

TK in NYC: An Interview with Tunde Kelani

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In April 2004, Tunde Kelani was honored with a mid-career retrospective of his works at the African Film Festival of New York. Such honors have been falling thick and fast on “TK”: in October 2003, he was featured at the 2nd Festival of African & Caribbean Film in Barbados, and in January 2004, he was featured again at the 33rd International Film Festival in Rotterdam. This extraordinary level of attention expresses the international film community’s slowly dawning awareness of the Nigerian video boom and the festival organizers’ natural strategy for coming to grips with this enormous, sprawling phenomenon by focusing on the work of its most respected and technically-accomplished practitioner.

The African Film Festival of New York (AFFNY) is based at the Walter Reade Theater in Lincoln Center, on Broadway. Lincoln Center is the most prestigious address in the arts in New York, and perhaps in the world, home to the Metropolitan Opera, the New York City Ballet, the Avery Fisher concert hall, and the Julliard School of Music. Under the direction of Richard Pena, the Walter Reade Theater has established itself as the premier showcase for international cinema in the United States. In his opening remarks, Pena paid handsome tribute to the African Film Festival for its part in putting the Walter Reade Theater on the cultural map.

The AFFNY, under the direction of Mahen Bonetti, has led the way in introducing American audiences to Nigerian and Ghanaian video films. In 2001 it brought Kelani (with *Thunderbolt*, 2001), Richard Mofe-Damijo, and the Ghanaian Ashangbor Akweti-Kanyi to New York, along with a representative selection of videos. The 2004 retrospective of Kelani’s work included *Saworoide* (1999), *Thunderbolt*, *Agogo Eewo* (2002), *Campus Queen* (2003), and the short *White Handkerchief* (1998). Also shown were two shorts for which Kelani served as cinematographer, Mahmood Ali-Balogun’s *Twins of the Rainforest* (1998) and *Nkan Mii/ Something Else* (2004), by the talented newcomer Seke Somolu, starring Kunle Bamtefa, Joke Silva, and Lanre Balogun. Other films by Nigerians in the festival were Tade Ogidan’s *Owo Blow/ The Genesis* (1997), Amo’s *Kemi* (2002), Lancelot Imasuen’s *Emotional Crack* (2003), Branwen Okpako’s documentary *Dirt for Dinner* (produced in Germany, 2000) and her feature *Valley of the Innocent* (Nigeria/Germany, 2003), and Zina

Saro-Wiwa's witty short about *Ovation!* magazine, *Hello Nigeria!* (produced in the UK, 2004). Another theme of the 2004 festival was the tenth anniversary of the end of apartheid in South Africa, with a raft of films from that country, and the opening night film was the Guinness-sponsored, Pan-African but mostly South African *Critical Assignment* (2003, starring the Guinness advertising icon Michael Powers). No major film festival outside of Africa has been so dominated by the new power of the Anglophone African film-producing countries.

The presence of the Nigerian Ambassador to the United Nations and of the Honorable Minister for Information and National Orientation, Chief Chukwuemeka Chikelu, at both the festival's opening and at the "centerpiece" film, the world premier of Kelani's *Campus Queen*, was evidence that the Nigerian government has begun to understand the significance of the video industry and is now willing to show appropriate respect towards a major artist in this medium.

Kelani was clearly deeply sensible of the honor being done to him by the retrospective and responded in characteristic fashion. Far from resting on his laurels, he had wanted to make no less than four new films to bring to the festival. In the event, he poured all his resources into *Campus Queen*. *Campus Queen* breaks new ground in several ways: no film has ever utilized the resources of a university performing arts program (in this case, UNILAG's) so thoroughly, no video has had such elaborate song and dance numbers, and never have so many cameras been deployed to capture them.

Ever technically-minded, Kelani was in a reflective mood about his relationship with technology at this crowning moment in his career, feeling he had arrived at two watersheds. He pointed out that only a trained professional eye could distinguish his digital images, when projected on the festival's state-of-the-art equipment, from those of the celluloid films: the distinction between film and video has been effectively erased, as far as audiences are concerned. He also told me that after years of experimenting with digital technology, he finally felt that he was ready to really set to work with it. This combination of modesty and ambition struck me as pure Kelani; his restless creative drive and work ethic reminded me of the qualities that propelled the Yoruba into their leading role in the Nigerian nation and that used to be seen as a hallmark of Nigerian culture generally. Fresh from watching *Saworoide* and *Agogo Eewo* on the big screen, I was impressed all over again by how much of the spirit and intelligence of Yoruba culture during the glory days of the mid-20th century are alive in Tunde Kelani, and this theme was on my mind as I conducted the following interview with TK in a restaurant on Broadway. His wife, Toun, and his friend and associate Tunde Adegbola were with us.

JH: In your remarks last night to the audience of the African Film Festival of New York, you talked about your roots in Yoruba culture. Could you

start from the beginning and tell me when and where you were born and something about your family background?

TK: I was born in Lagos in 1948. As soon as I was five years old, my father whisked me off to live with my grandfather in Abeokuta, about 100 kilometers away from Lagos. This was the period of the introduction of the free primary education by late Chief Obafemi Awolowo, and my father is an admirer of Awolowo and his revolutionary programmes which favoured the people. In fact, it got to be almost an obsession that anything he approves has to have Awolowo's name in it. And so I was in the first set of the free primary education introduced at that time. I just couldn't understand it, because separation from my mother was really painful for me, but that was it, so I just had to live in the community with my grandfather, who was the Balogun of Ijaiye Kukudi. The Balogun is a chief around there. What I remember was mostly, a lot of people would come in to a meeting and talk and talk, settling disputes and all that, and I used to wonder, what is it that elders have to talk about? I decided then that when I grow up, I also will have the power to talk without stopping. [Laughter.] This was my earlier impression. But living in that community exposed me to other ways of life, and I learned quite early that we all lived together, no matter our beliefs. We had Christians, Moslems and people who observed traditional religion in the same compound, wall to wall, and I knew everyone. Kasali, the *apala* drummer's mother, was a Shango worshipper whose house was directly opposite our house. Alabi and his family, on our left, were *egungun* worshippers. Erinkitola of the same *egungun* cult lived in the compound behind them. They were proud of their beliefs and refused to be converted to any of the imported religions. My family was converted to Islam a long time ago, and the other house on our right was occupied by Christians. Also our great uncle, who was an Abeokuta chief, the Odofin, was a Christian. But we all shared the same communal open ground, now shrunken, and shared in all the festivals. During the Muslim Ramadan festivals, the others would join, and then the Sango festival of course, we all took part without any inhibition at all. There was that spirit of tolerance.

And then I was exposed to the natural environment, because we lived close to the bank of the Ogun River, and between the houses and the bush, up to the bank of the river, we just thought it was for us. We had our favorite areas, and food was abundant, there were crabs, there was fish, and snails. A child could go and pick fruits and vegetable. And then of course I got fishing as soon as I knew how to.

Once I started school, the free primary school, I got to know more about our people and so on, and by the time I was eight or nine, I was reading and writing and became some kind of official letter writer in the community. And then of course my grandfather, who could neither read nor write, expected me to read all D. O. Fagunwa's books. At night, with the lamp, I would just read out loud to my grandfather. So I got really exposed to the Yoruba literature and Yoruba music. This was a period

when the Yoruba theatre was thriving, and I remember when I got to secondary school, we actually had an excursion to Obisesan Hall, Ibadan, to watch the first production of the *Palm-Wine Drinkard*, by Kola Ogunmola. I never forgot that experience.

JH: A very famous production . . .

TK: And then of course, Duro Ladipo's *Oba Koso* was at that time also on stage and we had the University traveling groups touring schools. So you can imagine what I took away from that community, and I suppose I can see it, I can't forget any of that, so that even now, I think I have done too little to try and document some of those encounters that I've had at first hand with our culture. When I was really young I thought it was a wicked thing for my father to send me away, but I'm grateful that I have had that experience.

And I discovered photography from my primary school days. I had seen my first mobile cinema when they came to my school and I can remember some of the images of the first film that I saw. Because I missed my mother I would come out to the front of the whole compound and just sit all by my self and watch the taxis (Morris Minors) zooming past. I noticed the shadows of women returning from Iberekodo market thrown across the side of the barber's shop. When a car approached I could see them with the shapes of their baskets balanced on their heads, bopping up and down the wall, and I could see the speed—as the car pulled along the wall they moved faster until they disappeared completely, only to start again when another car approached. These were the kinds of early images that I had in my head, so I suppose it wouldn't be possible to ignore all this. I would rather do that than be a copy of some other culture. So basically that's the story.

JH: It's a great story. And what did your father do, and your family in Lagos?

TK: He was an accounts clerk with the UAC, the United Africa Company, and I think what he got out of that was I won a UAC scholarship for my secondary education. I remember I traveled to Ibadan to the UAC headquarters for the competition with other children. I was one of the eight children selected in Nigeria who got the UAC scholarship that year.

JH: Why did he send you to Abeokuta for your primary education? Why couldn't you do that in Lagos?

TK: I suppose because it was free primary education, and then he loved Awolowo so much that I had to be a victim of his total belief in Awolowo. Of course I came to recognize the importance of such a visionary man, and he is one of my own idols as well. That's the hero we all looked up to.

JH: So your father thought he was sending you into this institution to build a modern Nigeria, but you also were plunged back into the tradition at the same time.

TK: Inevitably. I'm not sure if he saw the traditional aspect of that, but when I became a filmmaker he was quite interested in my work, and whenever it was necessary for me to acquire some of those things as props, he would help, because as a Muslim, it was unheard of that I needed to acquire an *egungun* garment, and so on, but if I needed one, my father would help me to get it.

JH: And the primary education was in English or in Yoruba?

TK: It started in Yoruba, everything was in Yoruba, until we got to the middle classes. There were vast literary resources in Yoruba. The education ministry even supplied a comic magazine that was in the Yoruba language, *Aworerin*. It wasn't even difficult to find similarities between some Yoruba literature and Greek mythology, because there are similarities between the Greek and the Yoruba gods, so I encountered that from an early age.

JH: I don't know of another filmmaker who is so close to Yoruba writers. It's been a strong element in your work all along—I'm thinking of your collaboration with Wale Ogunyemi, your frequent association with Professor Akinwumi Ishola, and the way you incorporate Adebayo Faleti into *Saworoide* and *Agogo Eewo* as the embodiment of the community's wisdom. You've mentioned Fagunwa, but who else made an impression on you as you were growing up?

TK: There were quite a number of writers at that time to choose from, but I remember plainly D.O. Fagunwa, and then J.F. Odunjo, Alawiye, and Olaosebikan.

JH: And the photography thing, you were always noticing images and moving images. Did it start with still photography?

TK: Yes, I started with still photography, I don't know how. My earliest memory and connection with photography was the term in Yoruba "*mo fo foto*," because translated literally that means "washing the picture." I took it literally and tried to do it. I gathered some old newspapers and tried to wash the pictures off, either wash off or wash on. [Laughter.]

But then, by the time I got to Primary Six I had bought my first camera from a friend. I just wanted to acquire it. It cost me eight shillings and was faulty but I bought it all the same. I never took a single photograph with it, I was just too happy to possess it. By the time I got to my first year in secondary school, I had bought a Kodak 127. It was all plastic, one lens, round button, and so on. I had some fun with it, but I got

fed up with it quickly. In my second year I had actually ordered a camera from England with a friend. The camera was called Rapier Mark II, and from the catalogue it looked like the real thing. It had a carrying case and so on. The camera arrived, and for a while I didn't have the money to collect it from the post office. Finally when I got it, I got fed up with it immediately because I found out that the case was plastic, it wasn't leather. It looked so good in the glossy catalogue. It had just a bit more improvement on the controls because I think it had two shutter positions, either slow or fast. When I was in Form Four I had a friend, Enemchukwu Chukwuemeka, and we were really photography buffs. The school had its own photographic society, which we didn't join, but we teamed up and formed our team. We did a lot of student photography those days.

The cheapest single lens reflex 35 we could dream of was the Halina 35X, and finally he bought his, and I got a chance to buy mine when the schools released forms to write the school certificate examinations. Students were expected to deliver the forms to parents. The exam fees were seven pounds and ten shillings and, being a UAC scholar, mine had been paid with my school fees. I managed to get another form and cleverly changed the number seven to nine, and then traveled to Lagos to give it to my father. He thought it was very curious: why should they send him this form? But in any case he did something that was very clever: rather than give me the cash, he wrote a postal order to the school and posted it and asked me to go. A few days later, the school bursar sent for me. The chief officer was an uncle who knew my father. The first thing he asked me was, "How did your exam fees get to be nine pounds?" I told him, "I changed it because I want to buy a camera." [Laughter.] He was supposed to have recommended some sort of discipline, but somehow he didn't question it. I'm surprised. If he were alive I would go and ask him today. He gave me the money, so I traveled to Lagos and bought the Halina 35X. That was my first single lens reflex 35mm camera till I left secondary school. So it is quite correct to say I started my professional career in still photography.

JH: And what were your ideas about what you wanted to take pictures of?

TK: I think that I did mostly student photography, because Enemchukwu and I would take pictures of students and we would refuse to print the pictures for them. We would cut the negatives and sell to them at 5 pence or so, and it was up to them to go and print them at a commercial photographic studio. But what we did was we printed our own pictures. We mixed the chemicals ourselves and then met at night to print and develop the pictures. Later, during the Nigerian Civil War, we knew of a photographer who had gone home because he was Igbo, so somehow, I don't know how we did it, it was outside in town, we sneaked out of the boarding house at night, gained access to his darkroom, and then took over from there and experimented throughout the night. I don't know what I

wanted to do, but I just did a lot of photography, mostly student photography.

JH: And in these years, Yoruba photographers were not only at work in the West, but they were also spreading all over West Africa. Looking back now, do you feel like you were part of a Yoruba tradition of photography?

TK: No, at that point it was just my interest in photography. But later when I started working in Lagos I bought the Daily Times just to look at the photographers, the names. I would look at the pictures and the names of the photographers like Peter Obey, Akin Adedayo, and Desalu. I would look for the names, and then I would be satisfied. I was privileged to meet those men I had admired in my youth on the field when I turned professional myself.

JH: And cinema?

TK: Oh, cinema—again, the thing is, I had seen almost every film that came into Lagos. All the American films. It was as if I knew everybody, and I'd see the great films: *The Guns of Navarone*, *Spartacus*, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, all the cowboy films, of course, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* and all of that, and at that time I could just reel off the names of the actors, Anthony Quinn, Anthony Quale, Peter O'Toole, Charleton Heston, Victor Mature, Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor, quite a lot, and some of the French, and then James Coburn, and later I started to watch the James Bond films, all the Flint films, all that, and all the ladies too, Anne Margaret, and Deborah Kerr, Brigitte Bardot, Ursula Andress, Julie Andrews. I could just go on and read out all these names, so I think I was really crazy about the cinema as well.

Finally, I applied to several photographers for training, including the Ministry of Information, but only Dotun Okunbanjo replied to me. But what I loved about Dotun Okunbanjo was that I had read in the newspaper that he held an exhibition in London and it was actually attended by the Nigerian Prime Minister Hon. Tafa Balewa, and I thought that was the end of the world. So I thought I really had to join him. The following year he invited me for an interview as an apprentice photographer. At that time it was strange for anyone who had the West African School Certificate to want to become an apprentice and be paid nothing, because I had a paying job. When he said he wasn't going to pay me, I agreed. He said, "No, no, no, you have to go call your father, because we need a witness here." So I told my father that I had decided to become an apprentice photographer for no pay, and he said, "Well, it's okay"—apparently he had noticed my interest. And I said, "No, Chief Dotun Okunbanjo wants to see you so you can talk about it," so they met and talked thing over. For my father it was a sacrifice, because at this time I was actually helping him to pay the house rent. In any case, I had only twelve pounds in savings, and I thought if things got so bad, I still had twelve pounds, so I just continued. And

then of course, for my part too I was prepared for it. I decided that I couldn't afford to take a bus anymore: I would trek from there to Lagos so I would save a shilling a day. I did that for months. My father got transferred from Lagos to the Benin branch of WAATECO where he was working at that time. That meant I didn't have anywhere to sleep again, so I stayed with a friend.

JH: And how old were you at this point?

TK: This must have been in '68, '69. It got to a point where I couldn't go out anymore, I just didn't have the money. The twelve pounds had since run out. I was looking in the *Daily Times* one day, and the former Western Nigerian Television advertised for trainee cine-cameramen. The qualification was West African School Cert, plus aptitude in photography. I did not just possess an aptitude, I was already apprenticed. I was overqualified. There were not many people with School Cert who were actually practicing photographers. Finally, a letter came that said I should go and take an aptitude test in West African Examination Council (WAEC), in Yaba, Lagos and when I got there, there were fifteen others, and we took this aptitude test. For a long time I didn't hear anything again, until I got another letter saying I should go to Ibadan for an interview. I entered the Television House for the first time and I felt, this is where I belong. There were only four of us. After the interview, out of the whole lot, I was the only one that was selected for that training.

So that's how I made the transition into motion pictures, and that's where my career really took off. I was of course dying to touch all those cameras, even if they didn't pay me. Suddenly from my small 35 SLR I had access to these gigantic Auricons, you know at that time for newsreels, it was Auricon, with a thousand foot magazine on top of them, shooting negative black and white picture and optical sound. It was really exciting. I must have touched almost all the cameras that mattered at that time, from the simple hand-cranked Bolex with the three lenses on the turret to the popular Arri 16st wild camera. With magnetic striped sound came the Ari 16-BLs and the American types, the popular and successful CP16 and the Frezzi, and so I experienced all of those things.

JH: And what were you pointing all of this equipment at?

TK: Once I crossed to television, it was a lot of work for the film department because we didn't have video, and so every other thing outside the studio had to be provided by the film department, from sports, to newsreels, to social diaries, to documentaries, to drama inserts, and so on. There was quite a lot to do and the kind of training I was given meant that I had to experience all of this. So I went quickly, they started me off with doing very simple things and then moved me into doing newsreels, and then I did some sports, and then moved on and did documentaries, and then moved and did drama inserts . . .

JH: Drama inserts being what?

TK: Television drama was studio-based. For exterior sequences, the film department with portable and more mobile production equipment had the responsibility of providing those footages. For instance if they had a story and somebody arrived from the airport, the film department would go and shoot the exterior sequences, which were edited and cued on the telecine and inserted at the appropriate time during the uninterrupted presentation of the television drama.

JH: And these dramas were by traveling theatre people?

TK: Oh yes, most of them.

JH: So you already knew those people?

TK: Well, I was thrilled to encounter this group of artistes who had brought their plays traveling around to us when I was in secondary school. I had worshipped them from afar, and then suddenly here they were in life and blood. I could touch them, speak and laugh with them. From far off on the stage I'd recognize quite a lot of them and had a lot of respect for people like Akin Sofoluwe, who led the first original cast of *Kurunmi*. And of course Kola Ogunmola in *Palm-Wine Drinkard*, I will never forget his magical performances when the school selected some of us to travel to Ibadan for the presentation of the classic at Obisesan Hall. My father worked briefly at the UAC branch in Oshogbo, and during the holidays I was privileged to watch the legendary Duro Ladipo at rehearsals. Both giants Duro Ladipo and his group and Kola Ogunmola lived and operated from Oshogbo at this time. After a while I got to meet them all during my early days at the Western Nigerian Television (WNTV/BS). Occasionally, Chief Hubert Ogunde came in to record with his troupe. And on the outside I admired the Osun artists as well, from Twins Seven Seven to Muraina Oyalami, to Adebisi Fabunmi, Rufus Ogundele and Jimoh Buraimoh. I really loved them and though they didn't know me, I would hang around them a lot.

JH: Those were the glory days.

TK: Unfortunately, that's all gone today. My professional career took off-- within two or three years I was getting noticed fast. My employers, the Western Nigerian Television, transferred me to the Lagos office, and then of course I met a lot more talented people in the broadcast and print media. Professionally I had noticed that the kind of films we shot for television was totally different from the ones I saw in the cinemas, and I knew definitely that there was more in terms of narrative film than just shooting the single system sound which was sufficient for television

broadcasting. So from 1973, I'd dreamt of attending the London Film School to do the diploma course in the Art and Technique of Filmmaking. I had a Grade Three pass in School Cert; that meant that I could never get a government scholarship. So I had to really start saving up, and by the time I went to the London Film School in 1976 I'd managed to save up £1,500 (one thousand, five hundred pounds), which was just what was required for the first year. I told my father that this would be a one-year trip, because I wasn't sure if I would be able to complete the course, but knowing that I was starting out from that handicap, I would try to learn as much as I could in one year and if I couldn't pay for the second year I would return home. We agreed. But when I finished the first year, some of my friends had actually said that if I couldn't pay they would raise the money and pay for me. I came to Lagos to try and get some work and I met Mr. Vincent Maduka, who had become the NTA Director General, and who was the Chief Engineer when I was in Western Nigerian Television. I was in the car park and he saw me and said "Ah, hello Tunde, how are you?" and I said, "Fine, sir," and he said, "I haven't seen you around." I said, "Actually I'm in London Film School." At Western Nigerian Television they were much more organized, and there had been some key technicians who had attended that course, all sponsored by the former Western Nigerian Television, so he confidently told me, "Oh, that's fine, because after all we're paying for that," and I said, "No, you are not," and he said, "Why not?" I said, "The general manager said they were just not interested in this course and I have managed as a private student." He was shocked and said, "Go write them again and give me a copy of the letter." I did just that and strangely enough they said, okay we'll pay the final year and then you'd have to serve a bond for two years after the course. So we struck a deal and that was how I was able to complete the course at the London Film School.

By the time I finished the two-year course, I thought I had the answers and I knew all the tricks. I thought that finally I had discovered everything I needed to know, so all I had to do was rush back quickly and start to make the films. The first thing I noticed was that the television was really not interested in all my enthusiasm, so I had to leave. After serving the two years' bond, I was not that relevant in the television production setup so it was time to move on. I decided to go freelance and started a production company, Cinekraft, with my friend Wale Fanu. Cinekraft provided technical backing to most of the films produced by independent producers, mainly from the traditional traveling theatre groups who were following in Ogunde's footsteps. Also, they have been influenced by Ola Balogun's success, who produced and directed *Ajani Ogun*. Ade Love had also produced *Ija Ominira*, which was an instant hit. Moses Olaiya of the Alawada Theatre group also produced *Orun Mooru* and later *Mosebolan*, which I photographed in 16mm. It was all an exciting and creative era. I must have photographed more than fifteen of the first wave of the 16mm films made by the traveling theatre groups. Shortly after that, Nigeria's economy nose-dived. It became almost impossible for any

filmmaker to raise the necessary foreign exchange needed to work in traditional filmmaking. I felt my career as a filmmaker had come to an end.

JH: So then you launched yourself into the video . . .

TK: Of course. I remember when the first set of ENGs, Electronic News Gathering system videos, came into television, I hated them, because the news people concluded that it was to replace film. Up to that time, every television station I had worked in had its own in-house film processing laboratory. I mean, film was not a novelty, it was something we had always taken for granted. You went out, shot a story, got it processed, edited it, and it got on air same evening. Suddenly our skill was no longer that relevant. We got really jealous when these new things appeared on the scene, and I thought this would never last and secretly prayed that it would never work. In any case, I was already on my way out of television broadcasting. Although we started off in Cinekraft shooting films, inevitably, we had to incorporate analogue video for the production of television spots, etc. By the time I branched out to start Mainframe, the use of video for the production of features was becoming popular. Cinekraft succeeded mainly as a facility house, but I needed a production-based company like Mainframe, set up to document Nigeria's rich cultural heritage. I was able to purchase some limited equipment like the Sony DXC M7 and a U-matic lowband portable recorder, and fortunately Chief Rashidi Ladoja, who I was lucky to have met on a failed project, agreed to fund the purchase of the necessary production equipment, giving birth to Mainframe Productions. With Ladoja's support, I was able to standardize on professional Hi8, which was superior to composite low-band Umatic. I felt I was ready to plunge into our first feature, *Ti Oluwa Nile*, in analogue video.

JH: Wale Ogunyemi was part of that?

TK. No, not on *Ti Oluwa Nile*. I approached Wale Ogunyemi to write the screenplay for *Ayo Ni Mo Fe* part 2. The story could still be developed after the success of the first part and I was convinced that Wale Ogunyemi, a skilful and talented writer, could approach it from a fresh angle.

JH: And your association with Professor Akinwumi Ishola began with *Koseegbe*?

TK: Yes.

JH: You knew him before?

TK: Well, indirectly. Of course I'd read some of his works and greatly admired him. I don't think it was a chance meeting, I knew it was something that was meant to be. I was in Tunde Adegbola's Tiwa System office in Ibadan and this young girl who came for computer training lessons was looking at me unusually. I thought she was admiring me, and she boldly approached and said, "Don't you know me? I'm Professor Ishola's daughter," and I said "Oh, my God, yes, I must go and see him now." I think we met and creatively bonded. He is a great Yoruba scholar and our interests in the Yoruba culture and language match. I wanted to adapt *Koseegbe*, one of his successful novels in Yoruba, so badly, and we just took it up from there.

JH: You worked out the ideas for *Saworoide* and *Agogo Eewo* with him?

TK: No. *Saworoide* was rather unusual. Prof. Isola told me about a talented drummer, Lasisi Ayanyemi, in his village (Labode). He told me he was one of the best living Yoruba drummers left, and that Lasisi, although a Muslim, played in the church at Christmas. I was really dying to meet him and decided to do a documentary about Lasisi. Prof. Isola already started some kind of sketch, only to call me one morning with the bad news. "TK, there's a problem, Lasisi has died." It was shocking to me because I'd not even met him, so how could he choose this moment to die? However, we did not entirely give up and we still decided to use the talking drum as a symbol in the story of *Saworoide*. I loved Prof. Isola's approach to *Saworoide*, especially with reference to its political and social angles, a risky project with the military dictator Sani Abacha still in the saddle of governance. The screenplay was ready and in fact predicted Abacha's death because like Lagata in our story, Abacha conveniently died a mysterious death before we started our production.

JH: But you'd already written it into the script.

TK: Exactly. For me, it was a really convenient death, because I didn't know what was going to happen if we released it in his lifetime. You know the character in the film was sounding quite like him, and only God knows what would have happened. We had produced *Saworoide* as nothing more than a sort of passive observation of those dictatorship days. Because part of what I meant to say in the introduction last night is that because the Nigerian film industry is a private enterprise, all the producers would just produce very safe stories, family issues, comedies, and love stories, but nothing about politics for fear of jeopardizing their investment. So everybody played it safe. *Saworoide* was a tame attempt to document the evil of military rule. You know the print media on the other hand did very well because they openly criticized dictatorship. Of course some journalists had to go into exile and all that. But none of the filmmakers would dare that, so everybody just seemingly turned a blind eye and just

went for their businesses. Abacha's death has been reduced to nothing more than a passing observation, or a slight documentation, if you like.

JH: So then you decided to try to get into trouble with the Obasanjo regime . . .

TK: No, I don't have any problem with the government but misunderstanding with the National Film and Video Censorship Board over the mis-classification of *Agogo Eewo*. As a matter of fact, I think the film *Agogo Eewo* is really not about Obasanjo, but there are similarities about political and social happenings between Jogbo and contemporary Nigeria. At the conclusion of *Saworoide*, the previous film, everybody had been led to expect that the young boy, Arese, was going to be king, but because of Jogbo circumstances the chiefs and other interest groups hijack the process of selection in the opening sequences of *Agogo Eewo* and install a compromise candidate they thought they could manipulate to loot the treasury. Adebosipo agreed to mount the throne against his personal wish and desire. He decides to embark on a different agenda of reform and dedicated service to the people. A conflict of interests develops with predictable organized chaos. We were at a loss how to end the film because it was going to be released before the second general election that was to give Obasanjo a second term. The whole country was apprehensive. It was generally believed that the election was going to be violent. Everybody had their own predictions of what was going to happen, but we suggested that the youth would refuse to be used by the politicians and that the various factions will unite for once in favour of a peaceful transition. So *Agogo Eewo* worked as some sort of conflict prevention film.

JH: I was amazed at the National Film and Video Censors Board response to the film.

TK: The Board, in responding to the negative criticism of the Nigerian video films, ended up on a crusade mission which has turned out to be counterproductive. With ninety percent of the films labeled Not to Be Broadcast (NTBB), it is clear that the Board's decisions are based along religious and ethnic lines. It is clear that the Board has demonstrated insensitivity to traditional beliefs and a poor knowledge of the Yoruba language and culture. How could they conclude that any scene with Ifa divination could only be translated to mean "ritual"? The Board's pre-occupation is to protect Nigerians from 'ritualistic' influences. And I had a right to be upset about the decision of the Board to classify it as falling under the official unacceptable level of fetish practices. I think there are two boards, because a preview committee had already scored it "G" in Lagos and, unknown to me then, another verification unit in Abuja sat to upturn the Lagos correct classification. We had no choice but to accept the verdict, otherwise we would be ruined. But it caused a lot of public

debate, which propelled the Board to go on the offensive. They officially wrote all the television stations and cable operators to be on the lookout for *Agogo Eewo*, threatening that any station that screened it would be sanctioned. But we should look at the implication of this assault on our culture. For example, how can Yoruba avoid Ifa, which is the collective knowledge system for thousand of years? It's impossible.

JH: It seems like exactly the kind of film that the Nigerian Film Corporation and other government agencies have always tried to support and should support—it's that kind of cultural nationalism, defending the traditional culture, providing an allegory about how to sanitize the political situation. The government should like everything about it.

TK: Well, the Film and Video Censors Board has its own undisclosed agenda. In an official publication, they explained that *Agogo Eewo* got the NTBB not only for unacceptable level of fetish practices but others: seduction, violence and power play which children could not benefit from. I have a lawyer who is following this closely. Finally we got a letter about four weeks ago that says that the Board agrees that we have the right to appeal for re-classification, but it costs. They broke down the costs: the notification for appeal was N2, 000, but the appeal fee proper is N60, 000. And the preview will be conducted in Abuja by an undisclosed committee. We will of course be expected to pay for return tickets and the hotel accommodation for the three members of the committee. Additionally we would have to pay honorarium for those people, and they totaled everything to N390, 000 if I wanted to go ahead with this appeal. Well I don't know, if I had N390, 000 at that time, I would put it on *The Campus Queen*, obviously.

JH: It's an amazing story. So finally, you think it's the religious attitudes.

TK: I think it's so many things. When we went to do the classification for *The Campus Queen*, we met an official letter concerning promos and new films on television. [Searches for it] Okay, I have this document. This is the notice from the Board, saying this is to producers/ presenters about adverts and advert materials. And they say, "Please be informed that tapes from films containing slapping, fighting, scuffle, flogging, shooting or display of guns, rituals, accidents, strangling, hanging, sex or talk or gestures, romance, death scenes, foul languages, disappearing and reappearing, dead bodies, supernatural power effects, oracle consultations, and any other wicked or ritual acts, are no longer allowed in promotion advertisement tapes. These tapes are considered not suitable for children's consumption. Producers/presenters should ensure that all approved promos and TSWZ codes are collected and inserted on the promo tapes before putting it on air. Failure to comply with the above will attract penalties including court action. All promos should be submitted before 12

noon, Monday to Friday. Signed by Rev. Mrs. N.M. Chukwu for Management.”

Just to give you an idea of the atmosphere.

JH: They’ve been trying to do things like this forever, though, and it’s never worked. This isn’t the first time that we’re hearing that there will be no more occultism in video films. Maybe they can control the promos . . .

Tunde Adegbola: Mrs. Odeh has no stake whatever in the industry, and unfortunately it is not backed by enough understanding of the media. She doesn’t understand the concept of resolution and all that, so that if there is violence, then she thinks the film has been violent. She doesn’t consider that this film actually is condemning violence. So violence is violent. If it is “ritual,” “ritual” to her means everything that is not Christian, because there are quite a number of Christian rituals in *Agogo* which they didn’t question. But the main ritual she questioned was the native chief that took some sacrifices to some grove and yet still got punished; the moral of the story being that nothing will save you if you offend the people. She can’t see all that.

TK: And then in her own awards, Mike Bamiloye won an award. Mike Bamiloye, have you heard of him?

JH: Yes, Mount Zion, he makes Christian videos.

TK: Mount Zion won one of her own awards.

TA: Now see that the notice that was written by a Rev. Mrs. Somebody on behalf of the Management. It tells you the kind of biases. I took her up on this publicly . . .

JH: So I heard . . .

TA: It was clear that it was a sore point, because she reacted to it so badly that you knew that it was something she wasn’t going to allow to go unnoticed.

TK: I’m sure Mrs. Odeh would be perplexed at our own reaction. Maybe she misinterpreted her role in the industry. Since we have a born-again president, she probably expects Nigerians need to be converts. This perhaps is her mission.

JH: It seems she hasn’t seen the film or she really doesn’t know how to watch them. And for somebody who wants to clean up the Nigerian film industry, to start with you! [Laughter.]

TK: I saw her on television and I left my room in disgust because she took it so personally that she has scored herself highly for her imagined battle with the top producers. That to her is a great achievement, because she thinks that if she can take on the top producers, the small fry will fall in line.

Note: Mrs. Odeh was replaced as Director-General of the Nigerian National Film and Video Censors Board in 2005.