began. These days, after twenty years of spectacularly successful proselytizing by Pentecostal Christians and Muslim fundamentalists, many people would notice the contradiction of an Islamic holiday being celebrated by a mixed crowd of Muslims and Christians viewing a film that is deeply and entirely about indigenous Yoruba religious conceptions. But in 1993 no one seemed bothered at all by this, the marvelous ecumenicalism of the Yoruba still in full flower. For that matter, much of the audience wasn't Yoruba, but the religious vision of the film apparently touched a chord in them. Ogunde's work was always seen (and intended) as Nigerian, not just Yoruba culture.

Aiye

Aiye was based on a 1972 stage play of Ogunde's that Balogun turned into a screenplay. Ogunde had founded the Yoruba Travelling Theatre in the late 1940s. His earlier stage plays were mostly set in the contemporary world and often dealt with topical or even political topics. But *Aiye* was the first of a series of films Ogunde made at the end of his life in which he appears as Osetura, an Ifa priest and leader of his community. The setting is in an unspecified, idealized past. Everything about *Aiye* is archetypal – no Yoruba film is more so – and this is the source of its power. Osetura is always at the center of the film, and Ogunde – even in old age a huge man, like Paul Robeson in his range of talents and his immense charisma – makes this figure radiate serene power and joyful benevolence.

The film begins with a religious procession to the shrine of Iroko Imorisa, led by Osetura, who is playing a drum. He offers a sacrifice, and it is accepted. Masquerades,

dancers, and the whole community celebrate and thank the deity through his priest Osetura for the fertility of the land and for their own fertility. They ask him to do the fertility dance. Witches – the enemies of this most fundamental value – in the form of vultures fly into a tree to watch.

The next morning, Osetura and an attendant are out gathering leaves to make medicine to ensure safe childbirth. A series of vignettes show the life of the community. Women fetching water sing and dance with pots on their heads. A weaver (we will learn his name is Dele) affectionately gives cloth to a pretty young woman. Fishermen are at work on their boats in the lagoon. An ancient, sick woman is brought to Osetura's house and is cured. A mother of twins comes to dance with another woman to cure her of barrenness. A woman faints as she comes out of her house, and a neighbor diagnoses pregnancy.

Osetura has a dream vision of two of the witch/vultures talking to one another. They tell him they have come from heaven and he should let them do what they want. The vignettes resume. A drunkard's old father implores him to stop drinking. Dele is making progress with his girl: she shows him where she lives. The newly pregnant woman's husband is happy and attentive, but his senior wife – barren herself – is jealous. A confidant invites her to join her coven of witches.

A man who was struck blind as the result of a land dispute with his half brothers comes to see Osetura, who prays to Iroko Imorisa, beats his drum, and looks into his divination pool. He sees a witch and cures the man. Later, a boat transports Osetura in full regalia; when he lands, a crowd prostrates to him and he blesses them. He has come to settle a dispute over a chieftaincy title. The loser goes away mad. The witches prey on such unhappiness and on the unsuspecting. A witch asks a passing girl to help lift her load onto her head and then gives her a kola nut – the audience groaned when the girl popped it into her mouth, knowing she was lost. The husband of the pregnant woman hosts a celebration, but a witch comes and brushes a cloth against her as she dances, “tying up” her pregnancy. At fifteen months, she still has not delivered. As the new chief has the beads marking his title put around his neck, the ceremony is interrupted, the beads torn off and given to his rival. Dele the weaver has run away with his girl, but then he goes missing and she sings, a cappella, a hauntingly beautiful lament. (The whole audience sang along; the music from the film was sold as a record and was very popular on its own.) The pregnant woman also sings a lament and calls on Osetura for help. He talks to the witch through his divining pool. She says good and evil are complementary forces; he stands for the one and they for the other. He complains that fertility is disrupted and the young don't prosper, but she only promises more trouble. He says he will have to show his power. The witches meet around a fire to declare war against Osetura. A witch calls to the pregnant woman, who raises herself from her bed and then collapses, dead. Dele is attacked by a witch and left blind, deaf, and dumb.

At night, Osetura prays to his deity; the witches in their skull-adorned coven are struck by lightning. In daylight, Osetura beats his drum. The man who seized the chieftaincy appears as a comic madman. The drum sounds again and the pregnant woman revives. Again the drum, and the drunkard is cured. The film ends as it began, with a procession to the shrine where Osetura is drumming.

Aiye is remarkably and deliberately simple and straightforward in conception. It is religious art, meant first and last to convey a spiritual vision of human life and society, and this priority is different from the normal conventions of Western film and drama. There is no real dramatic tension: evil has room in this world, but Osetura will undoubtedly triumph when stirred to action. Action is hardly the right word for his effortless wielding of spiritual powers that work invisibly at a distance. He is of course the central character, but he is entirely without inner conflicts and so is not a conventional dramatic hero. The life of the community is actually central, providing most of the life of the film: the multiple braided story lines, linked by quick editing, each one realized with practiced skill and energy on the part of both the actors and the filmmakers, keep the movie from being boring.

The conflicts within the community – disputes over land and chieftaincy titles and jealousies within families (mostly among women, and mostly arising from fertility issues) – are the most conventional, standard conflicts in Yoruba dramas and so need no special development. People are understood as subjected to spiritual forces beyond them, and those forces are so polarized as good and evil that here too things are left perfectly simple. The idea that stories should contain a moral and be an occasion for moral discourse is central to African aesthetics, but here the religious vision nearly crowds out the moral dimension: Osetura's vision pool renders moral discrimination unnecessary, and his spiritual power substitutes for interior moral struggle.

This vision is deeply conservative. Osetura's patriarchal authority is just, beneficent, powerful, indispensable, and unquestionable. We are in a dimension outside of history, and this makes all sorts of questions unaskable. There is no room for the revolutionary fervor that is in so many of Balogun's other films. But this film does resonate with the side of Balogun's Afrocentrism that values and respects deep African spiritual traditions, as shown in *A deusa negra* and his documentaries.

Ogunde began as a popular artist but his plays were eventually adopted as Nigerian official culture (on this distinction, see Karin Barber⁵). *Aiye* and his following films were his last, deliberate gesture, freezing an image of himself and of Yoruba culture and setting an influential example. Not everyone thought this was taking Nigerian culture in the right direction: Frank Ukadike writes, "Some critics have called this tradition of filmmaking opportunistic, dull-witted, self-indulgent, what Niyi Osundare calls 'glorification of cheap folklorism' involving the common themes of superstition, witchcraft, and magic".⁶ But all the evidence I saw in the

Cinema de Baba Sala seemed to indicate that *Aiye* was working as intended: it gave the audience a touchstone of their culture, and they loved it.

Orun Mooru

Orun Mooru begins in an ordinary village of daub and wattle houses with thatched roofs. Fishermen launch their canoes; in a palmwine bar someone makes music on a big thumb piano, men play draughts on a board resting on their knees, and people dance. The focus is on Lamidi (Baba Sala), a basketmaker by trade, a middle-aged satyr thick through the buttocks and belly who tries to seduce all the women who pass by him carrying loads on their heads. Full of antic gestures and miming, his whole body mobile and expressive, he's a contrarian and an endless source of ridiculous situations. He's taken a new wife and invited guests, but when they arrive he sleepily tells them to come back another day, it's his honeymoon.

Flashbacks catch us up on Lamidi's story: he once was a prosperous shop owner in town, selling electric fans and other goods, until a fake babalawo (diviner and herbalist – Osetura is an example of the ideal) tricked him out of his money by convincing him that he could magically fill six oil drums with money. Lamidi grieves extravagantly over his lost wealth, embracing the empty oil drums. Then he moves back to the village.

His old friend Adisa arrives in the village and loans Lamidi a considerable amount of money. Lamidi stops in the midst of his dance of joy, struck by the problem of where to conceal the money. While he takes the train to town, his wife inadvertently barter the container in which he hid the money for some new plates. In town, he stops to watch some masqueraders performing and pulls out his money to "spray" them with bills. This attracts the attention of pickpockets, who rob him. He rolls in the street in misery, and when he gets home and discovers what his wife has done, he has more extravagant paroxysms of grief: he flips on his back and kicks his legs in the air; he orders his wife to bring him a knife so he can cut his own throat and then kill her; he lies down on the train tracks but the train switches to another track. Finally he throws himself off of a bridge into a river.

He comes to in a bamboo grove. Skeletons pass by (rendered by animation, like the witch vultures in *Aiye*), and skulls pursue him. He begins goofing around with them when he figures out they won't hurt him. In a shrine, the god of death tells him it's not time for him to come there yet. He wanders about among fantastic statues, tweaking their noses with Chaplinesque impish nervous curiosity. Many women dance before a shrine to Mami Wata, a marine goddess associated with wealth. The goddess herself appears and he approaches, dancing and grinning. He is given two large decorated eggs and then the whole scene suddenly disappears; he finds himself standing in a blue void and then on a seashore, where two young women meet him and transport again, this time to a luxurious mansion with a sign reading "Lamidi's Lodge."

He cavorts with the two young women in the bedroom, rolling about with childish delight. He breaks open one of the eggs and the floor is magically covered with cash. He throws a huge party where the juju musician King Sunny Ade entertains his guests and Lamidi, in fancy clothes, sprays money over the musicians and everyone else. A “big man,” he sits at the high table and makes a speech, waving away a group of petitioning women. But when he breaks the second egg, Death comes and Lamidi rolls back and forth across the bed in terror. Then he wakes up... back in the village, where he’s been fished out of the water.

Orun Mooru is a classic for different reasons than *Aiye*. It has perhaps the highest production values of any film of this kind – a kind, comedies about contemporary life with topical spice and satire, that the Yoruba Travelling Theatre was very good at and produced in large numbers. Balogun brought the full apparatus of celluloid filmmaking (cranes, dollies, and so on) and his own sophisticated craft to the project, while most such films were (and are) filmed in a bare-bones manner. The supernatural dimension is conveyed with cinematic imagination. Yoruba Travelling Theatre performances always had a musical component, with a band playing before and after the play and between acts; sometimes the music was worked into scenes, as in this film. Baba Sala took advantage of the nature of filmmaking to include King Sunny Ade, the biggest music star of the era, whom a touring theater company could never afford. (At the beginning of their careers, King Sunny Ade and Baba Sala were in a band together.) The otherworldly scenes were shot in the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and feature the extraordinary sculptures and architecture that Susanne Wenger created and sponsored there – a rare example of using such artistic and cultural resources in a film. The audience at the Cinema de Baba Sala applauded the luxury of Lamidi’s Lodge when it appeared on screen. (Nollywood has made such spectacles of wealth routine and unremarkable.) And Baba Sala – ably backed by members of his own theater company and stars from other companies assembled for the occasion – gives an exceptionally fine, generous performance, his face shifting from avid lust and greed to gentleness, comic exaggeration, and a fleeting wisdom in repose.

Baba Sala’s clowning drives the film, but it has a serious moral dimension as the spectacle of a man oscillating giddily between greed, ebullient fantasy, and despair. The film capaciously includes the Yoruba religious dimension, though without undue solemnity; it also points straight at the historical experience of the Nigerian oil boom. As Karin Barber has shown, the oil boom brought a sudden flood of “petronaira,” mysterious unearned wealth distributed through corrupt and opaque cabals and coupled with shocking income inequality and a crime wave; the Yoruba Travelling Theatre responded by creating stories about various kinds of money magic and fraud.⁷ Those oil drums that the fake babalawo claims will be filled with money symbolize the whole maniacal era of greed and bitter disillusion, and the magical eggs that bring

cash and then death redouble the theme. After the crash that followed the oil boom, Nollywood's film culture would begin with the money magic theme.

Postscript

As Françoise Balogun and Frank Ukadike⁸ tell the story, Balogun's working relationship with the Yoruba Travelling Theatre artists was contentious and difficult. (In recent interviews he has softened his tone.) When celluloid film production came to an end and was succeeded by Nollywood video films, Balogun was vitriolic and vituperative. He was not alone in this: many people were shocked and dismayed by the videos, which paraded aspects of popular culture some found embarrassing and reprehensible. Also, the equipment was so simple that people without professional training could undertake to become filmmakers. Actors passed easily into the new medium (they were used to moving between stage, television, and film, since no one of them provided a living), but the video film directors almost all came from television, not from celluloid filmmaking. Eventually some celluloid directors ended their boycott and shot films on video, but none of the major celluloid film directors became major video film directors. Even in this context, Balogun showed a certain tragic intransigent: he would rather break than bend, and gave up making feature films.

The situation has changed again recently. Since about 2010, a "New Nollywood" has emerged of independent director/producers who aspire to make better films with bigger budgets. Their business calculations depend on the new multiplex cinemas that are appearing in Nigerian cities and on theatrical screenings in London and elsewhere abroad, as well as on deals for Internet and satellite television distribution.⁹ A few directors have shot films on celluloid and even in 35mm. Might there be room for Ola Balogun in this brave new world? The Portuguese director Manoel de Oliveira, who just died at the age of 106, made most of his films after his 75th birthday, older than Balogun is now; he released his last full-length film at the age of 103...

Notes

- 1 Ekwuazi, Hyginus, *Film in Nigeria*, Jos, Nigerian Film Corporation, 1991 (2nd edition); Adesanya, Afolabi, *The Nigerian Film/TV Index*, Lagos, A-Productions, 1992; Armes, Roy, *Dictionary of African Filmmakers*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2008.
- 2 Clark, Egun, *Hubert Ogunde: The Making of Nigerian Theatre*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1980; Jeyifo, Biodun, *The Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre of Nigeria*, Lagos, Nigeria Magazine, 1984; Balogun, Françoise, *The Cinema in Nigeria*, Enugu, Delta Publications, 1987; Barber, Karin, "Popular Arts in Africa", *African Studies Review* 30.3 (1987), pp. 1-78; Barber, Karin, *The Generation of Plays: Yoruba Popular Life in Theater*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2000.

- 3 Haynes, Jonathan (ed.), *Nigerian Video Films*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2000.
- 4 Ricard, Alain, "Du théâtre au cinéma yoruba: Le cas nigérian", *CinémAction* 26 (1983), pp. 160-67.
- 5 Barber, Karin, "Popular Arts in Africa", *African Studies Review* 30.3 (1987), pp. 1-78.
- 6 Ukadike, Nwachukwu Frank, *Black African Cinema*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994, p. 156.
- 7 Barber, Karin, "Popular Reactions to the Petro-Naira", *Journal of Modern African Studies* 20.3 (1982), pp. 431-50.
- 8 Balogun, Françoise, *ibid.*; Ukadike, Nwachukwu Frank, *ibid.*
- 9 Haynes, Jonathan, "'New Nollywood': Kunle Afolayan", *Black Camera* 5.2 (2014), pp. 53-73.