

POLITICAL CRITIQUE IN NIGERIAN VIDEO FILMS

JONATHAN HAYNES

ABSTRACT

Video films have established themselves as the dominant form of Nigerian popular culture, with more than 1,000 titles being released every year. They arose during politically tumultuous times but have had a reputation for being studiously commercial and avoiding political subjects. This essay attempts to revise this conventional wisdom by exploring three video genres that embody forms of political critique: the hardy genre of films about traditional rulership; the crime thriller, with several variants; and family melodrama, which tends to infiltrate all other genres. It then surveys some films with directly political subjects made since the end of military rule in 1999.

NIGERIAN VIDEO FILMS ARE THE LEADING FORM OF NIGERIAN POPULAR CULTURE.¹ By the mid-1990s, they were appearing at a rate of about 500 a year; by now, there is an annual torrent of more than 1,000 films, which are sold as cassettes or as video compact discs, screened in a variety of formal and informal venues, and broadcast on television all over Africa.

The films have, ever since their emergence in the late 1980s, been attacked for their lack of social and political utility from more politicized or at least cultural nationalist positions in the Nigerian universities, the media, government, and elsewhere. For instance, in 1997 the executive director of the Nigerian National Film and Video Censors Board, Ademola James, concluded on the basis of the hundreds of films he had seen that

the themes common to most of the presentations cover greed/avarice, perfidy, treachery, occultism, love and hate. Story lines invariably revolve around infertility or childlessness, the problems of polygamy, child abandonment or desertion, legacy or inheritance issues, prostitution, sibling rivalry, philandering, wife or husband snatching, problem of inlaws, househelps, bonding and oath-taking. Sensitive cultural issues such as the Osu System, incest, witchcraft and fetishism are also delved into . . . A

Jonathan Haynes (jhaynes50@yahoo.com) is Associate Professor of English at the Brooklyn Campus of Long Island University, New York. He was a Fulbright Senior Scholar at the University of Nigeria-Nsukka (1991–92), Ahmadu Bello University (1992–93), and the University of Ibadan (1996–97).

1. An earlier version of this essay was presented at a workshop, 'Modes of Seeing and the Video Film in Africa', Iwalewa Haus, University of Bayreuth, June, 2001. I am grateful to the organizers, Till Forster and Onookome Okome, and to my fellow participants.

number of the English language productions have handled stories related to crime, drugs, health and fraud based on happenings in recent times. However, the major issues of our time such as joblessness, problems of the legal system, justice, equity, freedom, politics, social problems in education, medical services, housing, food, drug addiction and trafficking are still begging for serious screen treatment.

How to handle these sensitive national issues for the benefit of all constitutes the challenge of the new direction in which the Nigerian film contents should move today. Certainly such mundane stories about philandering, wife or husband snatching, infertility or childlessness, disputes over legacy or inheritance have seemingly been overflogged. Nigerian film makers should use their genius to analyse and dissect the various urgent social issues facing the nation today and proffer possible solutions via the screen if possible. It is not an impossible task. It is part of their social responsibility.²

In a stern memo to film producers written in 1999, James again complained that the films were dominated by the exploitation of 'negative tendencies' in Nigerian culture including 'occultism, cultism, fetishism, witchcraft, devilish spiritualism, uncontrolled tendency for sexual display, bloodiness, incest, violence, poisoning, etc. . . . From all indications, indulgence in the production of film with 'negatively based themes' is driven more by excessive commercialism or love of profit to the detriment of a sense of social responsibility and relevance'. He goes on to recommend that filmmakers turn to other topics, including 'politics', which 'have been almost totally ignored'.³

The videos established themselves as an essential medium through which Nigeria represented itself to itself during the 1990s, a period of deep and prolonged political crisis, but the films remained resolutely commercial in orientation and generally declined to address, at least directly, the burning issues facing the nation. This is in striking contrast to other sectors of Nigerian cultural production such as literary drama, which has always been dominated by radical figures like Soyinka and Osofisan,⁴ or to Nigerian popular music, which produced a number of oppositional voices of whom Fela Anikulapo Ransome-Kuti was the best known, or to Nigerian print journalism, which kept up a steady stream of outraged and distressed commentary on the state of the nation. A culture of opposition expressed itself through guerrilla print and broadcast media⁵ as well as through more conventional outlets, but this oppositional culture hardly communicated at all with the one that built up around the video films.

2. Ademola James, 'Producers face challenges of new direction in film content', *The Classifier* 1, 3 (1997), pp. 4,8.

3. Ademola James, 'Warning notice: The need for a new direction in Nigerian film content', National Film and Video Censors Board memo FVCB/A.15/Vol.I, 14 July 1999.

4. Chris Dunton, in his catalogue of subjects and themes in Nigerian drama, makes this comment on his list of plays on the 'state of the state': 'Listed here are plays that deal with corrupt state administration, the oppressive state, the notion of government motivated only/largely by the urge to plunder (categories that overlap). Of all concerns explored by Nigerian dramatists this is the most dominant, providing the major or subsidiary subject matter in a startlingly large number of plays, dating back to the early 1960s. To one administration after another, military or civilian, this corpus of plays forms a truly remarkable memorial'. Chris Dunton, *Nigerian Theatre in English: A critical bibliography* (Hans Zell, London, 1998), p. 284.

5. Ayo Olukotun, 'Authoritarian state, crisis of democratization and the underground media in Nigeria', *African Affairs* 101, 404 (2002), pp. 317-42.

One of the most common charges against video producers and distributors is that they are motivated entirely by the desire for profit, with a consequent strong preference for sticking to known subjects and formulae, which does not include political matters. As petty producers, they have generally been careful to avoid trouble with the Censors Board since the financial loss consequent on the banning of even a single film would put most of them out of business. Relatively few films have been censored for political reasons.⁶ There have been a few dramatic exceptions to the rule of avoiding political controversy and danger, such as Gbenga Adewusi's *Maradona* (a.k.a. *Babangida Must Go*), a fiery Yoruba-language agit-prop film produced during the insurrectionary aftermath of the annulment of the 12 June 1993 presidential election.⁷ This film demonstrated the radical potential of video as an example of 'small media',⁸ but, in the Nigerian context, it was a singular event.

In the academic literature about Nigerian videos, those who have come to them from a background in the pan-African tradition of celluloid cinema, in which, as Ferid Boughedir puts it, the 'political tendency' is (or at least was for several decades) 'the royal road',⁹ have also been struck by how different the Nigerian videos are. I myself have made a habit of pointing to the contrast between the popular and commercial orientation of Nigerian videos and the self-consciously progressive intentions of most of the rest of African cinema.¹⁰ Academic criticism has often ignored, condescended to, or denounced the videos because they did not seem politically serious.

The purpose of this essay is to revise this conventional wisdom about the apolitical character of the Nigerian videos, partly by way of trying to construct a critical apparatus that will do justice to forms of popular political consciousness that may be unfamiliar or disconcerting, and partly by remarking on developments in the industry as it has become increasingly

6. From 1994 to 1999 — the first five years of its operation — the National Film and Video Censors Board approved 1,300 films and refused to pass only seven 'in the interest of peace, order, security and stability of the nation and because of patent artistic or structural or cultural defects'. G.K. Dosunmu, 'Board's management deserves a pat on the back', *The Classifier* 3, 1–3 (1999), p. 17.

7. Jonathan Haynes, 'Mobilizing Yoruba popular culture: *Babangida Must Go*', *Africa* 73, 1 (2003), pp. 122–38.

8. The classic study of 'small media' is Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ali Mohammadi, *Small Media, Big Revolution* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1994), which describes how clandestinely distributed audio cassettes of the Ayatollah Khomeini, speaking by phone from his exile in Paris, helped to bring down the Shah of Iran; on the relevance of this phenomenon to Nigerian video, see Brian Larkin, 'Hausa dramas and the rise of video culture in Nigeria,' in Jonathan Haynes (ed.), *Nigerian Video Films* (Ohio University Press, Athens, OH, 2000), pp. 213–21.

9. Ferid Boughedir, 'Les grandes tendances du cinéma en Afrique noire,' *CinemAction* 26 (1983), pp. 48–57.

10. Jonathan Haynes, 'Nigerian cinema: structural adjustments,' *Research in African Literatures* 26, 3 (1995), pp. 97–119; Jonathan Haynes, 'Introduction,' in *Nigerian Video Films*, pp. 1–36; Jonathan Haynes and Onookome Okome, 'Evolving popular media: Nigerian video films,' *Research in African Literatures* 29, 3 (1998), pp. 106–28.

interested in addressing political issues, which it is much safer to do since the end of military rule in 1999.

I should point out that to make the topic manageable within the confines of an essay, I have restricted it to films dealing with politics in the narrow sense of state power or close analogies to it. This is a tactical move only, not a theoretical position; on the contrary, I would insist that the concept of the political should encompass the level of the banal, everyday reproduction of authority, the personal level of gender relations, witchcraft discourses, and so on and so forth — all the myriad social tensions and controversies to which the videos have responded with literally thousands of stories, whose political valence deserves analysis. For reasons that are in large part political, conditions in Nigeria are such that practically every dimension of life, from the spiritual to the domestic, is saturated with anxiety, and this anxiety underlies and animates nearly the entire thematic and generic gamut of the videos.¹¹ But the narrowly political dimension does have an importance of its own. ‘The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership’, Chinua Achebe wrote more than two decades ago,¹² and while all of Nigeria’s problems cannot be reduced to issues of political leadership, the political dimension is central.

Another caveat is in order: the level of production of Nigerian videos is so high that it is nearly impossible to have a comprehensive view of the whole rapidly changing phenomenon, and inevitably many important films and filmmakers will be left out of the discussion. A particularly glaring omission in this essay is any mention of the numerous Hausa films made in northern Nigeria, which are routinely excluded from discussions of ‘Nigerian’ videos, by which is normally meant those produced by the southern Nigerian video industry in English, Yoruba, and to a lesser extent Igbo, Pidgin, and other languages.¹³ I do not pretend to offer an exhaustive

11. On the expression of spiritual anxieties in the videos, see Birgit Meyer’s works, especially ‘The power of money: Politics, occult forces, and Pentecostalism in Ghana,’ *African Studies Review* 41, 3 (1998), pp. 15–37; ‘“Blood Money”: On the attraction of Nigerian movies in Ghana,’ Paper presented to the conference on Religion and the Media in Nigeria, SOAS, London, February 1999; and ‘Ghanaian popular cinema and the magic in and of film,’ in Birgit Meyer and Peter Pels (eds), *Magic and Modernity: Interfaces of revelation and concealment* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2003), pp. 200–22. On urban anxieties, see Onookome Okome, ‘Writing the anxious city: Images of Lagos in Nigerian home video films,’ *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire* 5, 2 (2003), pp. 65–75. On anxieties in general, Brian Larkin, ‘Media and urban forms: Technology, infrastructure, and culture in northern Nigeria,’ unpublished manuscript.

12. Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (Heinemann, Oxford, 1983), p. 1.

13. On Hausa video films see Brian Larkin, ‘Hausa dramas and the rise of video culture in Nigeria’, ‘Indian films and Nigerian lovers: media and the creation of parallel modernities’, *Africa* 67, 3 (1997), pp. 406–40, ‘Itineraries of Indian cinema: African videos, Bollywood, and global media’, in Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (eds), *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media* (Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 2003), pp. 170–92, and ‘Media and urban forms’; Abdalla Uba Adamu, Yusuf M. Adamu and Umar Faruk Jibril (eds), *Hausa Home Videos: Technology, economy and society* (Centre for Hausa Cultural Studies and Adamu Joji Publishers, Kano, 2004), and Yusuf M. Adamu, ‘Between the word and the screen: a historical perspective on the Hausa literary movement and the home video invasion’, *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 15, 2 (2002), pp. 203–13.

survey of the field, only to inventory some of the most important generic and thematic matrices that are used to broach political subjects.

The essay has four parts. The first discusses the hardy genre of dramas about traditional rulership. The second and third concern the ways in which an important more recent genre, the crime thriller, and the dominant video genre, the family melodrama, have spilled over into the realm of politics. The fourth surveys some films with directly political subjects made since the end of military rule.

Traditional rulership

The forms and concepts of traditional political rule, especially kingship and chieftaincy, loom large in the imagination of the video films. Traditional rulership still matters a good deal in Nigerian life, and in the films it serves as a vehicle for themes of political legitimacy, the health and welfare of the community, the character of rulers, and so forth. Commentary on national state power can be and often is safely carried on through allegorical treatment of kingship. All the ethnic groups that have produced video films have their own traditions to contribute to this theme, which has long been a staple of Nigerian drama from Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* to innumerable performances by school or other officially sponsored troupes. By far the strongest influence on the video films from these traditions is that derived from the Yoruba travelling theatre.¹⁴ The so-called *oba* or *kabeyesi* plays, which stem from seminal works by Duro Ladipo and Hubert Ogunde, evolved into a well-worn genre in which the harmony of a traditional community was disrupted by a dispute over succession to the crown, or over land, or by the malice of sorcerers allied with evil spirits. The numerous videos inspired by this tradition tend to focus on the supernatural dimension of the conflict, complete with special effects in support of duelling sorcerers. Such titles led to denunciations of the entire medium as politically backward, obscurantist, and stuck in a generic rut.

This genre is too strong ever to go away or lose its potency. The artistic resources attached to it are too valuable to discard, recourse to traditional forms of legitimacy is an inevitably recurrent option in thinking about African politics, and the forms and symbols of traditional rule are still ingrained in popular consciousness. Moreover, this tradition has shown itself to be

14. On the Yoruba travelling theatre, see Biodun Jeyifo, *The Yoruba Popular Travelling Theatre of Nigeria* (Nigeria Magazine, Lagos, 1984), Eburn Clark, *Hubert Ogunde: The making of Nigerian theatre* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1980), and Karin Barber, *The Generation of Plays* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN, 2000); on the transition of this tradition to film and video, Barber again, Hyginus Ekwuazi, *Film in Nigeria*, 2nd. edn. (Nigerian Film Corporation, Jos, 1991), Françoise Balogun, *The Cinema in Nigeria* (Delta, Enugu, 1987), Haynes, 'Nigerian cinema', and Wole Ogundele, 'From folk opera to soap opera: Improvisations and transformations in Yoruba popular theater,' in Jonathan Haynes (ed.), *Nigerian Video Films* (Ohio University Press, Athens, OH, 2000), pp. 89–130.

resilient and renewable. The history of Nigerian celluloid film offers several examples of liberal or radical allegories based on the genre, such as *Ija Ominira* (1978), made by Ola Balogun and Adeyemi Afolayan (Ade Love) from a novel by Adebayo Faleti, and Ladi Ladebo's *Vendor* (1988).

Tunde Kelani's *Saworoide* ('Brass Bells'), written by the playwright Akinwumi Isola, is a sophisticated example on video. An opening title declares, 'This is the parable of the drum as the voice of the people. It is the story of the pact between an ancient community and the kings that ruled over it . . .'. As the king of Jogbo dies, his voiced-over memories and a montage of traditional images inform us of the magical constitution of this polity. As prescribed through *ifa* divination, half of the seeds taken out of a ritual pot were placed inside the royal crown and the other half inside a drum; successive kings and drummers had a powder rubbed into incisions. A king who was illegitimate or sought excessive wealth would die of a splitting headache if he wore the crown when the drum was played. The new king is greedy and rejects the traditional incisions and oaths, and he has a couple with a rival claim to the throne killed, though their young son escapes to be raised in the forest under virtuous tutelage. As the logic of folk tale would have it, the boy grows up to fall in love with the king's (illegitimate) daughter; the young lovers' perils end when the sacred drum brings down the tyrant. The film ends before the young man is installed, but the proper inheritance of legitimate roles and the restoration of legitimate traditional forms are assumed as normative ideals, and the narrative gives them magical sanction. (In fact, in *Saworoide*'s sequel, *Agogo Eewo*, the young man decides to pursue his studies while someone who looks very much like Olusegun Obasanjo is installed on the throne, bringing the film even closer to contemporary political allegory.)

But, in the manner of Kelani's early video masterpiece *Ti Oluwa Ni Ile* (1993), this story takes place in a multifaceted contemporary world, where every element is problematic. The new king wants a shapelier, better-educated, more presentable wife, which leads to a running story about the jealousies of polygamous marriages. The king and his chiefs are eager to enter into corrupt relations with foreign timber companies, which control the main local industry, at the expense of farmers, the environment, and even the sacred forest. They demand that foreign bank accounts be opened for them. But there is an array of countervailing forces aside from the providential redeemers already mentioned. The king is confronted by a television journalist demanding to know where he got the money for his fleet of Mercedes Benzes. The following sequence features a moralizing old man (played by the writer and media personality Adebayo Faleti) who reclines on the palace steps, observing everything and warning that the corruption of those in power will have repercussions, and this in turn is followed by a montage of demonstrators. The demonstration turns into an armed rebellion,

led by the Youth League, which wrecks logging equipment and finally steals the crown away from the king. In desperation, the king turns to the colonel in charge of his security forces, who recovers the crown but then claims it for himself. It is this military ruler, civilianizing himself for his coronation ceremony, who is killed by the sacred drum. Kelani worried about what the Nigerian military dictator Sani Abacha's reaction to this story would be, as he was clearly the object of the allegory, but Abacha died before the film was released.¹⁵

The film provides a complex allegory, then, which reveals rather than obscures the elements of contemporary Nigerian politics and, even as it works with the symbols of kingship, insists on the democratic aspects of the traditional constitution. (The heir apparent does not dominate the end of the film; the triumph really belongs to the Youth League and the young drummer who has just inherited his sacred role.) Such emphasis on democratic forces and structures is a rarity in this genre of film, as if colonial indirect rule followed by military autocracy had eclipsed the memory of the delicate constitutional balance of powers described by Rev. Samuel Johnson in his *History of the Yorubas*. Even in the flourishing genre of Igbo 'epic' films, set in the traditional past, it is normally tyranny we see, with few traces of the village democracy that figures so largely in Achebe's classic novels *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*.¹⁶

Enlightened liberal denunciations of other sorts of social corruption and backwardness have figured largely in Nigerian video production, as background for countless heartrending melodramas. As part of an argument in favour of some authentic realm of African popular consciousness, it might be tempting to dismiss enlightened liberalism as an element in the Nigerian, or more generally the African, situation, and indeed, before we import a Habermasian notion of the public sphere into the social and political analysis of Nigeria it would need careful scrutiny.¹⁷ But a dogged liberal belief in progress and development and a reciprocal aggrieved editorializing against corruption and backwardness run deeply and broadly in Nigerian culture, and, in a situation where much of the population has been exposed to at least some Western-style education, it is impossible to draw any clear line between this form of consciousness and popular culture. Karin Barber has pointed out how Yoruba travelling theatre artists like to appear as both custodians of tradition and bearers of modernization.¹⁸

15. Jonathan Haynes, 'TK in NYC: an interview with Tunde Kelani,' *Postcolonial Text* (forthcoming).

16. I develop this point in '“Cultural epics”: A Nigerian video genre,' paper delivered at the African Studies Association Annual Meeting, Washington DC, November 2005.

17. See, inter alia, Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (eds), *Civil Society and the Political Imagination in Africa: Critical perspectives* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1999).

18. Barber, *The Generation of Plays*; 'Popular arts in Africa.' *African Studies Review* 30, 3 (1987), pp. 1–78, and 'Radical conservatism in Yoruba popular plays'. *Bayreuth African Studies Series* 7 (1986), pp. 5–12.

Crime thrillers

These considerations bring me to my next topic — the political aspects of the genres of melodrama and the crime thriller, or, to put the matter the other way around, the way films about politics have emerged out of the matrix of these pervasive video genres. The crime thriller, a fairly recent innovation in the Nigerian videos, perhaps because action sequences are relatively difficult and expensive to film, has been quite political from the start. (In this case also, there were precursor films on celluloid, notably Eddie Ugbomah's crime thrillers such as *The Rise and Fall of Dr. Oyenusi*, from 1976.) Influential early examples of the genre like Amaka Igwe's *Rattlesnake I* and *II* and Tade Ogidan's *Hostages* and *Owo Blow I* and *II* all clearly emerged from socially conscious melodrama, featuring heroes who turned to a life of crime after being brutally treated by society in one way or another.

The intrepid American sociologist of literature Wendy Griswold, who undertook to read all the Nigerian novels ever published (she analysed 476 of them, published up to 1997; this total, I cannot resist pointing out, is only a little more than a third of the current annual number of video film releases), reports that she did not distinguish between crime novels and political novels when she began her research, since both genres were always about corruption. The Nigerian authors she interviewed convinced her that the political novel deserved its own category, on the grounds that abuse of public office was a separate, though related, matter from ordinary crime.¹⁹ 'While crime (and crime fiction) suggest that someone is violating the rules of the system, political corruption (and political fiction) suggest that there is something wrong with the system itself.'²⁰

Griswold's conclusions are worth reporting at some length since they are based on such a comprehensive survey of a cultural form so close to the video films; there are many parallels with the films but also some interesting differences. The picture she presents is extremely grim. '[T]he novels show all institutions — government, private, educational, medical . . . to be similarly indifferent to the public welfare. Officials and organizations are sometimes the core of the problem, sometimes merely useless, but they never inspire trust. Protagonists must step outside of institutions to get what they want'.²¹ The Western novels on which Nigerian crime and political novels are to some degree based begin and end with a state of order, but the Nigerian fictions, while depicting a Manichaean battle between order and chaos, typically end in chaos, and in the case of the political novels, may not have an image of order as a point of departure.²² 'If vigilantism

19. Wendy Griswold, *Bearing Witness: Readers, writers, and the novel in Nigeria* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2000), pp. 122, 240–41.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 241.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 253.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 239, 247–8.

and annihilation are the alternatives presented in the crime novel, the political novels are altogether bleaker in outlook, for they present no viable alternatives whatsoever. When the public and the private have been merged [through corruption], the damage cannot be undone; no basis exists for order to emerge from disorder; no social precipitate can organize the chaotic Nigerian mixture. This is the starkly pessimistic picture'.²³

Western crime novels often take the point of view of the police, which Nigerian authors are loath to do because of the disrepute of the Nigerian police, and while Western crime fiction is largely about detective work, that is, the (ultimately successful) exercise of reason, this is not true of the Nigerian books, set in a world that seems not to be amenable to logical deduction. Griswold's whole discussion is haunted by the theme of rationality and its bafflement. 'Crime novels and political novels do the same thing. They tell a story of rationality and its limitations. When told by men and women as committed to modern rationality as is the Nigerian educated elite, such a story is profoundly pessimistic because it describes a public sphere that is ultimately irrational'.²⁴

This commitment to rationality and consequent despair are, as Griswold understands, the mark of a particular class fraction, and she has a section called 'The glamour of impotence' about the masochistic satisfaction the authors sometimes take in their alienation. This class fraction produces and consumes video films, but it is only part of the much larger picture of video film production, a picture that needs much more thorough sociological investigation than it has received. My impression is that despite the frequent attacks on those involved in producing video films as untrained interlopers if not stark illiterates, their general level of education is not very much below that of the novelists whom Griswold studied.²⁵ But the educational level of video distributors, who largely control the market, is decidedly lower, as the producers like to complain, and, on average, so is that of the audience.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 256.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 242.

25. Since Griswold is dealing with all Nigerian novelists, irrespective of quality, the median is closer to the Drumbeat series than to Wole Soyinka. As anecdotal evidence about the video film industry, I offer the following information gleaned from an issue of the video film fan magazine *Reel Stars* 1, 11 (26 October–8 November 1999), whose editor Azuh Arinze interviewed five actors, asking each what he or she had done before entering the video business. One had been a senior accounts executive with Rank Xerox for 15 years; another read statistics at the University of Nigeria-Nsukka and was headed for a senior management position at the News Agency of Nigeria; a third studied theatre arts at the University of Ife; a fourth studied at the Institute of Management and Technology in Enugu and then got a job in a finance house in Lagos; and the fifth, the famous stage and screen actor Olu Jacobs, said if he had not become an actor he would have been a priest. On the differentiation of the socioeconomic bases for video film production in various languages, see Haynes and Okome, 'Evolving popular media'.

Partly as a consequence of these class differences, on the whole the mood and position of the videos is noticeably different from those of the novels. The role of the video industry as commercial dream factory explains much of the difference, as does the more public character of video production and consumption, which encourages expressions of faith in society and discourages the private despair that seems to provide much of the novelists' motivation. In the videos, there is a greater faith in institutions, though this is uneven and more marked in the general run of melodramas than in those with a political bent. For every thoroughly pessimistic film, there is one that celebrates the rationality and beneficence of modern medicine (like Tunde Kelani's *Ayo Ni Mo Fe I* and *II*), and there are probably a dozen that resolve their conflicts through the agency of a diviner or a Christian pastor. Criminals are invariably brought to book by the police or otherwise made to pay for their misdeeds. (A number of films end with evil still rampant, but this means that the producers are planning a sequel.)

The moralism of popular consciousness is a decisive element in the contrast between novels and videos. This moralism is derived from many sources, from the moral lesson that concludes so many folktales, to Christian or Muslim homilies, the ethics of school textbooks or village and family councils, and the conventions of television melodramas. The videos are formed by a ferociously powerful demand that the bad should be punished and the good rewarded. No one can pretend that this ethical imperative controls national politics, but it seizes on whatever it can, the way crowds in the street will beat thieves to death when they can catch them. Typically, the political films do not encourage optimism about the chances of truly reforming society as a whole, but individual protagonists or antagonists are dealt with rigorously and severely, and this provides at least temporary emotional satisfaction. Despairing vigilantism of the individual may be the mark of Nigerian crime fiction, but the videos have recently been celebrating vigilante groups as an effective means of cleansing society.

The spate of vigilante films followed the end of military rule (and so perhaps should be discussed in the last section), but its necessary and sufficient conditions are not directly connected with the change of regime. They were initially inspired by the Bakassi Boys, a vigilante group formed in the eastern Nigerian city of Aba to protect merchants who had been terrorized by armed robbers.²⁶ The Bakassi Boys were immensely successful, extended their operations across Igboland, and soon had imitators elsewhere, including the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), a Yoruba nationalist

26. See Johannes Harnischfeger, 'The Bakassi Boys: fighting crime in Nigeria', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, 1 (2003), pp. 23–49, Bruce Baker, 'When the Bakassi Boys came: Eastern Nigeria confronts vigilantism' *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 20, 2 (2002), pp. 223–44, and John C McCall, 'Juju and justice at the movies: Vigilantes in Nigerian popular videos,' *African Studies Review* 47, 3 (2004), pp. 51–67.

political organization which began a violent campaign against criminals in Lagos.²⁷ The OPC soon ran into trouble with the government, but for a while the Bakassi Boys enjoyed a measure of official support, despite reservations in many quarters about what vigilantism might lead to; they also enjoyed massive popular support, at least at first, as the general population was thoroughly tired of the hegemony criminals had been exercising across much of southern Nigeria, which the legitimate authorities were unable or unwilling to challenge.

The video industry produced a shelf full of films on the subject, in its usual imitative manner. Leading examples are the four *Issakaba* films directed by Lancelot Imasuem ('Issakaba' is 'Bakassi' backwards, more or less).²⁸ Once the basic version of the story had been told many times, there was the normal search for distinctive variations on the genre — comic versions, a girls' version, and so forth.

These are crime films in the first place; they belong in this discussion of political critique because they typically locate the problem to which vigilantes are the solution not in isolated criminal actions but in an epidemic of crime in which the local authorities are complicit. Typically, a community is being terrorized by a cabal of 'big men' encompassing various forms of power: titled chiefs, politicians, businessmen, certainly a wicked 'native doctor', and perhaps the police.²⁹ They constitute a regime that must be exposed and crushed. Normally, one of the forms of crime they are practising is slaughtering innocents to use in money rituals, which are magical practices that employ human body parts to produce wealth and power.

Money rituals have deep roots in Nigerian cultures and have figured largely in Nigerian videos for a long time. Following extensive media coverage of a particularly gruesome episode of human sacrifice that occurred in Owerri in 1997, in which the brother of a minister of the Abacha government was implicated, there was a new rash of films about money rituals, some of which, notably Kenneth Nnebue's *Rituals*, explicitly address the political dimension: the evil genius of Nnebue's film tries (more or less successfully) to influence the police, a minister of education, a sitting state governor, and a gubernatorial election. The current vigilante films are a continuation of the genre of money ritual films, with a new emphasis on weaponry — an emphasis shared by the new genre of action films (for example, those of Teco Benson, where the American influence is particularly strong). In the video tradition, money rituals are a central figure for

27. On the OPC, see Karl Maier, *This House has Fallen: Midnight in Nigeria* (Public Affairs, New York, 2000).

28. On these films, see the fine article by McCall, 'Juju and justice at the movies'.

29. Jean-François Bayart's notion of the 'reciprocal assimilation of elites' is useful here: *The State in Africa: The politics of the belly* (Longman, London and New York, 1993).

the evil, predatory character of 'big men' in Nigerian society and hence a central symbolic representation of politics.³⁰

Melodrama

Melodrama is the queen of the video genres and infiltrates nearly all of them. Because Nigerian melodramas usually practice the inflation and glamorization of lifestyle normal in commercial cinema and soap operas the world over, and because the number of Nigerians who actually live in such a manner is tiny and is in effect limited to those with close relations to the patrimonial state, many Nigerian films have wandered into the political realm even if no political implications were intended. The male protagonist in Kenneth Nnebue's *True Confession* is a candidate for governor, for instance, but the film is not really about politics. It is impossible and pointless to try to say precisely when the balance tips over and the film can be said to be political, but I submit that it has happened in *Dark Goddess*, written and produced by Charles Owoyemi and directed by Andy Amenechi in 1995.

This film has obviously evolved out of *Dallas* and *Dynasty*-style melodrama. Tokumbo Johnson, the glamorous, beautiful, and wicked 'dark goddess', comes from an immensely wealthy family whose problems include illegitimacy, incest, blood cancer, murderous disputes over inheritance, and control of the family business empire. The family's biggest problem turns out to be Tokumbo, who is the daughter and sibling from hell and busily kills off various family members she perceives as being in her way. I omit the fascinating details of this side of the film to concentrate on its political aspect.

This is, as far as I know, the first film to feature as a character the president of the country — a civilian, elected president, though the film was made during the Abacha military dictatorship — and a presidential candidate. This president is visited by Fred Akin-Thomas, a billionaire power broker who, later in the film, will marry Tokumbo. Fred tells the president that he has used his personal influence to get international bank assistance, now that they have a democracy in place. The president pleads for Fred's

30. The subject of beliefs in occult practices as they bear on power relations is too large and important to treat fully here — it is indeed central to the imagination expressed by the videos — but the whole extensive literature on the 'modernity of witchcraft' is of obvious relevance. See for instance Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (eds), *Modernity and its Malcontents: Ritual and power in postcolonial Africa* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993), and many others. As these matters relate to Nigerian (and the similar Ghanaian) videos, see especially Birgit Meyer's work listed in the bibliography. See also John C. McCall, 'Madness, money, and movies: Watching a Nigerian popular video with the guidance of a native doctor,' *Africa Today* 49, 3 (2002), pp. 78–88, Jonathan Haynes, 'Money rituals in Nigerian video films', paper presented to the African Studies Association Annual Meeting, Philadelphia PA, November 1999, and on Nnebue's *Rituals*, Onookome Okome, 'Writing the anxious city'.

help in his re-election, admitting it was a mistake to use the power of incumbency to try to get another term. Fred says Washington may reconsider its negative position on him if — through Fred — he does three things: first, appoint Washington's nominees as ministers of defence, petroleum, external and internal affairs, and of course finance; second, ensure these nominees will take directives from Washington on policy matters; and third, increase Fred's personal allotment of oil from 125,000 to 500,000 barrels per day. 'Who am I to say no?' the president replies. The film chronicles various events in the life of the presidential candidate, Femi Gomez. He is visited by his younger brother, Barry, whom he has made a senator, and who has fallen for Tokumbo. Gomez is flogged by a dominatrix; when his personal secretary Raymond reveals that the dominatrix is actually a journalist and finds a tiny tape recorder under the mattress, Gomez strangles her in a bubble bath. Later, Raymond is seduced by a woman working for Tokumbo, and Tokumbo enters their hotel room to propose a deal: she has overheard his plan to scheme Gomez's two sons out of their inheritance and marry his daughter, and will help him if he swears to worship the Dark Goddess — herself — all the days of his life. She has possession of his diary and threatens to let Gomez see it. Gomez, drinking with his son, discusses his mad and draconian plans for governing. His son tells him Amnesty International will condemn him, and everyone will think he is a crackpot. The son thinks Gomez should visit his psychiatrist in Geneva; Gomez warns him to keep his stay in a sanatorium a secret or he will kill him. When his brother Senator Barry comes to tell him that he himself will be running for president, Gomez shoots him.

Fred and Tokumbo, in bed on the morning after their marriage, receive a congratulatory phone call from the president. Fred tells him he has spent \$6 million to fix up his house in Spain, where they are going for their honeymoon; Tokumbo, unimpressed with everything, says she has business meetings worth \$700 million for the next week and cannot travel. She demands that he cut his ex-wife out of his will and worries about his disgruntled son Jeff. Later, the president comes to their house to see them, but Fred, distraught because he has disinherited his son at Tokumbo's insistence, refuses to see him. Tokumbo tells the president she is as good a power broker as Fred and promises to be more effective than the American assistance he still thinks he needs to win the election. She offers to destroy Gomez if he will deposit \$5 billion in her Swiss account and swear the secret oath to worship the Dark Goddess all the days of his life.

She summons Gomez and informs him he can never be president. 'I want you to leave that in the hands of the masses to decide', he says, to which she replies, 'Don't be naive, Gomez, a tiny but powerful cabal determines democracy in this part of the world'. She reminds him that his grandfather was a domestic servant in her family's house, making him unfit

for high office, and then confronts him with a certificate from the Swiss sanatorium and a tape recording of his final conversation with his brother, which she will use to indict him for murder. She gives him 24 hours to call a press conference to withdraw from the race. Gomez does so; he shoots his secretary Raymond for his treachery and then kills himself after summoning his daughter Amina from New York, who will avenge him (an evident advertisement for a sequel).

Tokumbo calls in Fred's ex-wife to inform her that Fred has had a stroke and 'is lying like a cockroach' on the floor of one of the 35 bedrooms in their mansion. What provoked the stroke was Tokumbo showing Fred a videotape of himself having sex with her mother and then demanding that he pay her \$12 billion of his total fortune of \$20 billion as damages or she will use the tape to destroy him in Washington, with the implication that Washington would finish him off. She also threatens to kill his son Jeff. Jeff overhears this conversation and enters the room, and she shoots him. So the film ends.

This seems like, and in fact it is, a lurid, demented, paranoid fantasy, but let us remember some things about 1995 in Nigeria. The scale of the fortunes mentioned in the film is only a slight exaggeration of what those at the center of power — Babangida, Abiola, and Abacha — were acquiring, and the games at the center of power were becoming ever more machiavelian and deadly as Abacha sank into his final paranoid dementia. The position of first lady had been given unprecedented prominence by Maryam Babangida and then by Maryam Abacha; both were attractive, power- and money-hungry, arrogant women with complicated sexual pasts that were the subject of widespread rumours, including some involving murder of inconvenient children from previous marriages.³¹ The episode in which Tokumbo brings down Gomez prefigures the story of Dan Etete, a minister in Abacha's government who, a year or so after the film appeared, supposing his boss would like it if his pseudo-transition to democracy were complete with some presidential candidates, announced that he would run. Furious, Abacha confronted him with evidence of his corruption — like Babangida, Abacha was said to keep such evidence on everyone — and demanded he give a press conference immediately to announce his withdrawal. Private

31. The first ladies' official, military-backed brand of feminism may have contributed to Tokumbo's character, though some combination of the vixens of international soap operas and the Nigerian troubled obsession with the figure of 'senior girls' (independent career women) would be a sufficient basis. This film does not actually seem to be hung up on the misogyny, which permeates much of the discourse on 'senior girls'. Tokumbo's power, though sexualized, is not subsumed by sex, despite the number of men attracted to her. Her relationships with the president, Gomez, and Raymond all depend on her intelligence and force of will, not her sexuality. Her sexuality is scandalous, but so is everything else about her. She is full of the most envied and hated qualities — beautiful and rich, arrogant, impious, powerful, independent, sexually uncontrollable — but she is perhaps as much a fantasy projection for women as a male nightmare of women's frightening power.

oil allotments like Fred's were a standard feature of government. The demeaning treatment of the elected president, subject to humiliating demands from Washington and finally forced to swear fealty to a young girl while her husband refuses to come downstairs to talk to him, was perhaps inspired by the perception of former presidents Balewa and Shagari as errand-boys of the northern oligarchs, but it also prefigures the Third Republic in which talk of democracy, transparency, and Amnesty International is not entirely without meaning but real power is exercised through private influence on a breathtaking scale and responds to the exigencies of neocolonial powers. That the film's satire was directed at a future civilian regime — the military is never mentioned — was doubtless a strategy to avoid the wrath of the censors.

This film hovers on the borders of the occult without ever quite crossing over. Tokumbo is a blasphemer, but what she blasphemes against most of the time are deeply held (and metaphysically undergirded) feelings about how one should relate to family members, how one should talk about the dead, how a young woman should act with older, powerful men, and so on. At the end, she claims the fundamental difference between her and Gomez is that she is God, and Gomez is a mere mortal; when Fred's ex-wife asks her if she fears God at all she replies, 'Why should I, when he has his jurisdiction and I have mine?' — as if she were the actual Prince of this world, the devil as a woman. Certainly, the semiotics of the title 'Dark Goddess' are rich enough. In a soliloquy near the beginning, she reveals her desire for absolute power and offers to trade her soul for it, wishing to be on the same footing as God himself. She interrupts the soliloquy to open the door for her strapping young bodyguard, looks him up and down, and commands that he give her his soul completely at that very moment. They cut into their arms and lick one another's blood. 'Fall down and worship me!' she says with unconvincing hysteria. The scene has clear sexual overtones; such blood oaths are said to be frequently exchanged among Nigerian politicians; the film makes repeated references to psychiatric problems, and it is reasonable to assume that she has one. My point is that, unlike in myriad other videos, we do not see any dark power appear to take her up on her offer to sell her soul, and the film gets along fine with no metaphysical or supernatural apparatus. The film ends giving 'Special thanks to 'GOD the Almighty Father', casting a controlling irony over the spectacle of unpunished evildoing we have just watched (and, again, suggesting a sequel must be on its way which will carry the story to its appropriate conclusion).

One could say that the videos reflect the fact that many Nigerians, reeling from the devastations of economic collapse and political hopelessness, have turned to Pentecostal Christianity, fundamentalist Islam, or the darker forms of indigenous occult beliefs to ease their psychic pain and to make some kind of sense out of otherwise senseless misery. But, as I have

been trying to suggest, a stronger case for the vitality of the popular imagination is possible. The videos have fostered multiple strategies for understanding the state of Nigeria during one of its darkest periods, some directly linked to political action and others adopting the position the late Chief Bola Ige called 'siddon look' ('sit down and look on', with the implication of cynical watchfulness and biding one's time). The videos have perhaps been most adequate to the spectacle of Nigerian politics when at their most fantastic.

After military rule

The end of military rule in 1999 has certainly not solved Nigeria's political problems, but it has created a more open political environment in which previously undiscussable topics can be aired. Millions of dollars looted from the national treasury by Abacha and his associates were unearthed, often with reporters in tow, and the Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission headed by retired Justice Chukwudifu Oputa, constituted in 2000 to investigate abuses of authority over the last decades, toured the country taking testimony. Its proceedings were broadcast on television and held the nation mesmerized. The major daily newspapers expanded to several times their previous bulk, chiefly to provide more political coverage, now that political spoils were distributed through a broader process rather than being allocated behind closed doors by a small military elite.

The video industry naturally invaded this new territory. Suddenly filmmakers were no longer discreet about using military men or police officers as representative 'big men', doing the things big men do, such as hiring university students as prostitutes at their parties (*Girls Hostel*, *Claws of the Lion*). As mentioned above, the vigilante genre, with its typical indictment of a local elite, flourished, as did the action genre in general, which also began straying onto formerly dangerous territory. The jacket copy of Teco Benson's *State of Emergency* reads, 'Anarchy has become the order of the day! Kill a civilian, it's a different ball game. But kill an Army Major, that means war'. There have been several films about melodramatic situations in imaginary First Families: the jacket copy of *The President's Daughter* explains that the heroine is expelled from her foreign university and is arrested, along with the children of other top government officials, for using cocaine. 'Suddenly, all eyes are on the president. Will he pull the strings and get his daughter released, to avoid defeat at the elections, or will he allow justice to take its course and send his only child to prison'. The jacket of *First Lady* features a lot of guns — three toughs with automatic weapons, a military firing squad, police attacking demonstrators — and quotes a bit of dialogue: 'Tell the president and the entire state how

you executed the FIRST LADY to take over her position or I'll blow your fucking head up'.

Films outside the vigilante genre continue to link politics with dark occult powers, as Nnebue's *Rituals* had done. *Time Up . . . No Place to Hide* (by the director of the *Issakaba* films, Lancelot Oduwa Imasuen) concerns the struggles of the virtuous Reverend Father Ejike, who has been named to a governmental commission, against the corrupt governor of a fictitious state who appointed him and the governor's ally, the wicked Igbakigba, who practices human sacrifice. The reputation and spiritual powers of the priest are the decisive elements in the governor's defeat (as in *Rituals*, the governor thinks he has rigged an election but fails to do so), but various elements of civil society are ranged against him: the priest's congregation, union officials, teachers who have not been paid their salaries, and the television news.

A significant handful of films retell recent or contemporary political events under the thinnest of disguises. Andy Amenechi's *The Last Vote* is transparently the story of Dr Chimaroke Nnamani, a medical doctor practising in the United States who was brought back to Nigeria and made governor of Enugu State by the Igbo power broker Chief Jim Nwobodo, who then fell out with the governor over patronage issues and opposed his re-election.³²

Sam Onwuka's two-part *Stubborn Grasshopper (Loved Power, Died in Power)* takes on the story of the Abacha dictatorship itself, beginning with the annulment of the 12 June 1993 election and ending with the dictator's death. There are formal disclaimers about the people and events in the film being fictitious and names having been changed: Abacha becomes Alba, his wife Maryam becomes Sabina, Mashood Abiola becomes Chief Kash, Wole Soyinka becomes Professor Nobel, NADECO (the National Democratic Coalition) becomes WADECO, and Nigeria becomes the Republic of Wahala (*wahala* meaning 'trouble' in Yoruba and Pidgin). Slight changes have been made in the story — the newspapers reported rumours that Abacha died in the arms of two Indian prostitutes, while the film has Alba with three Nigerians — but in general all the twists and turns of the history of the regime are represented faithfully and in detail, from the bloody suppression of the rioting in Lagos after the annulment to the forced resignation of the head of the Interim National Government, the violated understanding with Abiola, the assassinations of Kudirat Abiola and NADECO leaders, the arrests of Generals Diya and Yar'Adua, and so on. The film sticks close to the historical record in so far as it has been established, and otherwise, in cases where certitude is impossible or has not yet been established, it follows common assumptions and speculations that must not be more extraordinary than the truth.

32. On this political situation, see Kodilinye Obiagwu, 'Godfathers, godsons and the battle for 2003,' *The Guardian* (Lagos), 25 June 2002, pp. 8–9.

The film gives, in fact, a rather plodding chronicle of events, with little internal drama or depth of characterization. There are satirical touches, such as the scene where an elocution coach attempts to correct Alba/Abacha's notoriously bad English pronunciation (the dictator has the poor man hauled off after frustrating attempts to say 'agriculture,' 'local government,' and 'country'), but the film is not predominantly satirical. It has a discernable point of view (surprisingly sympathetic to Ibrahim Babangida, surprisingly hard on Abiola, entirely positive towards NADECO though that was almost entirely a Yoruba organization and the film's personnel are almost entirely Igbo), but it seems intended to express a condemnation of military rule that would appeal to viewers from across the political spectrum. Like the *Oputa* panel, it is designed to make the story public, and it relies on people's memories and common experiences to ensure interest in the story.

The two parts of the film appear to have been designed and shot at the same time, but there is an important shift in narrative strategy and even of genre between them. Part 1 has an elaborate apparatus for measuring public opinion. It begins with a political discussion, over a table full of bottles, between four friends: Chuks, an Igbo, Tunde, whose tribal facial scars advertise him as a Yoruba, Bala, an exaggerated version of a Hausaman, and Etim, from a southern minority group and by implication the stand-in for all the other Nigerians who are not part of the 'big three' ethnicities. This system of stereotypes is highly developed and accepted in Nigerian culture. We watch television with them as the election results are announced and continue to look in on them throughout the film as they discuss and quarrel over developments and cope with problems like fuel scarcity and exorbitant public transportation prices. We similarly observe other conversations among anonymous people discussing the collapse of social services, unpaid salaries of civil servants, and so on; and women with microphones — apparently television reporters — interview people in the street for their reactions to political developments. The effect of all this is to show the immiseration, frustration, and anger of the general population, but it also shows how effective the ploys of the dictatorship were in buying time for itself through false promises and in sowing ethnic divisions. 'WADECO' puts up a heroic resistance, but its leaders are killed or flee abroad; the first part ends with the assassination of Kash's activist wife (the historical Kudirat Abiola). Public opinion had reached the point of utter disgust but also of helpless impotence in the face of the regime's willingness to shed blood. The regime's collapse would come only with Abacha's death, caused at least in part by his debauchery.

Perhaps for this reason, the second part drops the whole apparatus of soundings in public opinion and adds a new element: family melodrama. Part 1 has just one scene with Alba's sons, in which he tells them they are free to grab whatever they want, and they promise to take advantage of the

situation. They become major characters in the second part, as does their mother Sabina, who hardly appeared before. Rebuffed when she asks that an accused coup plotter be released, she confronts her husband in bed with two prostitutes. Meanwhile, one of her sons tells the other he should stop using the family name for business because in fact he is not the son of the dictator but of an emir connected with a coup plotter. Angry with his wife, Alba has the illegitimate son killed in a plane crash.

Part 1 has just one racy scene, in which numerous prostitutes in bathing suits stroke Alba by a pool, but the trailer for the second part is lascivious and the film delivers on its promise. (Probably it is not coincidental that at this time there was a flourishing subgenre of sexually explicit films, often about prostitutes.) Alba's demise comes when a group of officers who have learned they are about to be sacked organize a party at which the dictator is lured by hired girls into a bedroom, prevented from taking the drugs he needs to stay alive, disconnected from his cell phone, and finally fed a poisoned apple. He twitches, apparently with pleasure, but then foams at the mouth and dies. We are not far from the world of *Dark Goddess* here, but again, the point is that we are not far from real history either.

Abacha had no real friends and consequently attacking his regime once it was over is politically safe. By 2000, films on politics were recognized as a money-making trend. But some topics are still too dangerous to handle, and political pressures continue to be exerted on filmmakers. The Censors Board demanded cuts in Don Pedro Obaseki's *The Brave Soldier*, an exposé of the terrible lives of Nigerian soldiers, because of concerns that barracks scenes would undermine discipline, and the filmmaker was offered money not to screen the film in Ikeja Cantonment, near a military base.³³ Many films present a spiritual war between Christianity and traditional religions, but conflict between Christians and Muslims is too inflammatory to be treated. (The exception that proves the rule is an Igbo-made film, *Holy Law: Sharia*.)

In 2000, Simi Opeoluwa, the director of *Stubborn Grasshopper*, made a film about the Nigerian Civil War, the first on this deeply traumatic subject.³⁴ Originally titled *Guns of Biafra*, it is about an Igbo military officer posted to the north and married to a northern Muslim woman. As the war breaks out, he is forced to flee to the south and takes up arms. The Censors Board insisted on cuts and, concerned about a politician's recent call for a Biafran state, forced a change in title, so that the film was released as *The Battle of Love*. The film was pushed in the direction of melodrama precisely to blunt its political edge.

33. Don Pedro Obaseki, personal communication.

34. In 2001, the writer and producer of *Stubborn Grasshopper*, Sam Onwuka, came out with *Oil Village*, a lightly fictionalized version of the Ogoni crisis and the 'judicial murder' (as John Major called it) of the environmental and minority-rights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa. In its procedures, strengths, and weaknesses, it greatly resembles the earlier film.

Melodrama, with its characteristic focus on individual emotional and moral choices rather than systemic issues, polarization of good and evil characters, manipulation of emotional extremes, and preference for happy endings, is a problematic tool with which to address political issues, as many critiques of Hollywood political films have shown. Melodrama encourages emotional identification with individual characters, the argument runs, but creates a mystified and spectatorial relationship with social reality. Many Nigerian commentators would add that the spectacle of unremitting bloody violence, occult practices, unrestrained passions, and corruption that the videos present, and which video producers produce because they calculate that it will sell, has helped to degrade the social fabric and create a generation of absolute cynics. It is also possible to argue, however, that the filmmakers are showing something very much like what exists and, moreover, that the melodramatic mode is capable of an unusually strong grip on Nigerian politics because that politics is so personal in its forms: the abolition of the difference between public and private wealth is the essence of corruption, personal relationships are essential in the patron–client structures that permeate politics and society on every level, and the immense personal fortunes and political power amassed under military rule magnify personal desire, caprice, and vengeance as elements in national politics. The effects of the video films on their audiences and the motivations of their makers are effectively unknowable, but one cannot simply dismiss the earnestness expressed for instance by the jacket copy of Lancelot Imasuen's *Dying for the Nation*:

It is now crystal clear that the operators of politics do not uphold their campaign promises and avowals . . . But then you as you are can bring about a quantum and monumental turn around of the structurally, politically, religiously, socially, economically and morally bankrupt, ailing and sick Nation. How does what you do now contribute to the growth and sustainance (sic) of the nation's building elements and components . . . Dying for the Nation . . . brave it up now! (ellipses in the original)

In general, as I hope this essay has demonstrated, the Nigerian video industry has taken up political issues with a wide, varied, and ever-increasing range of generic strategies: modernized handling of traditional discourses on rulership and the health of the community, the intersection of domestic melodrama with public life, action thrillers and vigilante films, films on money rituals and other forms of occult supernatural practices, and the occasional agitprop film that attempts to shake the spectator and rouse him or her to action, as Fanon called upon the revolutionary artist to do.³⁵ The videos continue to solidify their position as the most significant Nigerian imaginative form.

35. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Grove, New York, 1968), pp. 222–3.

*Filmography**(All films are on video unless otherwise noted)*

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