PRACTISING ‘DEMOCRACY’ IN NIGERIAN FILMS

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ABSTRACT
This article discusses the response of ‘Nollywood’ to the transformation of Nigeria’s social structure through the economic and political regimes of global neo-liberalism and Nigeria’s military rule, and the aesthetic possibilities enabled by video and digital technologies. Approaching Nollywood as a new cinematic form which results from the collapse of the middle classes due to radical economic reforms, the article looks at two films, *Akobi Gomina* (‘The Governor’s Heir’, 2002) and *Agogo Eewo* (‘The Sacred Gong’, 2002) to demonstrate the implications of this phenomenon in the changing socio-political structure crystallized with the advent of the Fourth Republic in 1999. In these works of explicit and oblique political commentary, which present us with intimations of the genre of ‘democracy films’, the idea of a public receptive to mutually recognized cultural or personal symbols is used to develop new aesthetic modes in films. But these film-making practices also circumscribe the possibilities of an ideologically progressive cinematic practice. Thus, a form originating partly from an economic context appears caught in an aesthetic impasse, but the article suggests that the tendency in Nollywood toward generic proliferation might represent one path out of the impasse.

EARLY CRITIQUES OF THE VIDEO-BASED CINEMATIC PRACTICE IN Anglophone West Africa, at various times dubbed ‘video dramas’, ‘home videos’ and ‘video films’, stressed the form’s apolitical tendencies. Indeed, the uncertainty surrounding nomenclature was (and largely remains) a sign of scholars’ assumption of an aesthetic incongruity in the new cinema, especially when compared to the better-known films of Francophone West Africa.¹ This latter category fused a political agenda (as an anti-imperialist

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critique or a concern with Pan-African cultural identity) with the technology of chemical-based celluloid in such an aesthetically satisfying manner that the issue of social relevance of a cinematic work was considered moot. It was as if the video films, which, by contrast, arose out of economic necessity, could only be properly appreciated as the infancy of African cinema. As Nwachukwu Ukadike put it,

video-films’ popularity and ‘populist’ leanings stem from contradictions and tensions within the definition of African cinema. This is so because these videos are grounded in an unapologetic commercial culture and seem quite indifferent to the social responsibility agenda of contemporary African cinema.²

In recent criticisms, however, a more complex understanding of the political has begun to appear, especially in the films coming out of Nigeria.³ A succinct formulation of this shift addresses the need 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 interested in addressing political issues, which it is much safer to do since the end of military rule in 1999.⁴

This article takes up the latter part of this statement, the thematic interests with politics in video films after 1999, to discuss the emergence of films concerned with democratic governance. The purpose is to relate the rise of Nollywood to two historical processes: the transformation of a social structure through the twin undemocratic regimes of global neo-liberalism and military rule in Nigeria, and the aesthetic possibilities in video and digital technologies. The emergence of Nollywood is emblematic of serious structural transformations in Nigeria, and indicates new standards both within the form of cinema and in the social structure. This change is very complex indeed. While the earlier attacks on the films’ lack of ideological awareness have subsided, the emergence of some self-consciously political directors is matched by the presence of the figure of the actor whose orientation reflects the fragmentation of social and political choices during and after the military era.⁵

5. The importance of the economic policy, the structural adjustment programme (SAP), which gave rise to the cinema cannot be exaggerated, but as the discussion in the next section shows, SAP is part of a broad programme of socio-political mobilization during the military era. For a well-considered discussion of structural adjustment, see Beatrice Hibou, ‘The “social capital” of the state as an agent of deception, or: the ruses of economic intelligence’ in Jean-Francois Bayart, Beatrice Hibou, and Stephen Ellis (eds), The Criminalization of the State in Africa (Indiana University Press and James Currey, Bloomington, IN and London, 1999), pp. 69–113.
Through the analysis of two films, *Akobi Gomina* (‘The Governor’s Heir’), I and II⁶ and *Agogo Eewo* (‘The Sacred Gong’),⁷ this article shows the connections between the production contexts of Nollywood and the kinds of ‘politics’ possible within the form, especially as these pertain to the flexibility both of video technology and of populism as an ideological system. The article argues that the possibility of political critique, whether explicit or oblique, reflects an important feature of Nollywood – the proliferation of themes or forms. In addition to the two films discussed here, a few others like *Makan* (‘The Untouchable’),⁸ *Alaga Kansu* (‘The Council Chairman’),⁹ *Mr President*,¹⁰ *Her Excellency*,¹¹ the two-part *Stubborn Grasshopper*,¹² *Omasiri*,¹³ and *Ekun Oko Oke*¹⁴ also reveal a commonality of themes and a similarity of treatment which suggest a shared cultural orientation. The films’ conception of democracy reflects a concern with good governance and ethical conduct in civil matters that cuts across ethnic and other cultural boundaries. For example, *Mr President*, a film which makes much comic mileage out of the governing idiosyncrasies of President Olusegun Obasanjo (1999–2007) is filmed using props and locations identifiable with the official quarters of Governor Gbenga Daniel of Ogun State (first term, 2003–7). Kareem Adepoju dedicates his film, *Ekun Oko Oke* (‘The Indomitable Tiger’), an allegorical tale about a wicked king and a principled activist who opposes him with matching resoluteness, to pro-democracy activist Abraham Adesanya, who appears in a documentary preface with images of his car riddled with gunshots fired by agents of the military regime. *Saworoide* (‘Brass Bells’),¹⁵ Kelani’s political thriller to which *Agogo Eewo* is a sequel, premiered as the command performance during the inauguration of Governor Bola Tinubu of Lagos (1999–2007). Thus,
Akobi Gomina and Agogo Eewo are exemplars of this new genre, ‘democracy films’, underlining the relationship between the transformation of Nigeria’s socio-political structure and the emergence of the video film as a public form. Though both films are concerned with democracy or governance, they differ quite significantly in the ways they approach the topic, and the parallel approaches cannot be understood without an awareness of the intersections of the structural transformations in the Nigerian polity with the individual fortunes of its citizens, economic and otherwise.

There are several differences between the two films. Akobi Gomina deals with ‘democratic’ politics more explicitly, while Agogo Eewo adopts an allegorical approach to the question of political legitimacy; Agogo Eewo is more self-consciously cinematic, while Akobi Gomina follows the conventional mode of television drama; the plot of Agogo Eewo is tight, perhaps a result of its being a sequel to Saworoide, whereas Akobi Gomina sprawls into the two-part drama so ubiquitous in Nollywood. These differences appear to mirror the distance between a film predicated on the presence of a number of star actors and one with the script sourced by a director who doubles as producer in his television production company. In fact, as will be shown below, the explicit focus on party politics in Akobi Gomina does not lead to a sophisticated ideological critique, and one has to look for that in Kelani’s film, which deploys Yoruba traditions in addressing issues of legitimacy and institutional checks on corruption. Kelani’s approximation of the auteur is thus an exception in democracy films, and may explain why the international film festival circuit is more receptive to his works than to the average Nollywood film. But the relationship between the two tendencies are more complex than can be deduced from straightforward thematic analyses, and one reason for this institutional affinity is that proliferation is integral to the video films. This means that these films develop new ideas from the success of a previous work in such a way that the resulting relationship becomes a feature of the form. The proliferative character of the films represents their potential for dealing with the incomplete break with the auteur mode, which is characteristic of dominant African film making. In order to show the contours of these related changes, the article conceptualizes the relationship in two ways: the ‘state of emergency’ embodied in the undemocratic

16. Concerning typologies, the genres discussed here may appear too condensed, but this is a function of the article’s focus. Haynes notes the routine exclusion of Hausa-language films produced in northern Nigeria, and even his own suggestive categories of the political (traditional rulership, crime thrillers, and melodramas) do not include those relating to Pentecostalism and other representations of the parapolitical system arising out of the contradictions of the nation state. Haynes, ‘Political critique’.
17. During a panel presentation at the annual conference of the African Literature Association in Macomb, Illinois, in April 2008, Kelani in a somewhat jovial manner denied that he made ‘Nollywood films’, perhaps as a way of underlining his unique style in comparison to most other directors.
formations out of which the form grew, and the aesthetic practices carried over from the actors’ theatre.

States of emergency

Some kind of democracy has been in place in Nigeria since May 1999, after fifteen years of military regimes. Three times in a row (1999, 2003, and 2007), and for the first time since independence, the country conducted elections into all public offices, although the 2007 general elections were more than controversial, and even the President only retained his seat following a narrow judicial victory at the highest court in September 2008. The questionable character of the elections is an indication of the attitude of the population not just to power, but to social conduct in general. In this essay’s understanding of democratic governance (as ‘practised’ and critiqued in Nollywood), such an attitude can be historicized within the frame of economic, social, and political policies embarked upon during the military era – the large-scale, wide-ranging, but in practice incomplete transformation of Nigeria in the age of neo-liberal capitalism. An analysis of this process of political mobilization is provided by the political scientist Adigun Agbaje, who writes of it as one designed ‘to bring about commensurate changes in the values, beliefs, attitudes, and norms of the people’. The process coincided with the period of the reconfiguration of the three aesthetic and institutional precursors to Nollywood: the Nigerian cinema of the celluloid format, the Yoruba travelling theatre, and television drama of the soap opera genre. In Agbaje’s characterization, the Babangida regime’s programme of social mobilization amounts to nothing short of a thoroughgoing social revolution, but that social mobilization was achieved by default. What happened was the ‘greater sensitization of the masses to the need to influence those in [power] and to react, violently if necessary, to what was perceived as bad policy’. Although Agbaje’s account suggests that the experiment ultimately failed, certain fundamental changes in society, either specifically originated under the regime or carried over from other post-independence attempts at social mobilization, remain salient. The changes are cultural, in the sense that they manifest themselves as processes

18. For a comprehensive reflection on the era of military rule, especially on the transition to democracy embarked upon by the Babangida regime, see Larry Diamond, Anthony Kirk-Greene, and Oyeleye Oyediran (eds), Transition Without End: Nigerian politics and civil society under Babangida (Vantage Publisher, Ibadan, 1997).
20. Ibid., p. 158.
21. Ibid., p. 163.
22. Agbaje’s list includes programmes such as the National Youth Service Corps (1973), the Ethical Revolution (1982), and the War Against Indiscipline (1984).
that are definitive of social conduct, even if by default. From the mid-1980s through the third general elections of 2007 and beyond, a culture of impunity has become a way of life in Nigeria, characterized by the proscription of unions and newspapers, detentions without trial, summary dismissals of public officials, and other extra-judicial acts of repression. Whether the government in power is military or civilian, a fiat-based ‘military mentality’ remains the order of the day. Nigerians are noted for their sheer drive and inventiveness. Indeed, this knows no bounds – a world-famous criminal practice of obtainment by false pretence, locally named ‘419’ (after the section of the Penal Code dealing with the crime), originated in Nigeria. Advance fee frauds may have become globalized, but ‘Nigerian scam’ has come to have the proverbial resonance of a phrase like Dutch courage or Parthian shot!23

The programme of structural adjustments in the economic realm also introduced pervasive changes in the social realm. Decisions motivated by the depredations of global neo-liberalism were presented in the country as innovative reforms under the Babangida regime, and they informed everyday choices of different sectors and groups. Nigerians became familiar with expressions like ‘homegrown economics’ and ‘newbreed politics’. The official justification for structural adjustment was that such an economic arrangement would foster industriousness and discourage the kind of wanton dependency that the oil-boom years had occasioned. Prior to this period, small-scale commercial enterprises had always been crucial as an urban formation. Under SAP, however, they became doubly so: the sale of ‘Pure Water’ in the streets, the use of motorbikes as a mode of public transport, and the emergence of Nigerian equivalents of American fast-food chains are some of the more conspicuous examples of this formation.24 Both political and economic reforms have resulted in the fragmentation of the social structure; SAP activated far-reaching structural readjustment of the society, fostering a total collapse or reconfiguration of standards, including those envisaged, during the earlier era of modernization theory, to integrate the economy within the global circuit. The emergence of Nollywood is a consequence of this process.

Yet there is more to the Nollywood phenomenon, and two developments that complement the economic situation are worth specifying here. The first is the fortuitous occasion of global technological changes that will appear less fortuitous when seen in relation to neo-liberal economic development.

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24. Kate Meagher’s work on informal institutions and development is relevant in this case. See, most recently, ‘Introduction’ in the special issue of Afrika Spectrum 42, 3 (2007), pp. 405–18.
The other is the state of film making and general cultural production in Nigeria in the mid-1980s. Benedict Anderson has written that under neo-liberal capitalism, an enormous process of disintegration, which is also a process of liberation, the world has become ever more tightly integrated into a single capitalist economy – one in which, in our epoch, billions of dollars can be sped almost instantaneously around the globe at the pressing of a computer key.25

The structural adjustment programmes spelt disintegration for many in the developing world, and reinforced unequal geographical development. But the neo-liberal system has unfolded in the context of technological revolutions that have multiplied aesthetic possibilities in cinema, either in video or digital formats. This is liberating; these technological changes present film makers with opportunities relating to the affordability, portability and accessibility of technology, beyond the conditions under which the celluloid films developed in the Fordist era. Not only in Nigeria but also in different parts of the continent, this dimension of technological change has had a significant impact on film making. It enables the emergence of a new generation of directors who, while remaining committed to the social responsiveness of the cinematic art, are also breaking with the kind of ideological orientation identified with the Third Cinema.26 The sentiment expressed in this regard by Kelani, the Nigerian film maker whose work is discussed here, is telling: ‘Africans should be enabled and empowered to tell the African story from African points of view, taking advantage of the democratization of production technologies to achieve this aim.’27

In the context of Nigeria, celluloid film making was in the doldrums in the latter half of the 1980s. The main reason, of course, was economic. Well-known film makers like Francis Oladele, Ola Balogun, Eddie Ugborah, and Bayo Aderounmu found it difficult to fund new films. In cases when they managed to complete a project, the costs of post-production, which could only be done abroad, were prohibitive.28 Even if the film makers could hope to market these works to local television stations for broadcast, the other effect of SAP – the commercialization of public corporations – had forced most of the television producers out of the official television station, the...
Nigerian Television Authority. The logic of economic deregulation in this process led to the establishment of private broadcasting companies (mainly radio and television). Nollywood films developed out of this conjunction of factors: institutionally as the rediscovery of Nigerian cinema that had begun to lose steam as SAP ate into the economic fabric and new technologies became more affordable, and aesthetically as the amalgam of the Yoruba travelling theatre practice (vibrant from the 1940s to the 1980s), television drama, soap operas from North and South America, popular magazine strips, musical videos, and Hindi films.

Made by artisans and individuals lacking a basic experience of celluloid cinema – the established directors were still too horrified to look at what was going on – the earliest films were very rudimentary in a technical sense. They were strong on acting, however, partly because most producers and actors were professionals from the travelling theatres and the independent producers of television dramas. The breakthrough work of this period, *Living in Bondage* (Parts I and II, 1992), was the first film in the Igbo language, produced and directed by the electronics merchant Kenneth Nnebue. It began life as a script for a film company that had transformed from the travelling theatre mode, but which the director turned down on aesthetic grounds. With the involvement of directors like Kelani (*Ti Oluwa Nile, I–3, Koseegbe*), Amaka Igwe (*Violated, Rattlesnake*), and Tade Ogidan (*Hostages, Owo Blow*), the stigma of mediocrity began to wear off. Yet it was largely through his collaborations with the actors from the old theatre companies that Kelani, trained as a cinematographer, was transformed into a director.

Some of the processes that crystallized as the birth of Nollywood ran concurrently with the social mobilization. But the combination of enterprise and social improvisation arising from the circumscribed context of structural adjustment proved decisive enough to indicate a cultural attitude: the habit of impunity which years of military rule have stitched into the social fabric is sometimes indistinguishable from the popular reaction against unjust policies which Agbaje identifies as the unintended consequence of the social mobilization rhetoric. The so-called indomitability of the Nigerian spirit might sound complimentary as a marker of resilience in the face of unrelenting adversity, but it also often resembles a lack of regard for orderly conduct, in public and private. A cultural form fashioned out of this context cannot but bear marks of its origins. But political critique was missing from the films. For example, Kelani’s work in the early to mid-1990s offered highly entertaining and cinematically sophisticated allegories invested in enshrining responsible social conduct, but he had to wait

29. Directed by Kenneth Nnebue, NEK Video Link, in Igbo and English, with subtitles, approx. 4 hrs, PAL, 1992.

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a little before turning the very genre of allegory inside out, thus opening it to the possibilities of ideological analysis of Nigeria’s power structures. In the aftermath of the transfer of power to civilians in 1999, a genre of films has developed in Nollywood which gives purchase to the democratic values embodied in that change. The handling of political themes in this genre is uneven, reflecting the varied legacy of the cinematic practice itself. Before coming to an extended analysis of two of these films, it is useful to examine the way that Yoruba travelling theatre contributed to this context.

Aesthetics of the actors’ theatre

On the eve of the independence anniversary in 1986, the Association of Nigerian Theatre Practitioners (ANTP) presented a command performance to General Babangida in Lagos. The play was a comedy in which the actor Sunday Omobolanle (known as Aluwe on stage and screen) turned ‘Second-Tier Foreign Exchange Market’, a slogan of the structural adjustment programme, into dramatic material. The complex aesthetic process, while possibly oblivious to the implications of structural adjustment for cultural production in the years to follow, seemed, in the performance, to embody the paradox of a bemused debtor being shaken out of his dignified clothing. That the ANTP would present a comedy as command performance was intriguing in the circumstances, but whatever could be said of the play’s desire for a subversion of official discourse, its performers, collectively and individually (in Aluwe’s ebullient ‘turns’) saw, first and foremost, an opportunity to make the most of a public performance for an unusual audience.

Aluwe’s ability to read signals from everyday life followed the logic of improvisation as a pervasive socio-cultural orientation. The practice of improvisation which crystallized in that performative moment is analogous to the reconfiguration of economic and social activities in the wake of structural adjustments. Not only did these modes indicate a pragmatic acceptance of the logic of neo-liberalism packaged locally as social orientation, but they were also complemented by a political conservatism of the most profound kind. A critical attitude toward authority, then represented by brutal, thieving military regimes, was largely abandoned by film makers, and radical journalists and activists were left to pick up the gauntlet. With the collapse of the middle classes arising out of the economic situation, there was also a collapse of forms, of which the films of Nollywood are emblematic.

The basis of the improvisation is more than economic. Among the signal characteristics of the travelling theatres were collective improvisation, emphasis on star actors, and a collaborative/competitive approach to production. The scenario goes something like this. The conception of a theatrical
piece proceeds apace with the incorporation of some actors from the point
of view of what has once or repeatedly proved successful to the audience,
and of who goes with whom in a particular scene. The audience is central
to the crystallization of this process. As Barber writes:

Audience recognition – which of course the actors sought and welcomed – thus exerted
a homogenizing influence, promoting the emergence of a kind of flexible composite
identity which operated both onstage and offstage and which could accommodate a
wide variety of roles without losing a certain underlying continuity.31

The result is the notion of the actors’ theatre, in which a performance
develops out of the process of self-exploitation by an actor executing a
‘turn’ (very much like Aluwe’s act) in an improvisatory mode. In this pro-
cess, actors are known by a particular stage/screen name (again, Aluwe is
one example) and are identified, if not with a particular role, then with an
accretion of mannerisms and idiolects that coalesce into a personality.32 This
style developed out of theatre practice, and with the complex transforma-
tion of theatre companies into film production companies in the mid-1980s
practices associated with live theatre were transposed to cinema. It was his
understanding of this transposition that led Ukadike to describe – exorbi-
tantly – the Yoruba-language films of the period as ‘filmed theatre’.33 In
spite of their technical imperfections, the films of the 1980s were more than
filmed theatre. They constituted the ‘golden age’ of Nigerian cinema, and
the careers of directors such as Balogun and (to a lesser degree) Ugbomah,
who worked with the actors, drew much sustenance from the popularity of
the films with audiences.

Following the disbanding – or more accurately, disintegration – of the
theatre troupes under the pressure of economic reality and the ascendancy
of new media in the late 1980s, a different form of organization came to
supplant the theatre/film companies: the ‘caucuses’. The widely accepted
practice whereby members of a troupe participated in the film of another
troupe had begun to restructure the dynamics between a troupe leader
and the company members. This was an industry where, in spite of the
strong sense of collaborative work, individual performance had remained a
factor. A crisis in the ANTP in 1996 precipitated the disintegration; both
occurred within the context of the rise of the star system on the screen.34
The executive, led by the actor-producer Jimoh Aliu, was suspended by an

32. B. Jeyifo, By Popular Demand: The Yoruba travelling theatres of Nigeria (Nigeria Magazine,
Lagos, 1984), p. 22. Out of fidelity to the generative process of creating the situations in which
particular actors dominate, the preference in this essay is for the actors’ screen names, which
may or may not change from film to film, but through which the films are produced, distributed
and consumed, irrespective of the character an actor embodies in a specific film.
33. N. Frank Ukadike, Black African Cinema (University of California Press, Los Angeles
and Berkeley, CA, 1994), p. 149.
34. For an account of this crisis, see Starfilms, 10 September 1996.
Elders’ Council, and Aliu himself was reappointed as sole administrator of the association, in an ironic reproduction of military practice. Thus, ‘military mentality’ met ‘patrimonialism’.

The emergence of caucuses – there are about five in Lagos alone, and a person may belong to more than one – has brought the actors’ working styles closer to the notion of egbe (club), and also made them adaptable to the unpredictable economic atmosphere – the extreme proliferation of skills that intensifies what Barber identified as ‘collective improvisation based on a strong individualism’.

What is fixed as a material basis for acting is often a general idea of a situation, what the actors of the travelling theatre, in their present life in the video film, have termed ‘situational narration’. In other words, even with a fully developed script, a situation is still presented to an actor who, from experience, has dealt with such meagre material before, and she is expected to flesh it out through interaction with other actors in a particular sequence, each turning on a different but related situation, as on an orbit. Indeed, it is in her work, in character, of resisting any directorial attempt to break that habit that her individuality as an actor lies, as Kelani was to discover.

In some cases, an actor may be so successful in expressing such individuality that the director then adopts the dialogue pattern developing out of the process of situational narration. In practice, it makes sense to structure a film in an open-ended manner to necessitate a sequel (hence the ubiquity of the two-part format), or to create a role to be filled later by an actor who is distinguished both as a screen personality and as a factor in the politics of caucusing. With the troupes superseded, an actor found the freedom to take on sundry roles within the industry. This freedom fed a practice of individualism which may be said to liberate actors from the strictures of a dominating leader and deepen an awareness of democratic practices in a social setting. In reality, its occurrence in the context of widespread improvisation as a cultural attitude tied to the patronage of powerful public officials encouraged a conservative political outlook which often assimilated self-advancement to quietism. The mutually reinforcing ideas of individualism and the politics of caucusing thus rely on actors’ reciprocal appearance in films to raise improvisation in films to an aesthetic level.

‘Democracy’ on the screen

Released in the run-up to the general elections of 2003, Akobi Gomina opens with the state legislature in session, to deliberate on the re-election bid of the governor, Idowu. He has as many supporters as detractors, including the house speaker, an evangelist moonlighting as a politician. The

polarization of the legislature quickly introduces a favoured mode of establishing roles in video films in the Yoruba language – the frontal, close-up shots of individual actors, each of whom delivers a short speech. This is related to the procedure of recognition, which personalizes the identification of an actor through a screen name carried over from a previous role. Thus, the three layers of identity (the present role, the accustomed screen name, and the actor’s real name) are subordinated to the more immediate, physical recognition. This procedure of recognition also plays into the marketing of the films because the discrete close-ups of the actors are reproduced on the cover jackets of video cassettes and video compact discs to interpellate the buyer.

The opening sequence is brief, and primarily concerned with the case for and against the governor’s re-election. Not surprisingly, the session ends rowdily as fighting breaks out, legislators throwing chairs and struggling for the control of the mace. Although the film is story-driven, and the pace is slow, the external factors of actors’ caucus and the politics of casting insinuate themselves, and the gradual unfolding of the plot is a simultaneous roll-call of the star actors. This is made even clearer in a subsequent scene, when members of the governor’s ‘inner circle’, led by the deputy governor, hold a caucus meeting to reflect on the implications of the strong opposition to Idowu’s second-term bid. These two sequences are as much about the film’s narrative focus as they are about the dynamics of actors’ real-life caucuses.

The other strand of the plot is the story of Kola, the governor’s heir of the title, and his dissolute life in London. This strand is integrated through cross-cuttings between Nigerian and London scenes, and the novelty value of a London sequence for Nigerian audiences is of the same order as the idea of star recognition motivating the close-ups of the actors in the opening scene. Of the four actors considered crucial to the conception of the film, three are worth discussing in detail to demonstrate the connection between their individual roles and the notion of the actors’ theatre described in the previous section. These are Olofaana, the governor’s political adviser; Alhaja Abatan, the governor’s cantankerous mother-in-law; and Baba Suwe, Abatan’s gate-man. Each of them has strong, individual qualities that are exploited to the fullest within the drama. Collectively they underscore the actors’ theatre mode, but the sum of individual and collective qualities does not deepen the spectator’s understanding of the film’s critique of democratic governance as a political imperative. When plans are afoot to bring Kola home from London and stop his drift toward destitution, his childhood friend, David, visits Kola’s aunt, Abatan. The visit is scuttled when David (son of the house speaker) is detained by Baba Suwe, the gate-man, who begins a complicated and self-serving palaver about David’s father, who has just resigned his position. He accuses all politicians of corruption,
then wonders why a man of God would go into politics in the first place. Then he will not release David until he has been ‘seen’, a euphemism for bribery. These interlocutions may be part of the script, but they cannot exist without Baba Suwe’s presence in the film. Often outrageously costumed (in his characteristic green cardigan over a dashiki, his face painted black), he serves a comic role, and there is a persistent reminder that aspects of Baba Sala (the great comedian and leader of the Alawada Theatre) survive in this actor, down to his screen name. Here, his acting is inspired by a deliberate desire to contradict authority – the police, the doctor, or his employer – through innuendo, double-speak, sarcasm, self-irony, or even plain insult, uttered under his breath. He proceeds through improvisation, responding to statements from other actors, and his responses are replete with slang, lingo, proverbs, and so on. Audiences look out for him; they wait for his moment in a film. His strength lies in set-pieces; in fact, fulfilling part of an elaborate structure of social relations in the world of a film tends to be secondary to how much he luxuriates in a particular ‘turn’. Baba Suwe’s best complement is Moladun, the actress who usually acts as his wife in films, but who now stars as his sister, out to bail him following his detention as the last person to see Kola and David before their disappearance.36

A character with a different kind of orientation is Alhaja Abatan, played by Ayo Mogaji, who began her career on stage, famously playing Troy’s wife in a Nigerian production of August Wilson’s *Fences*. In this film she is the elder sister of the deceased mother of the governor’s son, a cantankerous woman with the constant habit of self-criticism. She has come to the hospital where Kola is recovering from his dissolute life in London, and after praising both David and the doctor, she rises to go. Then she encounters Iyabo, the governor’s young wife who had turned Kola out of the house in London. She changes at once, accusing everyone, including the two gentlemen she has just thanked. Encounters like this (she believes that Iyabo has bewitched her nephew) are distinct because the kind of popular grievance that Baba Suwe projects to David is now personally directed at Governor Idowu, who will stop at nothing to secure his own re-election. But when she encounters Baba Suwe, her gate-man, she is cowed by his truculence, and only when she gets out of the house does she regain her own saucy personality.

These kinds of set-piece can be written into a script, but will be limited by an actor’s almost compulsive need to improvise. What another actor, Olofaana, who acts in this film as Idowu’s political adviser, said about improvisation is instructive: ‘Those scripts do not give the actor the liberty to act freely. He is being gagged with words that are not his and moved about

36. In *Her Excellency*, another ‘democracy film’ released around the same time, Moladun is a ‘feminist’ critic of masculinist/patriarchal politics, reeling off the names of powerful female figures in Nigerian history who were destroyed by their male rivals and ending her list with a satirical song.
like a robot... It is not the best way to help an actor.\textsuperscript{37} And he acts this out in the film. When report of the speaker’s resignation comes to Idowu, we see the adviser and the governor’s chief security officer (CSO) counselling him. The CSO, played by a college graduate with a limited knowledge of Yoruba, makes a proverbial comment, and as happens in a normal conversation, Olofaana\textsuperscript{38} corrects this proverb by repeating it when his turn comes to speak, and then introducing others with contextual appropriateness.

Olofaana’s appearance \textit{and} role in this film are instructive and worth further comment. Among the actors of the Yoruba film sub-sector, the actor (his real name is Deji Aderemi) is known as ‘Adedibu of film production’. He wields such influence in the actors’ caucuses that most actors going on location around the city of Ibadan need his imprimatur. The second alias is in reference to the notorious Ibadan-based political jobber and acknowledged thug, Alhaji Lamidi Adedibu, whose career in the post-military era received great impetus from the patronage of Nigeria’s former president, Obasanjo.\textsuperscript{39} Ironically, Adedibu (who died in June 2008) was one of the politicians banned by General Babangida in 1991 to sanitize the field for ‘newbreed politicians’, the category mirrored in the objection to the gerontocracy of the Elders’ Council during the ANTP crisis. Appropriately, Olofaana plays the governor’s adviser, an unofficial confidant or godfather. This makes him into a sort of stock character in the slew of films produced during the 2002–3 election period. In \textit{Her Excellency}, a character confronts him, in a more sinister version of the same role, with the statement that ‘the idea of godfatherism is a thing of the past’.

This film attempts an explicit critique of governance and makes the intrigues that are characteristic of party politics its narrative template. But these are enabled by rhetorical practices that are more cultural than constitutional, in the sense that the arguments for political responsibility are presented as moral injunctions, rather than as ideological critiques of a system. The scene devoted to an encounter between Alhaja Abatan and the governor, in which she condemns his tenure in the strongest possible terms, could be seen as no more than the rebuke of an errant ward, especially since the basic relationship between them is familial. Moreover, toward the end of the film we realize that the new (female) governor plans to relocate Iyabo to prevent Idowu’s vengefulness, but the film remains silent on the

\textsuperscript{37} Babatunde Onaolapo Taiwo, \textit{Form, Content and Style in Yoruba Videos: Koseegbe, Ayo Ni Mo Fe and Ti Oluwa Ni Ile as case studies} (University of Ibadan, unpublished MA thesis, 1997), p. 25.

\textsuperscript{38} The screen name can be traced back to the actor’s role in a version of Duro Ladipo’s \textit{Oba Koso}, where he played Timi Agbale, alias Olofa-Ina, one of King Sango’s warriors.

financial details of this patronage, which is hardly different from the former governor’s accustomed practice.

Acting is central to all of this. Olofaana may have been cast as a ubiquitous Big Man, but such casting merely complements his special gifts as a performer of accustomed mannerisms. Such a performance does not rely strictly on directorial control or the specificity of a film script; the constant factor in the films dominated by the actors of the old companies is situational narration, the capsular description of a scenario which the actor fleshes out with dramatic meaning. It is this series of situations, then, that are developed, in stages, over a period of time depending on availability of actors or camera or electricity or gasoline for substitute ‘generator’, and constitute the raw film. In better funded films, the process may take less time, and it may be less structured by such a perennial state of emergency. But for the most part, given the limitations of this category of professionals as economic actors, the contingencies of production complement the time-tested practice of improvisation in giving cinematic or dramatic character to their materials.

Kelani, the director of *Agogo Eetoo*, once worked on a scene involving an accomplished actor, Baba Wande (Kareem Adepoju, director of *Ekun Oko Oke*) and Kunle Famoriyo, a teacher of drama at the University of Ibadan. The challenge for the director was to make these two actors with different orientations act together. Baba Wande is a man hoping to file a suit in a paternity dispute, and Famoriyo as a lawyer is expected to discuss his options. Although the film, *Ayo Ni Mo Fe* (II) was scripted, the director and the professor realized that much of the script had to be abandoned to accommodate Baba Wande, who would not be constrained by the script and whose confidence became a challenge to the university professor. Kelani later said: ‘It’s a struggle because I cannot impose myself on them, because they are confident. They believe they know their audience and they just don’t want to do it differently. Sometimes they see it (the formality of scripted dialogue) as a waste of time. Well, I cannot blame them because these are highly skilled people.’

A cinematographer with previous experience of working in television and in cinema, Kelani produces films that are distinguished in the way they display the cinematic apparatus. The viewer is conscious of being implicated in a transaction totally mediated by a camera. He is the emergent *auteur*, simultaneously attentive to the economic realism of his milieu and cognizant of the body language of the film festival circuit, although it must be admitted that the scales are weighed against him in the latter context because of the peculiar character of the former. Although the travelling theatre actors no longer dominate in Kelani’s films, nor is improvisation as crucial to their

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composition as it is in the general fare, the extent of the reciprocity between his Mainframe Productions and the mainstream Yoruba actors is suggested in the emergence of new idioms in the films, as well some truly ‘popular’ moments in Kelani’s films.

After the first two films, he began to collaborate with the Yoruba playwright Akinwumi Isola, whose plays were once adapted for the stage by the Ishola Ogunsola Theatre. It is a collaboration that now gives Kelani’s work a stamp of literariness, and before the camera actors perform in a notably stylized manner that mitigates the incidence of improvisation. This collaboration is a providential one for the fortunes of Yoruba culture: Isola, the classical, multi-faceted writer with high stakes in the survival of his cultural values, meets Kelani, a gifted film maker who sees the cinema as an opportunity to recover for his audiences ideas and images with which they were once familiar. The result is a kind of neo-traditional cinema which seeks to emphasize the film maker’s respectful allegiance to Yoruba culture. The core of his actors, with few notable exceptions such as Eda (Lere Paimo) of travelling theatre fame, is formed by the members of the Ife-based Ori-Olokun Company established by Ola Rotimi, the late English-language dramatist. Their training was conventional, but the conception of drama in the Ori-Olokun Company was always sensitive to the mass appeal of the travelling theatre, and Kola Oyewo, a major figure in this group, worked briefly with the Oyin Adejobi Theatre.

Isola’s literary skills now combine with Kelani’s training as a cinematographer to give the films a distinct quality. Agogo Eewo is the sequel to Saworoide, a 1999 political thriller about the crisis of legitimacy in the leadership of a fictional town, Jogbo. The film opens with what can pass for a prologue, in which the palace wit, Opalaba, recites a rhetorically pithy poem to underscore the precariousness of governing Jogbo. The chiefs whose corrupt manipulation of the first two rulers has produced the current stalemate seem bent on conducting business as before, but Adebosipo, the man they approach, decides to put a stop to their antics once he is crowned king. Much of the film is taken up with this struggle, leading to the institution of a sacred oath, the administering of which provides the story’s climax. Throughout the unfolding of this narrative, the circulation of the camera is palpable: a close-up shot of watering-can, of hands being washed, of palm wine being poured in tall drinking glasses; the ubiquitous close-ups of the embattled king; the tracking of chiefs coming and going through the palace. In these scenes the viewer is less aware of improvisation than of the director’s strong political desire to recuperate cinematic practice through the mediation of a video culture, as well as suggest ways of retrieving mutually recognized symbols (the drum, the gong) for the cultural redirection of his audience. There are no star actors and situational narrations; nothing, however funny or quirky, is said out of turn.
The film’s final sequence deserves a closer look. After the leading chiefs – Balogun and Seriki – have thwarted of Adebosibo’s every move, even melodramatically enticing him with a woman, the king is advised to resuscitate an old practice of checks and controls on public office holders. His spiritual counsellor commences the process of developing a ritual around the sacred gong which, if beaten seven times in the hearing of a corrupt public figure, is bound to occasion fatal spiritual problems. If this sounds like complex ritual, bear in mind that, for Kelani, cinema is as much a means of cultural redirection as it was an evening school for Ousmane Sembène. Kelani believes that some of what is lost to besieged societies in the profusion of external economic and educational policies may be regained if people see or hear things with which they were once familiar. There is also the question of the film as a sequel. In *Saworoide*, the crisis of leadership engineered by the corrupt chiefs arrives at a stalemate with the death of a military usurper who looks very much like General Abacha, and the son of a murdered king-elect is set to be crowned king. The young man, Arese, has matured in *Agogo Eevo*, but now opts for furthering his education, one of several direct ‘messages’ in this notably didactic film.

This declaration, later reinforced by the laborious quest of Arese and his female friend (Arapa) after the gong, undermines the monarchical institution on which the authority of the film rests. In other words, *Agogo Eevo* substitutes a republican ethos for the royalism of its prequel, even if the king remains the focus of attention. In the final sequence the chiefs are arrayed in public to take an oath of accountability. The parade of five ‘battalions’ – the regular law enforcement agents, the thugs contracted by disaffected chiefs, the followers of pro-democracy activists, the royalists, and the acolytes of the Ifa priest – is a stunning spectacle. It is a community on screen, a democratic public trial totally involving the people. This is a culmination of the film’s different moments in more than one sense. Throughout the narrative, the viewer has been treated to a number of diegetic songs (heard within the film) which constitute discrete critiques, and in some of these, the public is both audience and performer.41

The oath-taking ceremony is a distinct spectacle, and, for the duration of the sequence, the king does not utter a word. Even in the use of space, with the king’s court as both participant and spectator, and the public ranged on the other side but teeming, the film collapses the internally differentiated space of the *alarinjo* masqueraders and the rigidly defined space of the travelling theatre.42 The different interests segmented by uniforms or

41. By contrast, music in *Akobi Gomina* is non-diegetic but with occasional moralizing commentary on the conduct of the characters. This again is common to southern Nigerian films of different generic categories; it applies as much to this film as to the satire *GSM Wahala* (directed by Afam Okereke) and the comedy *One-Dollar*.
solidarity dresses dissolve into one rowdy song-and-dance of triumph in the final scene, when both Arese and Arapa are carried aloft as symbols of the democratic struggle. A similar carnival-like moment comes up in Akobi Gomina, when the supporters of Ajoke Badmus, Idowu’s female challenger, dance into the market, distributing campaign flyers among market women. Although this need not suggest that the film is directly influenced by Agogo Eewo, Kelani’s aesthetic choices represent a breath of fresh air in the complacent world of film making in the Yoruba sub-genre. In terms of thematizing politics in this allegorical manner, and re-investing old standards of arbitration (the court scene and the family gathering) with cinematic qualities, Kelani’s work thus constitutes a point of innovation. Indeed, this is the most appropriate exemplification of the video film as a proliferative form. The recognition that kabiyesi (the king) on his throne is no longer an anachronism in cinema has resulted in a wholesale return to political themes based on the traditional locus of power in an indigenous setting. Much of the criticism of so-called ‘folkloric cinema’, that is, Yoruba films using the allegorical forms of traditional culture, rests on the dismissive assumption that the genre encourages an atavistic conception of political power in a modern context.  

The point here is that the innovative use of these modes of power in the work of Kelani is followed by other film makers, especially in the Yoruba sub-genre. This is a function of the proliferative character of the form. Though the current example relates to the relationship between Kelani and those with whom he shares a cultural idiom, proliferation as a feature of the video films is not limited to the sub-genre. When Nnebue followed the success of Living in Bondage with the two-part Glamour Girls, a new genre developed, presenting women’s motives as starkly as possible. Kelani broke free of the grip of the star-actor mentality after his first two films, but his work continues to be enriched by the self-assurance of the professionals of the actors’ theatre.

**Conclusions**

The genre of democracy films in Nigeria confronts localized political questions in ways that demonstrate the responsiveness of the artistic medium to its social setting. This has become even more pronounced since the return to democratic rule in the late 1990s, when film makers, partly inspired by the example of pro-democracy activists and ‘guerrilla journalists’, turned their attention toward themes that might have occasioned political

43. For a recent nuanced revision, see Haynes, ‘Political critique in Nigerian video films’, p. 515.

44. Directed by Kenneth Nnebue, NEK Video Link, in English, approx. 3 hrs, PAL, 1994.
persecution under the military regime. But, as shown in this article, these engagements are uneven: the treatment of political themes reflects a basic concern with good governance and ethical conduct in civil matters, which is then assimilated to the ideological orientation of didacticism. When explicit, a critique of political conduct is presented as a customary injunction rather than as an ideological critique of systems, as we see in Akobi Gomina. By contrast, in Kelani’s cinematically astute deployment of the allegorical form in Agogo Eewo, there is a greater investment in systemic issues even when such a critique is far from direct. We thus have a paradoxical situation in which engagement with political issues is either explicit but determined by an attitude of populist moral suasion which does not translate into an awareness of the nature of ideology (Akobi Gomina), or allegorical but evinces an awareness of ideology within a set of particular cultural referents (Agogo Eewo). This paradox is consequential because the orientation which informs the explicit kind of critique is no less cultural; indeed, it assimilates its understanding of democratic practice to the thoroughgoing but incomplete ‘changes in the values, beliefs, attitudes, and norms of the people’, as Agbaje characterizes the project of social mobilization during the military era. This is what the crisis within the ANTP throws into relief: a practice of ‘gerontocracy’ is assailed by the equally undemocratic posturing of the ‘newbreed’ caucus. It is also demonstrated in the political conduct of Governor Idowu and associates, on the one hand, and in the opportunistic attitude of Baba Suwe (the otherwise marginalized gate-man), on the other.

A well-established way of approaching this conundrum is to use the academic rubric of ‘popular culture’ as projecting the desires of people excluded from power. Indeed, it is tempting to surmise that the difference between Kelani’s films and those of the Lagos, Ibadan, Onitsha, and Osogbo caucuses parallels the difference between ‘popular’ and ‘elite’ cultures, given that what distinguishes his works is the conscious use of the camera. But this film maker also structures his work around elements that are usually recognized as ‘popular’, such as unbounded public discourse (rumours), mass demonstrations, and lampoon singing. Furthermore, working with actors like Lere Paimo is an acknowledgement of the continuing vitality of aspects of the travelling theatre tradition that produced them. The socio-cultural context in which Nollywood developed puts the tripartite structure framing the concept of popular culture into question. The concept certainly served a useful purpose, but there is a correlation between the reconfiguration of

45. Instructively, the oath-taking ceremony in the final sequence of Agogo Eewo is cross-cut with didactic commentaries by the palace wit, Opalaba, praising activists and journalists and beseeching them to remain steadfast.
46. Agbaje, ‘Mobilizing for a new political culture’.
economic and cultural practices and the changes in social organization that sustained a tripartite structure: the middle classes which act as buffer between the elite and the rabble are precisely what structural adjustments and social mobilization have destroyed, at any rate in the modernist conception of the category. There are several ways in which the combination of cultural background and political awareness informing Kelani’s work represents an alternative to the impasse that such a reconfiguration entails. First, the cinematic form enables a promiscuous use of different traditions, and the fact that video is a ‘democratic’ technological form makes this all the more compelling. The organization of space in the final sequence of Agogo Eewo complicates the two prior traditions of alarinjo masquerades and the travelling theatre – which are the direct progenitors of the ANTP-influenced film makers and actors. Unlike the admirable image of attendants, mechanics, and hustlers dancing behind the scene to the same music of the elite installation of Osemawe of Ondo, suggesting class differentiation, the whole public, the noble and the rabble, is on display in Agogo Eewo.

Second, one of the notable features of Nollywood films is proliferation, the films’ tendency to develop through the appropriation of previous works. This does not imply that classes have disappeared from Nigeria in the aftermath of structural adjustment; rather, the proliferative character of Nollywood films, a function at once of economic and technological contexts, presents a more complicated view of class structure under neo-liberalism. This is even more so in the post-military era, when appearance indicates democracy, but democratization remains in question, and civilians rule in uncivil manners. The film makers are economic actors, and the calculations of caucuses, marketers and independent producers are never totally free of the configurations of political power at all levels. Adepoju’s dedication of Ekun Oko Oke to Adesanya is remarkable as a public gesture, but it also creates the basis for a practice of patronage that may not be democratic. The politics of the production in Nollywood films may or may not reflect the larger politics of the country in every particular detail, but there is a sense in which the ideological interests of ‘executive producers’ are related to the political alliances of caucuses, cartels, and guilds, themselves a sub-species of the country’s political culture. Third, the thematization of politics reflects the flexibility of populism as an ideology. Democracy remains a potential in Nigeria and, in spite of its dubious history, Nollywood will play a role in

48. Ibid., p. 69, n. 3.
49. A related observation is the involvement of the herbal medicine company, YET-KEM in the sponsorship of a number of the ‘democracy films’. The obvious mileage the executive producer makes out of this role is in the advertisement for his products and services, but the relationship between this interest and the thematic orientation of the films deserves serious attention.
realizing this potential. What the proliferation of films thematizing politics indicates is a generative and regenerative process through which the habits socialized from the military era can be analysed, critiqued, and transformed. The result is not just the gradual shedding of the charge of political conservatism by film makers of different temperaments, a charge that remains true but which takes the class-based segmentation of the arts for granted, but also the changing nature of the class structure.