

YORUBA FILM INDUSTRY AND TRADITIONAL THEATRE: A RETROSPECTIVE OVERVIEW

By

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Abstract

Although the golden age of Yoruba folk opera, Yoruba travelling theatre and Yoruba theatre is over, but their contribution to the development of film genre in Nigeria remains historical. Although some documents hold it that the rise of contemporary Nollywood Film Industry points to Kenneth Nebue's Living in Bondage (1992), history has it that the Yoruba Travelling Theatre deserves the accolades for the rise of Nigerian Film Industry. Consequently, the paper argues for the recognition of the status of the Yoruba travelling theatre as the cradle of what is now Nollywood films. It undisputable that Kenneth Nebue's Living in Bondage brought the industry to limelight, nevertheless, The Yoruba popular theatre practitioners are catalyst for the rising video film production in Nigeria. The paper explores their contribution via their rich tradition of touring plays (mobile theatre), especially those of Pioneer Ogunde's Aiye (1979), Jajesinmi (1980) and TaxiDriver (1982). Ironically, none of these films has been given national recognition.

Keywords: Retrospect, traditional theatre, Yoruba film, Nollywood.

Introduction

Looking at the film culture in Nigeria today, one needs to reiterate the importance of film as a means of mass communication in order to underscore its usefulness in society. This equally makes it an important vehicle for national development and for promoting international understanding. There is more to benefit from the local production of full-length films and (not video films) which can enjoy the same recognition as those from other nations at international exhibitions such as the annual Cannes Film Festival.

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What normally befalls a country that makes no effort towards encouraging local production of full-length films is that there will be an influx of foreign films whose circulation will no doubt serve as a threat to the cultural values of that country. Film in Nigeria has come a long way. It started with the colonial film unit (the body responsible for film matters during the pre-independence period) which was in charge of distribution of films in the country. These films, often produced in the United States and Britain, were distributed to the regional government. They were usually re-edited to achieve the desired propaganda results.

In 1945, according to Shehu (1992), the distribution policy changed to production of films within the country. This was because the production of films in the colony, it was realized, would have more manifest propaganda advantages. However, since the produced films were mainly for propaganda, this meant that the authorities at that time were not interested in film as an entertainment medium or an essential element of national development. To cap it all, the films made by the colonial film unit never attracted wide Nigerian film audience as a result of the fact that the populace could not really identify with them since they were not culturally relevant.

However, moving away from the past trend, the content of the post-independence films basically revolves around two themes, i.e. culture and history. These two approaches were stoically embraced by film makers with the intent of popularizing the films among the populace and to depart from the past style of the colonial film unit.

The cultural approach to film making has been based on thematising and emphasizing the socio cultural issues and problems of society. Film-makers working within these traditions have criticized the negative influence of foreign values, particularly external cultural domination, by highlighting the strength of indigenous culture. The heroes are usually those that represent Nigerian culture and the approach is based on the use of melodrama, satire and comedy; songs, dances, and popular theatre (Mgbejume, 1989).

When one looks at the story lines and costumes of the films, they reflect the cultural values of the country; such films like those of Moses Olaiya and Ade Afolayan are typical examples of films in this category. One peculiar thing about these films is the showcasing of the ills of society. This style is borrowed from the popular stage display of the past years. Buttressing this fact, Ekwuazi (1991) agreed that the problems arise from the fact that the film-makers are not steeped in the art of film making and what

they do are usually a carry-over from the popular stage. Thus, the plot, techniques and characters are those of the popular theatre and not film.

Theatre: Yoruba Folk Theatre

Centred in western Nigeria, the Yoruba folk theatre has its origins in alarinjo (travelling dance troop). Alarinjo first emerged from the dramatic roots of the egungun masquerades, which honoured the ancestors, and initially all participants came from the same patrilineage. But when Ologin Ologbojo, the head of the court entertainment during the reign of Alaafin Ogbolu, died, the kingship was given to Esa-Ogbin, a material relation. Esa-Ogbin is generally credited with the professionalization of masquerades. Although Ologbojo only performed for Alaafin and his royal guests by flattering and amusing them, Esa-gbin took the theater. These performances continue to entertain Yoruba communities.

The acting troupes move from one town to another; they have historically often been exposed to dangerous situations. As a result of this, they relied heavily on the egungun associated for protection. In some villages, members of the troupes are regarded as lazy rogues and vagabonds. Nevertheless, they are usually well received when they arrive for their performance.

On certain occasions, the troupe may be invited by the Oba's (traditional rulers). The audience is usually limited to the Oba's royal guests and the nobles in the village. The troupe may also be invited by Alagbaa, the head of the Egungun association in the town. However, it may also go to a village to perform without actually being invited. Either way, the troupe must first go to the house of the Alagbaa to pay homage and gain permission to perform. Without this important step, the troupe will not be allowed to perform in the community. Usually, the performance venue is the market square or the front yard to the Alagaa's house. The role of the Alagbaa is crucial before, during, and after the troupes' performance. All necessary groundwork and preparations prior to the arrival of the troupe should be done by the Alagbaa. When the troupe arrives, the Alagbaa also accompanies the troupe while they dance around the village to publicize their arrival and to announce the venue of the performance.

The venue is an open ground and not an elevated or raised platform, and it is encircled by the audience. The space within the circle depend on the type of dance or dramatic sketch the troupe is performing and on how orderly the audience is. Therefore, the circle formed by the audience can

sometimes contract or expend. No entrance fee is charged because it is a sort of open show. However, a good performance is rewarded by the appreciative audience with money and gifts, such as new cloth and even new wives.

The presentation of the drama can be divided into three parts. The opening comprises tune of the troupe which pays homage to Olodumare (almighty god), homage to Esa Ogbin (the founding father of the Egungun association as a professional entertainment guild), and homage to the other pioneers of the profession. The opening must also include the introduction of the leader of the troupe, who is usually the lead guitarist/vocalist. This introduction usually includes a list of activities and attributes which portray him as a hero and great performer. Lastly, the opening must include greetings and the welcoming of important members of the audience to the show.

After the opening is the actual performance, which usually comprises different types of acrobatic dances, dramatic sketches, and at times magical displays. The closing is the grand finale, which comprises the farewell songs, an expression of gratitude to the patrons, not only for the money and the gifts but also for patiently staying until the end of the performances. In certain situations, the drama sketches may be a social or political satire, which may be too critical or controversial, and thus displease the ruler. The traditional ruler in such a situation may order the performance to be brought to an abrupt end and order the troupe out of his domain.

The first Yoruba professional theatre group was that of Hubert Ogunde, formed in 1946. The name of the group at its formation was the Africa music and research party. Among his earlier plays are *Tiger's empire*, *Darkness and Light*, and *Mr. Devil's money*. Ogunde, former police constable, was born in 1916 at Ososa Ogun state of Nigeria. He gradually shifted the focus of his plays from biblical themes to politics. The shift is explained by the fact that this period following World War II was marked by the political independence throughout Africa. Ogunde's plays were his contribution to the struggle against colonialism. Ogunde's plays with political themes include *Strikes and Hunger* (1950) *Towards Liberty* (1947), *Worse than Crime*, and *Bread and Bullet* (1950).

For a long time, Ogunde dominated not only the Yoruba theatrical scene, but that of all of Nigeria. His audience grew to include various ethnic groups of Nigeria. The reason for this is in part due to the fact that he performed most of his plays at this time both in Yoruba and English. Because

of the popularity of these plays and their impact on the public, the colonial administration attempted to suppress Ogunde's work. *Strike and Hunger* and *Bread and Bullet* were both banned at various times, and Ogunde was fined.

Even after Nigeria gained independence, Ogunde's plays continued to focus on political themes. His monumental play *Yoruba ronu* is a clarion call for unity among the Yorubas in the face of divisive external forces. The play was not well received by the government; it was banned and Ogunde was barred from anywhere in the region. Ogunde's popularity continued to rise. The ban on Ogunde was lifted by the military government in 1966. In 1967, Ogunde's theatre represented Nigeria in EXPO, 67 in Montreal, Canada after which the group undertook a much acclaimed tour of the United States. In the 1970s, Ogunde decided to try filmmaking. His first movie was a monumental success; it was not only shown throughout West Africa, but in many European cities. This film, *Aiye*, was followed by *Jaiyesimi*, *Aropin ni tenia*, and *Ayanmo*. Ogunde is generally regarded as the "Father of Nigerian Theatre."

Another towering figure in Yoruba theatre is Akin Ogungbe. Most of the second generation of Yoruba theatre practitioners were trained by Akin Ogungbe, including Isola Ogunsola, Jimoh Aliu, and Baba Ijesa. Kola Ogunmola is another important artist of the Yoruba theatre. Very popular among the people, his most famous play is *Omuti*, which is based on Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard* which was loosely based, in turn, on Yoruba folktales. Notable Yoruba theatre practitioners trained by Ogunmola include Ray Ejiwumi and Fabusola.

As Ogunmola's popularity continued to grow, a great tragedy struck. He became paralyzed on stage during one of his performances. For years, his theatre group was dormant because he was being carried from one healing home to another in search of cure. In 1972, the news of his recovery was received enthusiastically by all theatre lovers. In a short time, Ogunmola staged a comeback. He was again on the road, taking his theatre from one city to another. In all the cities where he performed, the halls were always packed full; but at the height of his popularity, his death was suddenly announced. It was believed in many quarters that he worked too hard too soon after his recovery.

Another aspect of Yoruba folk theatre is comedy. In this regard, Moses Olaiya, a.k.a Baba Sala, is a pioneering Yoruba theatre comedian. His Alawada group became so popular that any of the theatre groups which formed in the early and mid-1970s followed the pattern of Moses Olaiya's

Alawada group. The high degree of literacy among the Yoruba, particularly the Yoruba language, has contributed to the popularity of make, a Yoruba "photo play" magazine which was introduced in the 1970s by West African Publishing Company, which also publishes Spear and Drum magazines. Yoruba theatre practitioners were selected every month for performance of their play, during which all the scenes in the play were recorded in photographs and every character's utterances were transcribed. The "photo play" magazine became a great commercial success.

Another important factor that has contributed to the growth of Yoruba folk theatre is the role of Western Nigerian Television, Ibadan, which happened to be the first television station in Africa. Theatrical productions were often shown in prime time slots. The television stations also embarked on a programme of talent hunts, whereby many new talents were discovered. Also, the television station commissions theatre groups to produce special plays for the station's yearly anniversary, which lasts an entire month every October. Drama presentations usually constitute about 60 percent of the anniversary's programs.

However, radical changes are taking place in the production of Yoruba folk theatre. These changes are being brought about by the effects of a profound media transformation. With the advent of cinematography and video production of most plays, most theatre groups are disintegrating. Most artists now see themselves as individual stars and no longer as members of a particular theatre group. They are free to star in or feature in any movie or video production of any play. Live stage performances of drama are growing rarer. Instead, Yoruba movies are shown, and videotapes of drama productions can either be bought at video stores or rented at video clubs which can be found in every corner of most Nigerian cities. Most of the producers of these movies and video plays find active financial support from businesses, which consider movie and video plays another valuable medium for advertising.

The Development of Theme in Yoruba Films

Theme and its development in indigenous Yoruba films could be traced to the traditional theatre genre which has its root in the various institutionalised festivals and ceremonies of the local communities. The origin of these festivals and ceremonies can be traced to the period of our fore-fathers and spanning many decades ago. Thus, the themes being used in *the* indigenous Yoruba films at present came from the stage plays

(traditional theatre) performed by the notable theatre practitioners of the sixties and seventies.

The Yoruba traditional theatre from where the film generated its theme contents can be found in the Alarinjo Theatre (travelling masque dramaturgies). The history of the Alarinjo can be traced to the 'Old Oyo' where the king made use of masque dramaturgies in entertaining his guests at the palace. This was a courtly form of entertainment characterized by songs, dances, lavish costumes and extraordinary spectacles. The masque later grew out of the palace entertainment form and eventually extended, to the people (Lawal₃1987).

People's desire for entertainment is being satisfied by the films which took after the stage plays as a way of filling the vacuum. People easily adjusted to this new mode of entertainment because their plots and themes were plays of that period.

Yoruba Theatre and Film

As early as 1900, different plays were acted on stage, the themes of these plays were drawn from the Bible so as to satisfy the interest of the churches then. An illustration of this was given by Ogunbiyi, (1980) thus:

In 1902, under the joint sponsorship of the Bethel African Church and St Jude's Church Ebute-Metta, a play written by D.A. Oloyede, 'King Elejigbo and Princess Abeje of Kontagora' was performed by the Egbe If'e at the Bethel African Church school-room.

The theatre at this period was not popular, and it was not surprising that it did not last long. Its extinction came about when the support of the elite class which it catered for was no longer forthcoming. This was the situation until two decades later, when popular theatre emerged through the arrival of Ogunde on the scene in 1944, Ogunde was to dictate the fate of Yoruba theatre for many years.

The undying influence of the Alarinjo theatre is visible in the operational and organizational pattern of the practitioners of the contemporary travelling theatre. Ogunde's theatre was the first to turn professional. The nature and purpose of the Ogunde theatre strikingly relate to that of the Alarinjo. The concept of theatre must reflect the reality of its

society; this was the basic aim of Ogunde's theatre and his plays retold the tragedy, the hopes, dreams and triumphs of his time.

The long tradition of influences started from Ogunde and passed on to other artistes that emerged after him. These include Kola Ogunmola, Duro Ladipo, Moses Olaiya, Ade Folayan, Lere Paimo and a host of others. Ogunde theatre had been established among the people, and they were influenced through the contract they had with the troupe. Their arrival on the scene introduced more vigorous efforts being put into the practice of the theatre in order to have great effect on the generality of the theatre audience. The two plays that created effects and had impact on the pattern of the theatre which Ogunde introduced were *Lanke Omutuand Oba Koso* produced by Kola Ogunmola and Duro Ladipo respectively. These two plays and others that followed had a great impact on the audience.

Other theatre groups that came after the first three included the comic theatre of Moses Olaiya (Baba Sala), Lere Paimo and Ade Afolayan. Moses Olaiya's theatre presentation and format were different from others because of the comic and humorous mode of its plays. This theatre was a clear departure from the folkloric and historic style which others vigorously adapted to. It however had popular audience, in the sense that it tended to make a change in the audience taste, that is, the audience was introduced to a different form of theatre. It was a new dimension in popular theatrical production in Nigeria.

The arrival of Moses Olaiya and other theatre troupes generated a healthy competition among these troupes which brought out the best in them, in terms of leadership and performance. This, as a matter of fact, resulted eventually in professionalism of the theatre. It has not only created a proliferation of troupes, but encouraged competition, which in turn, improved the theatrical art and performance.

Each troupe's contribution towards the upliftment of the theatre in the country has developed and extended into other areas, where their impact is being felt by the public. These areas are in the aspects of T.V. production and cinematography. In the first aspect, plays on T.V. have a great influence on theatre popularity. Through this medium, theatre now gets closer to the people. It can be said that this medium contributed to the growth of theatre in Nigeria, through the exposure given to, both the established and the new theatre troupes. The popularity which these theatre troupes gained was made possible through the T.V. medium. Well noted

among them were Duro Ladipo, Baba Sala, Ishola Ogunshola and, of recent, Jimoh Aliu of the 'Arelu' fame.

The other area which theatre spread to is the cinema. This medium has given coverage to theatre upliftment in this society and, of recent, some of the theatre practitioners have found the cinema as a means of promoting and creating interest in theatre. This is being done through the inclusion of theatrical elements such as music, dance and mime in cinema. Some of the theatre practitioners who went into cinematography and succeeded were late Hubert Ogunde, Baba Sala and Ade Folayan.

The Relevance of Themes to the Nigerian Audience

One important factor that contributed to the success and acceptance of Yoruba films was the presence of the audience. The audience was important in the presentation of the films; without them the actions and the displays would be meaningless, the audience was part of the actions, either directly or indirectly. This is in the sense that the traditional norms that were adapted in the films must go down well with the film audience whenever the films were being put on screen. The audience needs to agree in unison over the usage of the intricacies and actions in the film in line with the Yoruba tradition and culture.

An example of this can be seen anytime the films of late Ogunde and Moses Olaiya (*Baba Sala*) are being shown on screen. The response from the audience is often with sighs, and gasps as the actions in the film get hold of them, thus making them to be part of the film actions. This is a typical example of Yoruba full length film - in its reality and it cuts across Yoruba films (old and new). The content of Nigerian films, most especially the indigenous language films, depending on their dominant tendencies, can be conveniently grouped into two, i.e. those that thematically emphasize culture and those that bend towards history.

Most importantly, the cultural approach to film-making has been based on thematizing and emphasizing the socio cultural issues and problems of society. The films usually highlight the strength of indigenous culture. The Yoruba films (old and new) have demonstrated this and the audience go back home happy after watching these films with the feeling of satisfaction written all over their faces. The focal point here is that the audience can identify with the contents or themes of the films they have watched. The heroes are usually those that represent the Nigerian culture.

The approach is based on the use of melodrama, satire and comedy. Songs, dances and popular theatre are equally freely used (Mgbejume: 1989).

Folklore and Traditional Themes in Ogunde's Films

The success of *Aja-Ogun* and *Ija Ominira*, two films produced and directed by Ola Balogun in 1976 and 1977 respectively, made Chief Hubert Ogunde to decide to join the Nigerian film industry with a production outfit known as: Ogunde Films. His first film, *Aiye*, pioneered the entrance of other Yoruba full length-films in the country. The film changed the face of entertainment in the western part of the country as far as theatre or stage play activities are concerned. The theme in Ogunde's films basically focuses on folklore and traditional myths. These two themes were well researched on, to bring out the true-to-life position of scenes and events. The actions in the films were so close to the audience, to the extent that they believed every action in the films.

The traditional belief of the people came to life through the actions in the films and audience participation directly or indirectly could easily be felt. According to Francoise Balogun (1987), Chief Ogunde chose *Aiye*, which, as a stage play, attracted crowds at each performance. The traditional and cultural element in *Aiye* was also decisive and rightly so, for the release of the film brought an unprecedented crowd to the National Theatre venue where the film was shown. Film director, Ola Balogun, adapted the play for the screen in such a way that it was possible to envisage a sequel to *Aiye* which eventually came out in 1981 under the title of *Jaiyesinmi*.

Aropin N'Tenia, Ogunde's third film, was also adapted from his 1964 stage play which was equally popular. It is the story of a king to whom it is revealed that his successor is going to be his younger wife's son. The co-wives, who are jealous, try to kill the child but he miraculously survives. Ogunde's films really brought out the traditional and cultural elements of the Yorubas into the fore and the audience had more than enough to satisfy their thirst for good and entertaining movies.

Satiric and Comic Theme in Olaiya's Films

The character of Moses Olaiya Adejumo (*Baba Sala*) as an actor and as Nigeria's number one comedian can never be in dispute. He is as popular with the illiterate Yoruba audience as he is with the elite who admire and adore him for his role in both stage and film productions. He commands the respect and following of a cross-section of the Yorubas and even with the

non-Yoruba audience who understand such films through the movements and gestures of the actors.

Baba Sala started his film production in 1981 with *Orun Mooru* which was released on the screen with amazing publicity. It was billed as the longest and the most expensive film produced in the country. In *Orun Mooru*, also directed by Ola Balogun, Baba Sala, the hero of the film, is comfortable in his business, but he exhibits greed and selfishness which led him into the hands of tricksters and dupes. Adisa, his bosom friend later gives him money to soften the effect of his loss. Instead of using the money to improve his financial situation, he uses it to declare free drinks for his friends at his regular palm-wine bar and also on the masquerades in the city, an action which led to his being robbed. At the end Baba Sala realizes that money is not everything. He fails to learn from his past mistakes that greed can lead to downfall. The film shows how social ills like greed, robbery and extortion have affected the lives of many people. Also, it tries to express in the film, that hard work and contentment are important factors in life.

In *Aare Agbaiye*, Moses Olaiya criticizes the corruption in the judiciary. He also criticizes highly placed personalities who use their position to oppress the less fortunate ones under them. Baba Sala, the hero, as a king, sees his position as an opportunity to exploit his subjects. Even before he became a king, *Baba Sala* was very already deeply involved in taking bribes as a messenger in an office. When he eventually became king, he now collected bribes openly from his subjects and anybody who had a case pending in his court and did not offer him bribe was jailed. In the end, Baba Sala's greed and love of power led him to seek for more power so that he can deal ruthlessly with his subjects who now want his deposition. In this conversation his greed was finally exposed.

Through *Aare Agbaiye*, Moses Olaiya is trying to show the corrupt side of judges in our society. Of course it is an open secret that majority of the influential people in positions of trust openly indulge in this shameful practice. However, one sees Moses Olaiya's works aesthetically as a deliberate attempt to create a distinctive dramatic style. He himself has this to say of his films:

Our films are satires, so that people can learn from them and people can mend their ways by correcting their mistakes. Plays and films should be for educational purpose and not entertainment alone, because we learn

from them. If they are only for entertainment, then it means it's just for fun (9).

This statement gives the notion that, as a comic actor, Moses Olaiya is not only concerned with entertaining his audience but also in educating them by exploring the ills of society in his films through ridicules and satires.

List of Some Yoruba Full-Length Films and their Producers

Film	Producer
<i>Ajani Ogun</i>	<i>Ola Balogun</i>
<i>Aiye</i>	<i>Hubert Ogunde</i>
<i>Orun Mooru</i>	<i>Moses Olaiya</i>
<i>Mosebolatan</i>	<i>Moses Olaiya</i>
<i>Aare Agbaiye</i>	<i>Moses Olaiya</i>
<i>Taxi Driver</i>	<i>Ade Afolayan</i>
<i>Sango</i>	<i>Tunde Kelani</i>

Conclusion

The production of Yoruba full-length films was the vogue in the late 70s and early 80s. That was the period theatre practitioners moved away from staging plays in the theatres and embraced the culture of film production (not video). The metamorphosis from stage to celluloid was very easy for the practitioners because virtually all the paraphernalia being used for stage shows were also handy for film production.

Film contents and action in terms of theme, style, characterization and costumes were not all that different from those of the stage. The only notable difference was in style and this aspect was widely used to bring out the beauty of the local environment where the films were shot.

Animation was constructively made use of purposefully, though with variation according to the need of each film and as found necessary by the producers. The distribution of Yoruba full-length films was able to satisfy the recreational yearnings of the people at the time. Members of the viewing public found it necessary and as a form of leisure to visit cinemas and have a piece of the action.

However, there has been a dearth of full-length films produced by Nigerians over the years as a result of the unstable economy which hitherto led to the fall in the per capital income of the people. This situation has been

unfavourable for large investments as in film-making which relies heavily on the people for its returns. Another factor for the dearth is copy-wright infringement which has bedevilled the country's entertainment industry.

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